

Executive Summary

This whitepaper analyzes the social gathering known as a “Meetup” and how the company Meetup.com might improve the user experience of these live gatherings.

Any Meetup will improve if its members are given the chance to share their best qualities and are appreciated for them by their peers. Improving any Meetup is a matter of improving the avenues through which members express their best qualities, enjoy the esteem of their peers, and can share their esteem for others as well.

Taking the psychologist Abraham Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs” as a guide, we can see that once user satisfies a need for belonging then they will begin to seek social esteem. Meetup.com facilitates belonging by enabling Meetups and can offer more value to the user by supporting the user’s search for esteem.

Avenues for esteem are anything that allows members of a Meetup to participate more fully in the group. Avenues for esteem might include contributions to help organize the Meetup; chances to express appreciation for other members; and opportunities to display aspects of their own personality, interests, and ultimately their social value. These are opportunities to build rapport with their fellow members and to provide the means for other members to appreciate their value.

Organizers are the best means of delivering these avenues for esteem into the real world Meetups as they have the deepest involvement with the Meetup.com website and are the ones that interact most directly with members.

Exploring just one framework based on the simple model of the “potluck” we can see some ways that avenues for esteem can be introduced into a Meetup. Elements taken from a model potluck including the Host, Guests, and Dish can be related to typical elements of a Meetup. By creating generative questions in relation to each element, we can generate possible solutions and brainstorm for new products.

There is an opportunity to create new products as a result of users’ hunger for esteem. This hunger is an aspect of human nature but became an actionable opportunity following Meetup.com’s success at creating of the world’s largest network of self-organized clubs and community groups. By strategically considering how to create products that satisfy users’ hunger for esteem, there is an opportunity to move further towards the goal of having a “Meetup Everywhere about Most Everything”.



Creating Avenues for Esteem to Improve Any Meetup

Any Meetup will improve if its members are given the chance to share their best qualities and are appreciated for them by their peers. Improving any Meetup is a matter of improving the avenues through which members express their best qualities, enjoy the esteem of their peers, and can share their esteem for others as well.

Starting with this notion of “creating avenues for sharing esteem”, we can illustrate the difference between a Meetup that simply gathers people together around a topic and one that provides multiple avenues for esteem during their real world gatherings. We can also consider why Meetup organizers are central to facilitating avenues for esteem in the real world.

Next, by exploring a framework based on the simple model of the “potluck”, we can begin to examine how avenues for esteem can be introduced to a Meetup. Using the potluck framework, we will ask some generative questions and begin brainstorming a few possible products.

There is an opportunity to create new products as a result of user’s hunger for avenues to share esteem. This hunger is an aspect of human nature but became actionable opportunity following Meetup.com’s success at creating of the world’s largest network of self-organized clubs and community groups. By strategically considering how to create products that satisfy this hunger for avenues for sharing esteem, there is an opportunity to move further towards the goal of having a “Meetup Everywhere about Most Everything”.

Something Users Want Out of a Meetup

People want to be appreciated, to feel important and enjoy the esteem of their peers. A more nuanced theory that accounts for the human need for esteem is found in the work of the psychologist Abraham Maslow. Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs” suggests not just that humans seek the esteem of their peers but that this need for esteem is nested in a hierarchy of needs, following basic survival and safety but before achieving self-actualization. Interestingly, Maslow’s hierarchy suggests that the need for “love/belonging” must be satisfied before “esteem” can be sought; a dynamic that seems to succinctly describes the value proposition Meetup.com is offering to its users.

Meetup.com offers us the goodwill of a low-cost place to belong; a group to join that requires little beyond the self-knowledge to identify a personal interest. Folks who attend a social gathering like a Meetup are basically surviving and safe enough to get out of the house but, in the light of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, we can speculate that once users establish basic membership in a group they will next seek esteem. This need for esteem is an opportunity for developing additional products and services and a chance to make every Meetup significantly better. Also, by providing avenues to share



esteem we provide a context where people can look their best, so if they are seeking more fundamental needs they then have the opportunity to pursue these needs in a favorable light.

Anyone who has attended a Meetup may have noticed that the specific things that drive members to attend are varied and often more complicated than the topic of the Meetup itself. One member might attend the Bocce Meetup in Brooklyn because they like bocce but also because they are looking for a job, another member maybe looking for a date, and a third member might be looking for a chance to practice their English conversation skills.

