

# The systemic dimension of tribal entrepreneurship

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The best place for consumer competencies to be expressed is in the community or ‘tribe’ of person sharing the same passion (Cova, 1997). This holds true for all kinds of pastimes, whether sporting activities such as mountain climbing or snowboarding; works of fiction like Harry Potter or Star Wars; and even loyalty to particular brands (Harley-Davidson or Lego). Consumers operating within these groups enjoy heightened creativity, something that helps them to share their common passion. Some might try to invent new sequels for series like Harry Potter or Star Wars. Others might customise their motorcycles or invent new uses for Lego. Others still might develop new climbing equipment or skateboards. Fans will end up trading these creations with one another, leading in turn to a kind of tribal entrepreneurship, in the sense that Goulding and Saren, (2007) gave to this term in their research on ‘Goths’. Members of this tribe would, for instance, do things like create (and subsequently sell at festivals) items required for an authentic Goth experience, including corsets, chains and wigs. More recently, Martin and Schouten (2014) have analysed the mechanisms causing fans of ‘mini-motos’ (mini-bikes they have transformed into racing machines) to produce items for fellow tribe members, launching a new niche market in the process. What we are dealing with here is a collective model of entrepreneurship, one that is starting to shape completely new markets. This can be exemplified by the community of Star Trek fans, a tribe that “*becomes like a hive of active bees, collecting, organizing, creating, reproducing, distributing, making networks, closing deals, being entrepreneurial: they become inno-tribes*” (Cova, Kozinets, Shankar 2007).

This body of literature aims to describe fans who, without wanting to start up a business, sometimes create goods simply because they enjoy doing this and want to give something functionally and/or symbolically useful back to other members of their community. What then happens is that the community asks them to ramp up their output and structure it so that the activity ultimately does become an enterprise. Calvignac (2008) has defined the construct of consumer-driven socio-economic innovation, starting with initiatives launched by consumer-innovators but extending into the community and market spheres. Considerations here include the permeability of the borders between communities and markets as well as the conditions underpinning the rise of this twofold product offer, one whose community and market aspects complement one another. We approve of this approach. To describe the systemic dimension that is an intrinsic component of tribal entrepreneurship, our research mobilises a case study based on

long semi-directive interviews with members of the communities in question, supplemented by a number of secondary data sources (blogs, journals, TV broadcasts, etc.) covering the different kinds of innovation.

The Gruppo Speleologico della Montagna Pistoiese (GSMP; i.e. “the Pistoia Mountains Speleology Group”) is a community of speleologists and mountaineering enthusiasts. Its origins date back to the 1970s, when societal changes enabled the transformation of an already widespread passion into an organized leisure-time and sporting activity. Its fields of pursuit range from the high ridges to the deep caverns of the Apennine mountain chain, as well as other ranges throughout Europe and the world.

Since its inception, a new generation has taken up the group’s activities and today its members number in the tens, though it is part of a wide-ranging community of enthusiasts belonging to other similar groups in various countries, with which it entertains contacts and exchanges. Although its members include mostly mountain dwellers, their passion is shared by many the world over, providing the opportunity to establish contacts throughout the world. One telling example of this in the case of GSMP is its relationships with a number of South American “Andinism” groups (which, by analogy to Alpinism, refers to mountaineering in the Andes).

Their passion for speleology and mountain sports (mountain and rock climbing, canyoneering, and the like) drive its members to willingly share with others in this world-wide mountaineering ‘tribe’ many, often hazardous, endeavors and experiences that cannot but form long-lasting bonds between them. The closeness and mutual trust of the group is evident from the rich collection of photos that have been published online (<http://www.geograficaservice.it/gsmpp/contatti.html>). The group moreover sees to the training of its new and less expert members through courses managed by its more experienced members in collaboration with national level schools. These shared experiences of the tribe create an almost ideal basis for identifying specific needs in terms of products and services on offer for sporting and gaming activities. For example, the types of tools to use in scaling rock walls or descending into caverns and galleries during speleological outings are examined and tested by the group in the field, and existing commercial offerings have often been found to be wanting.

A prime example in this regard is the experience of GSMP member Gianni Filoni, whose role and skills have been widely recognized by his peers. Gianni, with years-long experience as a mountaineering instructor, has also recently begun teaching canyoneering, another allied sport that is now spreading rapidly among the new generations of mountain enthusiasts. Now 40 years old, Gianni lives in the mountains and works at his father’s manufacturing firm, which produces automotive and other mechanical components. It is a small-to-medium-sized enterprise (SME) that has however developed high-tech practices and has been involved in a number of important collaborative projects with large-scale national and international companies, primarily in the transportation and infrastructures sector. These overlapping roles (passionate mountaineer, community sports instructor, employee in the family business) has led him to a systematic process of drawing upon his experiences with the mountaineering group to develop new markets for the Filoni company.

It was this process that led to the development of the “Stone Drill”. Some years ago Gianni’s mountaineering group experienced the need for a perforation tool that could offer performance suitable to the demands of their activities in terms of lightness, manageability and reliability. The devices present on the market at the time appeared unable to satisfy the performance requirements dictated by the extreme conditions under which the group practiced their various mountain sports. Thus, the case of the “Stone Drill” exemplifies the process by which, over the

course of about one year (2007-2008), a new product was realized through the relationship between a small group of sports enthusiasts and an SME. Its development is the result of a system made up of social relationships and entrepreneurial ability. Moreover, to a large degree, these same social relationships entertained within the group contributed to creating the market for the drill itself. Nowadays, the Stone Drill line accounts for nearly one third of Filoni's revenues – indubitably a great success from the entrepreneurial perspective.

GSMP members have moreover collaborated with the SME to form an efficient system for market innovation. The group expressed the need for light, versatile, suitably powerful tools for their activities. The batteries powering other drills in commerce lose amperage at low temperatures and die out quickly. This rapidly led to the development of a fuel-driven device that offered a greater margin of safety.

The group not only contributed to defining the product specifications, but also carried out tests on the drill, whence continuous and varying improvements have emerged. Indeed, 'Stone Drill' is no longer a single device, but includes a range of four models. For example, apart from the original version developed and tested by the group at high altitudes in European and South American mountain ranges, there is a model aimed at mineralogy hobbyists, who use it in caverns and mountains to fracture stones in their search for minerals.

This tribe-enterprise system forms the basis for both innovation and the creation of a consumer market, often spread by word of mouth amongst members of other groups that share the same passion. This case represents a market system centered around a group, the 'tribe', in which specific needs arise to create demand and thereby activate mechanisms of a new 'tribal entrepreneurship', in which the business actors, as part of a community (Guercini, Woodside 2012), participate by providing complementary skills.

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