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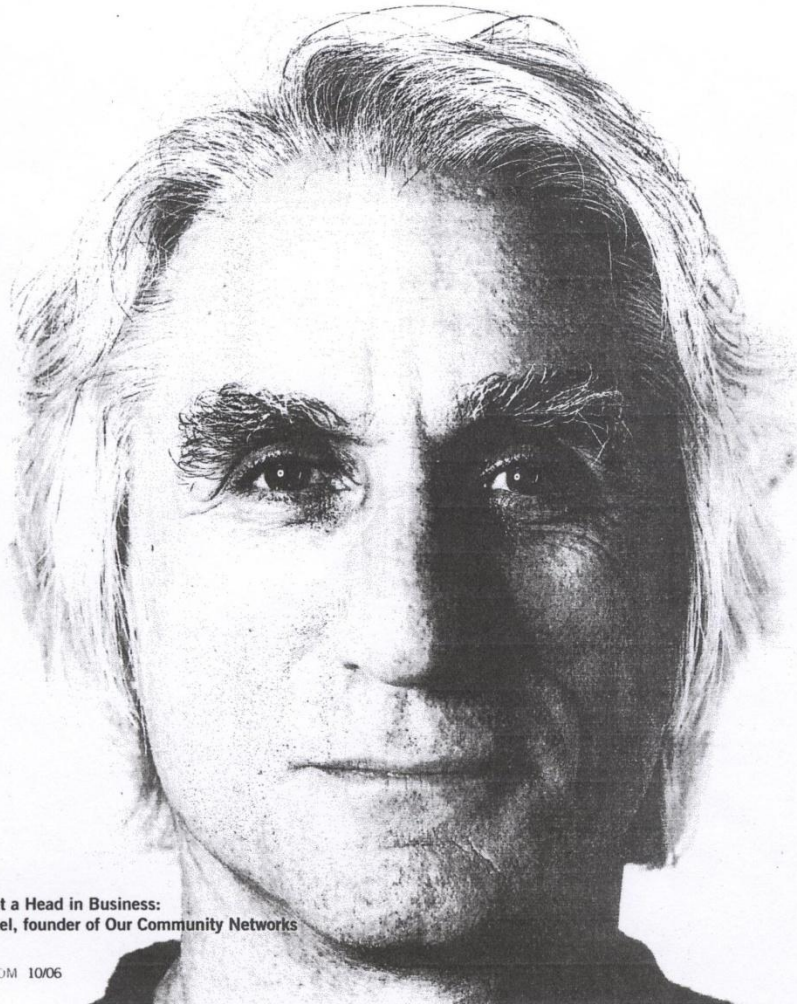
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JEFFREY MILSTEIN

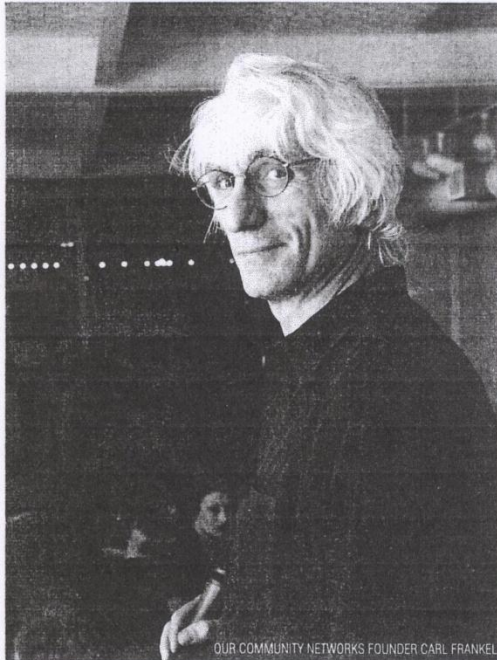
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Carl Frankel, founder of Our Community Networks

## THE ART OF BUSINESS

# THE POWER OF US

## Our Community Networks

by Jonathan D. King photos by Jeffrey Milstein



OUR COMMUNITY NETWORKS FOUNDER CARL FRANKEL

Hera first met Carl Frankel, who she playfully referred to as “the Mayor of Uptown Kingston,” at swing dance lessons. The Woodstock artist has also attended Frankel’s popular community gatherings from their inception in 1999. “Being a sculptor, I am something of an entrepreneur,” she said. “I thought these gatherings were great because I found [them] a way to meet other entrepreneurs and network with people who were young and vital to the Kingston community. It attracted me enough that I actually bought a house in Kingston.” Although she eventually sold the house, Hera said that she even landed a tenant through Frankel’s e-newsletter, Carl’s List.

