

‘Buy Nothing’ groups: A place to share goods, services — and gratitude

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A few years ago, Melissa Holguin Pineda decided to spend a summer in Seattle with her cousin. She brought a duffel bag, the clothes she was wearing and little else to a place that was almost entirely new to her. She wanted to connect with the unfamiliar city, and her cousin pointed her to something that essentially furnished her entire apartment in Green Lake: a Buy Nothing group.

Holguin Pineda was intrigued by the Facebook group, one of a network of thousands across the world where people regift items to neighbors instead of throwing them away. The pages allow people to give or request gifts, borrow items or offer services. But no money can be exchanged.

“It emulated this sense of home, because my family always received things, whether it was clothes or furniture or kitchen things,” Holguin Pineda says. “So this mutual exchange was very comfortable for me. It’s something I had always known.”

Liesl Clark and Rebecca Rockefeller started the first Buy Nothing group on Facebook in 2013, because they were disturbed when they noticed plastics washing up on the shore near their homes on Bainbridge Island, just outside Seattle. The trash was coming from their community, and they wanted to lessen the effect.

“We realized that people were buying the same things over and over, and only using them occasionally,” Clark says. “So we asked the question: ‘Could you try to buy less and ask your neighbors for the thing you need?’ If you’ve got something, rather than throwing it away or taking it to Goodwill, offer it up to your community. And let’s see what happens.”

They presented the idea to friends, explaining how there were no trades or costs involved, just gifting. They made a Facebook group, and in a matter of hours, 300 people joined. That number grew to nearly 1,000 within the next few days.

What started as “a social experiment,” Clark says, has slowly evolved into a project that spans the world: a global, but always hyperlocal, gift economy where excess is given, gratitude is offered and there are no expectations. Now there are more than 5,500 groups spanning 44 countries.

“I wouldn’t say it was viral or instant,” Clark says. “It was very much organic growth of people just hearing about it, letting it sink in, and then saying: ‘I want to try this in my community.’”

There are organization rules that local groups abide by, albeit with their own community spin. Members can join one Buy Nothing group in their area, and groups are typically limited to about 1,000 members, with one to three admins in each group.

Items posted span a broad range; Keurigs and kitchenware are commonplace, and furniture requests abound. Mikita Hill-Cashaw, a member of the Columbia Heights/Mount Pleasant/Park View group in the District, borrowed watercolors for two weeks for an art project, knowing she wouldn't use them often enough to buy her own kit.

Since the pandemic began, Clark and Rockefeller have seen a sharp rise in the groups' popularity. Initially, groups were archived or frozen to comply with coronavirus guidelines released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. After it became clear that the virus was primarily transmitted through the air rather than surfaces, the groups restarted.

During the pandemic, the groups have allowed neighbors to help each other in large and small ways. There are offers to pick up and drop off medicine at doorsteps and posts on behalf of those who don't have Internet. In many Buy Nothing groups, it's common for members to share updates on items they've been gifted, along with expressions of gratitude. Group admin Leona Rodriguez of Burke, Va., has seen members cultivate hobbies by giving their creations, such as cocoa bombs and bread, to their community.

Kat Huey, an admin for Buy Nothing Foggy Bottom/Dupont Circle/Kalorama Heights, says her members have been doing lobby or porch pickups during the pandemic. Her area is a mix of families and college students, and she has seen a college student ask for — and receive — a laptop.

"It's encouraging to see members active," Huey says. "And not just sharing items, but sharing of information or time with one another."

Buy Nothing's natural focus on community and its uptick in popularity have led to an increase in members for some groups. Sometimes, items are posted and claimed within minutes. Admins encourage allowing posts to marinate for a few hours, and suggest members use a random drawing system to keep gifting equitable.

Increased membership also has caused some groups to split into smaller "sprouts," a process that has caused some growing pains. In recent years, members and critics alike have said the smaller groups can be exclusive, drawing arbitrary boundaries that reinforce existing inequities or that keep out people who live in the same neighborhood as other members. In 2019, an equity team was created to help target those problems.

"We found after a few years that in some communities, there were repeating patterns of systemic racism, injustice and redlining," Clark says. "And it became clear it was destructive. Although it wasn't our intention, it was [the end of the project] in some communities."

Nyaka Mwanza, an admin for the Columbia Heights/Mount Pleasant/Park View group, says that although people have good intentions when launching a Buy Nothing group, they "may not necessarily have the knowledge or sensitivity" about the community to administer it fairly.

"You want simple and sensible demarcations, but you also want to be inclusive and diverse," Mwanza says.

Potential admins now undergo additional training on redlining — or excluding people from certain neighborhoods — and diversity. The equity team also has created an evolving community agreement that serves as both a mission statement and a commitment to keeping Buy Nothing equitable. And there are hubs where admins can trade information about groups, sprouts and more.

Using Facebook has also been an issue for the organization. Equity team member Katherine Valenzuela Parsons, who was an admin in Charlottesville before she moved to an area south of Richmond, says Facebook frequently flags or blocks posts containing alcohol, kitchen knives or anything resembling a weapon. Buy Nothing is working on its own

blocks posts containing alcohol, kitchen knives or anything resembling a weapon. Buy Nothing is working on its own digital platform to avoid these issues, which it hopes to launch by the end of the summer.

Despite the inherent difficulties of creating and operating a gift economy in a world where almost everything comes with a price, the members, admins and founders of Buy Nothing are dedicated to using the groups to help build community resiliency, mutual aid and neighborly trust. As Valenzuela Parsons points out: If the power goes out, can you walk across the street and trust your neighbor enough to ask for help?

“This pandemic has been, for all but the 1 percent of people, a really leveling experience, because it has reminded all of us that our survival is not just in our hands,” Clark says. “And I think that our participation in these groups is allowing people to tap into that deeper truth about who they are and how they want to live and what it really means to be in a community.”

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