Meetups provide the chance for many individual needs to play out simultaneously. If Meetup.com supports a social gathering where members share esteem, then they place Members in a favorable light – so in the example above: the first member looks better as a possible employee, the second member is more likely to get a date, and the third is supported in their pursuit of becoming a fluent English speaker. All of these individual needs are manifestations of the needs for survival, security, and love/belonging. A Meetup that provides avenues for sharing esteem can better satisfy these individual needs as well as enriching the experience of the group in general.

Illustrating the Difference

Imagine two Meetup scenarios:

In the first, a new member joins a Checkers Meetup. She brings a checkers set with her but when she arrives at the Meetup she finds a few other members have already set up plenty of boards so her set stays in her bag. The Meetup is in a café filled with people so the other members don't immediately notice her, but when she sees the organizer she introduces herself. The organizer welcomes her and invites her to start playing a game right away. The new member plays a few games with the organizer and with another members; she wins a few games and loses a few games. When she talks with her opponents they are all basically friendly but are focused on playing Checkers and it is hard to find much to talk about other than the game and the Meetup itself. There are a few players who seem to have just one partner they play with every week and are pretty absorbed in there own game. There was one funny guy who made her laugh by cracking jokes to everyone in the room but she never found a chance to talk with him one-on-one. After a couple hours the new member goes home. She loves playing checkers but wonders if the Checkers Meetup is any better than playing with a few friends at home.

In the second scenario, a new member joins a Checkers Meetup in a different city. In the announcement, the organizer invites members of this Meetup to bring their favorite boards, snacks to share, and checkers inspired decorations. So this new member brings along a wooden checkers set that her dad made for her as a child and bakes some of her favorite oatmeal cookies to share. When she gets to the Meetup, there are already a few members there and a stack of checker sets on a table. She finds



the organizer and says hello. The organizer welcomes her shows her the snacks table and says that there are plenty of sets but she is welcome to set up her set if she brought one. The organizer is curious and appreciative that she brought the wooden board and cookies. She plays a few games with the organizer and few other folks, winning a few games and losing a few games. While playing on her wooden board she shares a few stories about her father when her opponent admires her set. Turns out that her opponent is a wood worker who makes furniture for a living and shares some funny stories about his clients. She tries the pizza one member created with toppings to look like a checkers set. The member who brought the tasty brownies with red and black icing also promised to email her the recipe. Two members who always show up but only play with each other, decided to wear silly foam hats that look like checkers pieces. One guy who came straight from work didn't bring anything but when he tried her cookies he liked them so much he made a point of talking to her and invited her to join his Baking Cookies Meetup next week. After a couple hours the new member heads for home, planning to send a few emails to the people she met and is already thinking about what to bring to the next Meetup.

The second scenario attempts to describe a group that not only plays the game but also plays it in a more significant context of social exchange. A variety of avenues for sharing are suggest like bringing boards, snacks and decorations and then the group has the goodwill to take advantage of these avenues to share esteem and to build relationships.

Now we might generate all kinds of scenarios to illustrate the second group as prepared to support the mutual sharing of esteem without the crutches of foam checkers hats, but the specific means of execution are not the point, it is the knowledge that they are useful. Certainly we can also imagine a group that already has a strong sense of belonging in their lives who would be prepared to meet over a simple game of checkers and engage in an emotionally mature and socially adroit conversation (one that exchanges esteem with few bells and whistles), but we also might imagine that such a mature group would not look down on additional avenues for esteem if they where supported by Meetup.com.

Both Meetups provide the basic circumstance for checkers players to belong and play their game, but which group would engender the larger and more loyal membership?

Helping Organizers Build a Better Meetup

Meetup users want to be appreciated, appreciated particularly by their fellow Meetup users. In a user driven social community this appreciation should be supported online by Meetup.com but needs to be facilitated in the real world by organizers. This dynamic of online support of online/offline activity distinguishes Meetup.com from other social networks. This dynamic also make the organizers central to distributing avenues for esteem into real world Meetups and ensuring the goodwill among their members to take advantage of these avenues.



Meetup.com has experimented with a number of avenues for users to show off their best qualities and share their esteem online. Users can post photos and information in several locations on the Meetup.com website. Users can also share their esteem for fellow members privately through emails and publicly through comments, forum posts, and nominations of organizer of the week. Organizers can also help their members express their value by asking for responses to posted questions when the users initially join a Meetup. The more difficult consideration, it would seem, is how to extend these avenues into the real world Meetups in ways that are useful, branded, but not intrusive.