Frankel’s community gatherings began with the Ulster County transplant getting a group of his friends together for a monthly dinner at a now defunct uptown Kingston restaurant, The Tapping Frog. It was as casual a concept as Frankel’s patronizing a restaurant he liked and getting his friends together to break bread. He started an e-mail list to inform people of the dinner times and it rapidly transformed into something greater. We met on an afternoon in mid-August on the patio of Frankel’s home in Kingston, where he told me, “I began collecting people’s e-mails to announce these parties, and before I knew it I had this little e-newsletter going. The next thing I know, people started asking me, ‘Will you announce I am selling a futon?’”

And thus was born Carl’s List, as a complimentary community newsletter, named by others as a playful poke at Craig’s List, the popular online classified ad service. In essence it has evolved into something very similar, with an added goal of fostering a sustainable community in the Hudson Valley.

“I had never been community-minded, but I had over 1,000 people on my mailing list. There were 60-80 people showing up for my community parties,” Frankel explained. “I just woke up and realized that it was a success, even though I hadn’t really tried to make it a success. I was just filling a need that the community [had], and all of a sudden I found myself to be this node in the local information network.”

As a struggling fiction writer in the late 1980s, the Princeton and Columbia Law alum was supporting himself through technical writing when he decided to devote himself to eco-writing, focusing on sustainable and socially responsible businesses. He became enamored with the idea of saving the concept of community in a disjointed age, an age that he viewed as a product of corporate globalization. The major results of this interest were Frankel’s two nonfiction books, 1998’s *In Earth’s Company: Business, Environment and the Challenge of Sustainability* and *Out of the Labyrinth* (2004), which Frankel claims as one of his two

proudest achievements. The other is his business—or as he refers to it, his social enterprise—Our Community Networks, which has a two-part mission statement: 1) To build local community; and 2) To support local businesses. He created the system from a desire to see the rising tide of the free-market economy truly lift all boats, not just the yachts.

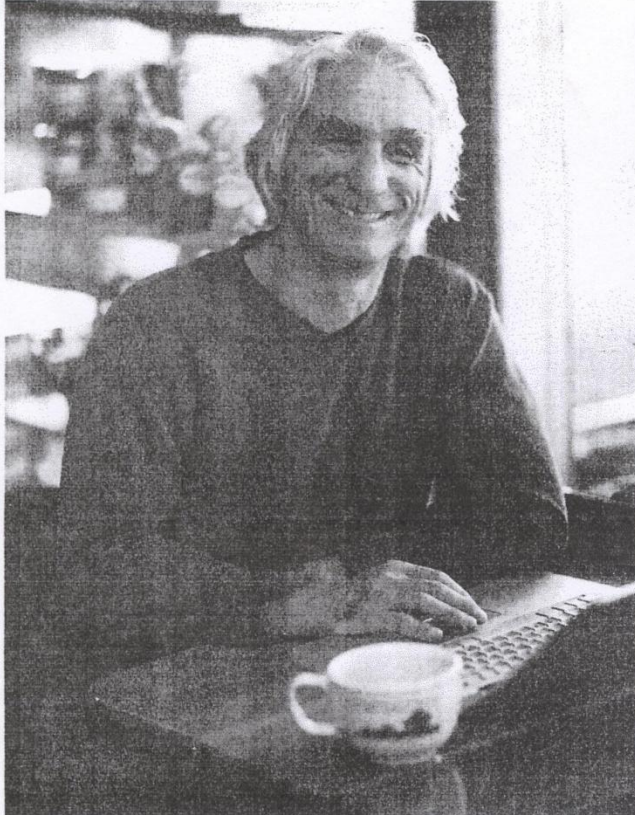
One can get an idea of the complexity of his business philosophy from the central ideas in *Out of the Labyrinth*. The Cliff Notes version follows: Everyone is comprised of three personae that live in a quest for balance—the Strategist, the Seeker, and the Citizen. The Strategist pursues goals in the objective domain; the Citizen participates in the social domain; and the Seeker quests for meaning. Inherent in the psyche of each of us is this triad of subpersonalities. Frankel believes that true community could be the lynchpin of balancing these personae through cultivating an interactive network of socially responsible businesses to help people break through society’s fragmentation.

