

**A**MBER ATHERTON IS A PARTNER AT THE early-stage venture capital firm Patron, investing in the convergence of games, consumers and Web3. Previously, she was Head of Strategic Communities at Discord, which acquired her community software startup Zyper in January 2021. She is the author of *The Rise of Virtual Communities: In Conversation with Virtual World Pioneers* and Executive Director of GBx, a private community for British founders in the Bay Area. She lives in San Francisco.

Atherton, who's in her early 30s, recently spoke with Brunswick's Kirsty Cameron. Their conversation started by exploring how Atherton's passion for tech emerged, a journey that included a memorably named blog: My Flash Trash.

**You were fascinated with the online world from a young age. What ignited that passion?**

I was born in Hong Kong and went to international schools. My dad worked at Cathay Pacific and was a huge computer hobbyist. He taught me how to code. I then went to boarding school in England. The computer room at that point was mostly about Mavis Beacon [software designed to teach touch typing], but I was already building websites.

When I was 15, I started a WordPress blog. This was before the age of influencers, but I started



# Community Connoisseur

selling jewelry and accessories from Hong Kong on this blog. The margins were huge, and I began taking photos of my friends wearing the jewelry, which led to other jewelry designers asking if they could appear on the blog.

I began to realize the value of creating a big community-slash-marketplace, so I started charging designers to be featured on this blog and I'd take a commission.

It was called My Flash Trash, and a big part of the commerce experience was community engagement. You could comment on pieces you liked, and designers could respond. It was early conversational commerce. I raised some seed money and continued to build the company. Eventually I merged My Flash Trash with a Chinese manufacturing company and began thinking about my next move.

The alchemy of creating virtual communities has been at the heart of **AMBER ATHERTON'S** career as an entrepreneur, investor and author.

**That turned out to be Zyper, which you later sold to Discord, right?**

Yes. I started building a machine learning-led community marketing tool, Zyper, that allowed brands to identify and engage with the top 1% of their social following. This was 2016 and I raised a seed round for that. A lot of people were asking if it was influencer marketing, but it wasn't. It was about creating community for your most valuable customers so that they would purchase more frequently.

Direct-to-consumer brands were realizing that the way to grow a brand was to make your customers your evangelists, and that it was valuable to do that in an authentic way. We quickly started acquiring brands in beauty and fashion.

Fast forward to 2020 and we raised a small Series A and were approached by quite a few larger social

media companies about acquisition, including Discord—which was blowing up during the pandemic. It wasn't just gamers, it was Web3, it was art ... it was becoming the de-facto community platform. We sold to Discord and I started working there.

I became more interested in what makes an online community. Community happens when people have a common interest, whatever that may be. And although it's hard to measure the ROI on community, it is part of the marketing moat around a brand and can be an effective way to get into the hearts and minds of your customers. It is a great alternative to a focus group.

**How do you make sure an online community runs as it should, and that there are no bad actors?**

You need a community manager or moderator. It is a lot of work making people feel welcome. I've just published a book called *The Rise of Virtual Communities* and in it I interview 15 founders who have built these communities since as early as the 1980s. Having a code of conduct comes up a lot. The world may have moved on since then but so many fundamentals about community remain the same. Building a social media audience is very different than creating a community. The latter is much more high touch.

**Are you platform agnostic when it comes to building communities?**

It depends on the need. WhatsApp is great if it's ephemeral—if you're organizing an event, for example. Reddit is also super interesting. I do have a bias toward Discord. Developers on Discord are a great example of the positive side of the internet—the open-source community is driven by altruism, and dedicated to making the online world more playful, useful and delightful.

**Is there an ideal size for a community?**

People often quote [British anthropologist Robin] Dunbar's number: Communities can't be bigger than 150 people. But actually they can be bigger. I've seen servers on Discord with millions of people. But only a few thousand are actively engaging regularly and showing up. It's the 80/20 rule. Eighty percent are reading and lurking. You can also have subgroups, or gated areas, where only certain people can enter which can help organize larger communities.

**What is it you love about building and studying communities?**

Andy Warhol had this great quote about Studio 54: "It's a dictatorship at the door and a democracy on

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**KIRSTY CAMERON** is an Associate and Digital Specialist in Brunswick's San Francisco office.

the dance floor." He's totally right. There should be something special about unique spaces and specialist communities. I think there will come a time when these become more subscription-based.

In the early days you would see the same people showing up. It was like a village. I think people want to go back to that time. If you are setting up a community, the more specific, the better. I run a community of British founders and entrepreneurs in the Bay called GBx. To get in, you need to be a Brit, a founder or investor, and live in the Bay Area. You've got already lots in common and that creates a sense of belonging.

**How should brands behave when it comes to owning, or interacting with, communities?**

You have to be really careful. There are so many epic fails by companies. But there are brands who do it well. Netflix had a thriving server on Discord, for example, that was totally community run. Netflix reached out and basically said, "Hi, what you're doing is amazing. Can we bring out some props?" It provided some additional stimuli but let the group run itself. The key is to let the community own the space and you can give it an endorsement.

**What excites you about the Bay Area's technology landscape?**

I don't think San Francisco is doing a very good job of cultivating its external brand image! Since the gold rush, the city has always been a place for pioneers. There's so much opportunity and potential. There's a democracy of ideas here; it doesn't matter where you came from, it's about your ambition and the quality of your product. There's a wonderful ecosystem here that nurtures that.

I also somewhat controversially love the time zone. Some see it as isolating. But while London and New York are sleeping, we are inventing new ideas.

**How do we encourage more women to join tech?**

We need more women in tech, no question. I started the Atherton Award, which 30 schools in the UK participate in. It's for young women who have an idea and that entrepreneurial spirit. If your idea wins, you receive £500 and join a community of other aspiring female leaders on Slack. Some of these young women have created amazing businesses.

If we want more women to start businesses, we need to start early and educate about risk tolerance and encourage risk taking. Because if you want to become an entrepreneur, you've got to be OK with failing. It's all part of the learning experience. ♦