As a social network that extends from the online world into the real world, the Meetup.com brand is sustained most significantly in the real world by the organizers. The more the organizers are empowered with Meetup developed products to improve the sharing of esteem at their Meetup in real world (as well as the online world), the better the users experience and the more distinguished the Meetup.com brand becomes among other social networks.

Not only do organizers have the deepest relationship with Meetup online, with the most means of interacting with the website, but they are also the ones who are physically available to help members have a good time at the Meetups. By matching the assertion that users are hungry for esteem with products that supports organizers who facilitate sharing esteem along multiple avenues, you affirm Meetup.com's distinctive brand and empower users.

A Potluck Framework

Food is our common ground, a universal experience. – James Beard

Food is an important part of a balanced diet. – Fran Lebowitz

If we can accept that any Meetup will improve if it can provide a space for people to satisfy more significant social needs, then we can ask how to take that abstract principle and apply it in a more concrete framework. There are numerous frameworks we could imagine but a familiar one to start with might be the social gathering known as the potluck.

The potluck, as many of us know, is a dinner party where guests each bring a dish of some sort to contribute to the shared meal. A good potluck not only relieves the host of shouldering all the work and cost of throwing a dinner party but gives everyone a chance to participate: to show off a favorite recipe, to try making a new dish, and to taste new foods. It is a popular and a natural framework for the mutual exchange of esteem because ideally everyone participates both as a producer and a consumer.

Taking the potluck as a model we can distinguish five elements to the potluck to create a framework for creatively looking at a Meetup. The two basic roles at a potluck for participants are either Host or



Guest. The primary medium exchange is the Dish, but you could also include a variety of Other Things related to social dinner gatherings and of course the event must take place Somewhere/Sometime. Each element supports the mutual sharing of esteem by either participation or providing an avenue for gifting the esteem.

- Host – participates by facilitating the sharing of esteem; they offer people the chance to meet; they can smooth out the rough edges of the event by doing things – such as helping people who are insecure about cooking find another way to participate (say by picking up some drinks, or by showing up early to help set up).
- Guests – participates in the social gathering, brings a dish and experiences other dishes.
- Dish – is the familiar avenue for sharing. Food is a particularly accessible avenue as even folks who claim to not be able to boil water have probably enjoyed a meal at some point in their life. [In the context of a Meetup this category is understood in an expanded sense, including any thematic activity or topic that brings users together.]
- Other Stuff – include things like invitations, decorations, music, games, utensils and plates; these create the atmosphere as well as provide alternative avenues for esteem.
- Somewhere/Sometime – the circumstances of the event including time and place can set a mood and be an avenue for esteem itself.

These five elements are categories that can be seen in any Meetup: with the Host being an organizer, the Guests being the members, the Dish being the Meetup topic, the Other Stuff being a catch-all for ancillary stuff that you associate with a social gathering like the Meetup and finally the Somewhere/Someplace is location and meeting time of the Meetup.

The potluck of course might be a format that is used by Meetup organizers as an activity but the notion potluck here is suggested in an expanded sense so to make a useful comparison. The comparison of the Meetup and the potluck may reveal useful ways to solve problems or simply be a good metaphor for helping new organizers conceptualize how to improve their Meetups.

Within the context of an inclusive and supportive gathering like a Meetup, it should also be said that the sharing of esteem is ideally not a knee-jerk reciprocal process. To avoid a notion of tit-for-tat exchange, which may suggest something less fun, it might be helpful to think of the movement of esteem as one of mutual gifting towards a common good. The potluck embodies this well as everyone is contributing to the dinner as a whole rather than to another person. At a potluck, guests can participate to greater and lesser extents with a good deal of leeway without severely hindering the overall event.



Generative Questions

Using the framework of the potluck, it is possible to identify a series of generative questions that can be used as talking points by Meetup staff and by users as they consider and reconsider how to improve the experience of a Meetup.

In addition, following any of potluck inspired questions below, we might ask: How is a Meetup similar or different? Is there a way to improve a Meetup by incorporating any of these pieces? Can a Meetup product solve any of the trouble spots that come up?