Taking tangible steps to make this ideal community a reality, in addition to the Carl’s List free classified service Frankel has also used his extensive contacts to build a network of service providers and retailers who accept a discount card called the Hudson Valley Passport. For a \$40 initial investment, the card gets consumers 10 to 25 percent off purchases at participating businesses. At this point Frankel claims over 250 local businesses honoring the card, with more signing up daily.

“We are a network- and partnership-based organization, and we are setting out to build relationships with organizations that will reach out to their constituents,” he enthused. “Because it is all about building community. It takes a community to make this happen. And when people realize that they can save money, that’s a great motivator to grow this.”

It’s free for businesses to sign up so long as they pledge a discount to holders of the Passport. It’s typically a 10 percent discount, in essence taking the cost of tax off of purchases at participating businesses. In addition, Frankel is committed to taking 10 percent of his profits and putting them into promoting local commerce in an attempt to create a positive-feedback loop. Among the businesses that have signed up are Kenco sporting goods, New World Home Cooking and Le Canard Enchaîné restaurants, the Golden Notebook bookstore, and the Harvest Café, as well as several service providers and health practitioners. He even has deals in the works with a few larger local retailers.

“We are inclusive thinkers,” Frankel said. “The world is full of negativity and opposition to everyone, but what we are about is positivity and inclusive thinking and finding language to bring people to the same table. There is something in it



CARL FRANKEL SITS AT ONE OF HIS FAVORITE COMMUNITY NETWORK SPOTS, BREAD ALONE IN UPTOWN KINGSTON.

for everyone, regardless of what their politics are. If people just want to save money, by using the card they don't have to give a hoot about the community, and they can save hundreds of dollars a year just from joining." Saving money is universal, something that everyone can grasp.

For the most part, it is Frankel himself who does the majority of the dealmaking, strategizing, and marketing, with the help of a small support staff. Further postulating on the focus and goals of OCN, he said, "I don't want to sound grandiose, but what we are doing here is laying the infrastructure for a postglobal capitalism corporate economy. We are creating alternative trading systems through Carl's List and we are creating a local network of people who can trade and barter and do various things amongst themselves, whether it is shopping at locally owned stores or engaging in peer-to-peer exchange through Carl's List."

And his potluck community parties are still happening affairs. A recent gathering at the Enchanted Manor Bed & Breakfast in Woodstock was the largest yet, with over 200 in attendance, and featured drumming and a bonfire. One of the attractions of the party is that there is an open "sharing" time for people to verbally announce their future additions to Carl's List. Listings announced might include anything from art openings to adoptable pets.

"We live in a world where we are at ideological loggerheads, and it is creating a paralysis in terms of preventing our ability for progress in society," Frankel said. "But I am not interested in creating a business that is going to be 'us against anybody.'" In reality, although we are a counterpoint to the national brands and malls, I don't think of the Barnes and Nobles of the world as the enemy. That's not a useful conversation. How I look at it is, Barnes and Noble doesn't need our help. But the Golden Notebook could use it. I'm here for our neighbors."

Frankel's ideal of empowering the community to aid people in taking charge of their lives has a simple motto: "The Power of Us." His ultimate goal is to morph business into a force that is not destructive, but, rather, a dynamic agent of positive change. And it all arose from one of the first places of true community, the dinner table. The result is a system that gives people the framework to be in commercial relationships with one another on a personal basis. Oh, and it can save you money. ●

Information about Our Community Networks is available at [www.ourhudsonvalley.net](http://www.ourhudsonvalley.net), where you can also sign up for Carl's List.



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