- What are the roles of a good potluck host? How are they similar or different to a Meetup organizer?
- What ways to potluck hosts help people who don't know how to cook to participate in the gathering?
- What are the "dishes" that members are encouraged to bring? How will other members get to experience these dishes?
- If esteem is important, and a participant has made the effort to bring a "dish", how are they being recognized among the group for the contribution?
- How does a potluck play out over time? Is there a desirable beginning, middle and end? How could a Meetup be improved by incorporating a timeline or improve on the progression of a typical potluck?
- Anything that involves eating, like a potluck does, creates clear physical and emotional effects in the eater. Does (or could) food play a useful role in a Meetup? Or more broadly, what elements of any Meetup influence the physical and emotional experience of the member? Is there a beneficial way to include/exclude these kinds of physical and emotional triggers to improve the experience of a Meetup?

There is any number of other questions one might ask.¹ Perhaps a selection of a few interesting ones might form a survey or as topics for forum discussions.

Brainstorming Some Possible Products And Solutions.

While any framework and analysis attempts to suggest new ways of thinking about Meetups, ultimately creating applications that can help users improve their Meetups is the goal. If the notion that users are hungry for avenues to share their esteem is accepted then we could begin to brainstorm of number

¹ A brief analysis of an actual Manhattan Monopoly Meetup, using the potluck framework and some of the generative questions, is presented as an appendix following this paper.



potential products.

- **Tactics Wiki:** Expand the current offerings in the Organizer's Center to include a wiki of tactics for organizing a great Meetup. Expand the current series on how to get started and have a good first meeting to include how to diversify the avenues for users to participate and share their esteem. Cull user content, as well as those repeatedly prescribed by Meetup.com staff, as best practices found in the forums.
- **User Contribution Suggestions:** Add a new category in the template where organizers create their Meetup profile and specific event announcements. Ask organizers to suggest, "ways members can contribute/participate" in the next Meetup. Separate from any requests for membership dues. Include a popup that couches this suggestion in the notion that this is a way to encourage deeper participation and to create more significant ways get to know each other.
- **Hosting Guide:** Create a blog/video series towards the ideas of hosting a good party, which could be connected to the idea of putting on a good Meetup. Invite professional event producers from various sectors (music, wedding, corporate, fine art, Burning Man, etc.) to be interviewed. A possible revenue stream maybe found in featuring books related to these ideas and linking to retailers. Invite users to post how to videos and documents.
- **Social Games Book:** Publish a Meetup book of social games and icebreakers. Repackage and credit users for the best practices of successful Meetups. Sell the book to users and through typical retail channels.
- **Meetup Crossovers:** Create crossover features for Meetups that want to mix groups in special events. Maybe roll out a dinner series...that pairs different Meetups.
- **Meetup Dates:** Maybe create a way for one Meetup to ask another Meetup out on a date as a whole group.

Conclusion

People want to be appreciated. Any Meetup will improve if its members are given the chance to share their best qualities and are appreciated for them by their peers. If we can accept this assertion about human behavior, then improving any Meetup is simply a matter of increasing and improving the avenues through which members express their best qualities, enjoy the esteem of their peers, and can share their esteem for others as well.

Meetup.com succeeds by valuing its users and their capacity to assemble and self-organize, it seems



reasonable to trust that users will deepen their relationship as a group if Meetup deepens its offerings and support.

The ideas in this paper are of course a very introductory exploration of these topics, written from the perspective of a Meetup user. Nonetheless, these ideas are offered with goodwill as is and as fragments to be extended, added to, chopped, broken, and squished, but ultimately to encourage new ideas.



Appendix: Applying the Potluck Framework to A Specific Meetup

There is a Monopoly Meetup that had been meeting for over a year now; it is just shy of 50 members, and has two assistant organizers. They meet most weeks at a Cosi Café that is friendly to board game groups on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. There is some interest among them to improve attendance but they are stuck on how to get more members to show up regularly.

The organizer of this Monopoly Meetup commented on his group by saying the following:

“There is a core of six or so members of the group who show up regularly. The vast majority of the members come once or never at all. Why this is so is a mystery to us, unless the guys are looking for women, who don't show up because most meetings are all male. A tautology!”

Clearly this organizer is struggling with some very fundamental (and probably common) problems with his Meetup. Certainly you can suggest a variety of simple tactical approaches to the problem, like increasing advertising with flyers and business cards or developing a thematic hook by creating a special event that stands out from their regular meetings. But to consolidate the good ideas that are available in places like the user forums and encourage new creative solutions among the members of this group it is useful to consider a more coherent strategic goal worth striving for rather than simply a reduction in the most obvious trouble spots.

One approach might be to look at the Meetup from each element of the potluck framework and to ask some generative questions.

Host: There is an organizer and two assistant organizers. What is the role of the host and is there agreement among the three of them about their goals and roles? How are the organizers going about helping members be engaged participants?

Guests: There are more than 50 members, six or so attend regularly. What is being asked of the members...do they have multiple ways to participate? Are people really just looking for a date or is it other things as well? Is there a way to up the level of participation on the part of the six regular guests? Perhaps making them ambassadors or something?

Dish: The main avenue of interaction is the Monopoly game. Is there other ways to make this a more layered and deeper avenue for esteem?

Other Stuff: What other things does the group do? Can other activities be added on? Does the group ever just take a break and chat? Do they share other aspects of their interest in Monopoly? Can more effort be made to share links to Monopoly sites, events, and happenings in the Monopoly world?



Somewhere/Sometime: Cosi café on Upper West Side of Manhattan. Is this comfortable and accessible? Does Cosi provide an interesting enough location? Would the occasional Meetup in someone's home be appropriate?

After attending this Meetup a couple times and speaking with the organizers about their attendance concerns, here are a few observations relating to each element:

There is division between the main organizer and the most active assistant organizer on the purpose of the group and the ideal size. The organizer is more laid back and happy to have a group of any size as long as there is someone to play with. The assistant organizer is more driven to expand the group and to make the Meetup a bigger deal. This division is observable in both their spoken opinions about the group and the kinds of email announcements they send out to the group separately.

The guests are asked to just show up, and are not asked to contribute to cover the Meetup fees. The guests are mostly men and are a friendly group. They are competitive but go out of their way not to be rude or combative. When a new member shows up for the first time the organizer tries to be very inclusive. Guest could be encouraged to contribute in additional ways to the games, to each bring some personal object to use as a token on the game board, or a snack for the group.

The dish is the Monopoly game. One interesting thing about this group is that the active assistant organizer is a Monopoly board collector and he brings new versions of the board to each game – this could be advertised more on their Meetup site. The spirit of this contribution might be encouraged in other members as well. Additional playing formats might be experimented with – such as a tournament where members could take turns creating “house rules” for the game. Perhaps players might give brief presentation on Monopoly related topics like the history of the game or some thought on how Monopoly can be used to understand the current housing crisis. There are a number of Monopoly books that could be passed around among the group as well. The organizer seems capable and interested in facilitating the friendly socialization of the group if these kinds of opportunities arise.

The organizer brings a Backgammon set for people who get knocked out early from the Monopoly game. Pairing a shorter game with the longer game seems like a good idea and could be advertised more. Perhaps the Monopoly group might consider joining another single-game group, even if just on occasion to mingle members. Perhaps a Scrabble/Monopoly night or a Boggle/Monopoly afternoon would also draw new players and help the current players to encourage friends to stop by who aren't typically big



Monopoly fans.

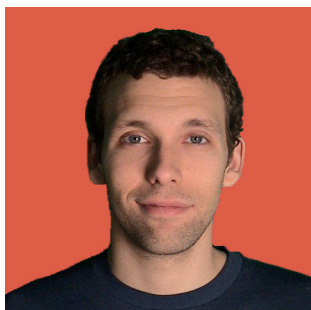
Additional elements are provided by the location at Cosi café. People buy food and drinks there and sit in a back area with tables. This is a very board game friendly location in general, if bland. Monopoly can have a particular dragging quality that perhaps a break time or a group snack could brighten up towards the end.

The Upper West side location is not as central as could be and they might consider the occasional game further south or on the East side of Manhattan. They meet on weekday nights but are going to try to meet on a weekend to see if things change. Maybe meeting somewhere more thematically appropriate, like the lobby of a hotel might be interesting. Perhaps a member who lives on the East side, who can make it to the normal games would host a Meetup at their home.

On a whole, this group seems to have a solid base. Some good things about a potluck are that there are chances to try new things and to appreciate other peoples' food while creating a shared event. This Monopoly group feels like a group of individuals and could use more avenues to share their personalities and to contribute to the social experience as a whole.



About the Author & Double Happiness LLC



Erik Fabian is the the principle at Double Happiness LLC, a live experience design firm in Brooklyn.

Double Happiness designs experiences that help people, brands, and organizations: innovate, collaborate, and build meaningful relationships.

For more information visit: www.DoubleHappinessNYC.com