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## Buy Nothing! The UX of Hyper-Local Gift Communities

The Buy Nothing Project and its local chapters are having a fundamental impact on the way neighborhoods interact, purchase and redistribute goods, and define charity. And they're doing it all through Facebook.



By [Amy L. Dickson](#)

What began as a routine Friday night at home with a glass of wine and HBO ended in a trip to the local Ballard Emergency Room for acute appendicitis. No one can predict these events and I was as surprised as anyone to find myself suddenly being rushed by ambulance to Swedish hospital for a laparoscopic appendectomy.

Thanks to modern medicine I was home again within 24 hours and put on bed rest for a week. Cable TV has its limits and I had just wrapped up my latest Kindle novel—what could I do to stay entertained for the coming days? That's when I remembered Buy Nothing Ballard.

## What is Buy Nothing Ballard?

Buy Nothing Ballard (BNB) is a closed social media group on Facebook that is part of the larger [Buy Nothing Project](#). The Buy Nothing Project began as an experimental hyper-local gift economy on Bainbridge Island, WA; in just 18 months, it became a worldwide social movement, growing to more than 110,000 members in 12 nations with 607 groups and 800 volunteers. In

my Ballard neighborhood the group rules are simple:

*Buy Nothing. Give Freely. Share creatively. Post anything you'd like to give away, lend, or share among neighbors. Ask for anything you'd like to receive for free or borrow. Keep it legal. Keep it civil. No buying or selling, no trades or bartering, no soliciting for cash, we're an adult-only, hyper-local gift economy.*

Membership must be approved by volunteer coordinators and your address is used to verify that you live within the small defined radius, ensuring activity truly is local, and in most cases, walkable. My surgeon prescribed walking to help with healing, so I put the call out for a few novels I could borrow. I was happy to pick up the books from BNB folks within a half-mile radius. I thought I would get an offer, maybe two.

Within 20 minutes I had BNBers bringing me novels, sending me locations for pickups, and leaving messages offering me access to their personal libraries. I immediately found myself with six great new novels and had met, either virtually or in person, eight new neighbors. They all wished me a speedy recovery. They received nothing in return.



BNB Gratitude Post from a user who made banana bread with several donated ingredients.

## Give where you live

The Buy Nothing Project and its local chapters are having a fundamental impact on the way neighborhoods interact, purchase and redistribute goods, and define charity. And they're doing it all through Facebook. The facilitators decided Facebook made the most sense to have the largest effect: "To reach the masses and have the greatest impact, we need to use the master's tools to dismantle the castle. The transparency of Facebook groups' design allows our members to see mutual friends they share with relative strangers, and to build trust based on real-life connections visible through personal profile information." In a way, the Buy Nothing movement is making Facebook both relevant and fun again for casual users like my colleague/fellow BNBer, Deborah, and me.

With local blogs becoming the de facto source for news, and platforms like [Nextdoor](#) growing in



popularity, social networks are having a startling scalable effect on local communities. Here are four positive ways Deborah and I have observed this with Buy Nothing Ballard:

1. **Hyper-local networks strengthen communities through real-life interactions.** By posting my request for reading materials, I met eight new people I would not have otherwise met. I immediately felt more connected to my neighborhood. Members of these gift groups find themselves spending more and more time interacting in the groups, finding new ways to give back to the community that has brought humor, entertainment, and yes, free stuff into their lives. These groups lead to more robust communities that are better prepared to tackle both hard times and good by giving freely.
2. **Gift economies create an easy way to be charitable with immediate, measurable effects.** The Buy Nothing Project is about setting the scarcity model of our cash economy aside in favor of creatively and collaboratively sharing the abundance around us. When we give freely and openly to our immediate neighbors, whether it's an extra casserole, a box to bury a loved pet, or for me, the golf ball retriever claw that I gave to a neighbor golfer with an ailing back, we see the results immediately.
3. **Hyper-local social groups are a perfect example of content in context: What you need, where you need it, and when.** Deborah and her husband were in the middle of a landscape project when they realized they didn't have the right tool. What to do? Ask the BNB Community:



Deborah's daughter brings home the tamper from a friendly neighbor.

*We were in the middle of our backyard project when my husband announced he needed to go to Home Depot to buy a tamper. I responded to his announcement with a trio of questions: "What is a tamper? How often will we use it? How much does it cost?" After he supplied these answers —tamp down the dirt, once, and \$50, I decided that BNB was a good next step.*

*I posted my request and by lunchtime our daughter had walked half a block and brought the tamper home where it sits in our backyard ready to go. The woman who answered the post was named Judy. Minimal Facebook sleuthing revealed that Judy has two young boys and looked familiar. I showed my husband her photo. He knew Judy from our kids' school. I messaged Judy explaining that Joe is my husband and she replied with both an emoji and an offer for us to keep the tool as long as we needed it.*

*As a UX Designer I would evaluate my First-Time Use experience based on two criteria: Will I find what I need; will it be easy and quick?*

*BNB First-Time Use (looking): Check and check, and the elusive “delighter” of meeting Judy made this process fun!*

- 4. Buy Nothing platforms help keep reusable items out of landfills and the ocean.** Rethinking consumption and refusing to buy new in favor of asking for an item from a neighbor may make an impact on the amount of goods manufactured in the first place, which in turn may put a dent in the overproduction of unnecessary goods that end up in our landfills, watersheds, and seas. My colleague Deborah put this theory to the test with the old Blink toaster oven:

*The toaster oven at Blink has been replaced. After the old one sat on the counter for two days with a Post-it announcing it as “FREE” with no takers, I thought of BNB. After explaining how BNB works, I asked my colleague how long she thought it would take to find a home. I countered her “two days,” prediction with “two hours,” and the bet was on! Seventeen minutes later Laurie responded to my post saying, “My roommates and I have no toaster or toaster oven. We would love this! Thank you for considering us!”*

*Within a couple of hours there were several more takers, but I went with Laurie as she was quick and seemed to need the appliance. I messaged Laurie my address, brought the oven home, left it on my porch for pick up, and the next day it was gone.*

*BNB First-Time Use (gifting): Check and check!*



Deborah found the old Blink toaster oven a new home in 17 minutes.

## Social Media For Real-World Interactions

For those who worry that social media disconnects or isolates us from the real people in our lives, we firmly believe this shift toward hyper-local online communities will blend the best of both worlds: the ability to reach many in an instant while seriously impacting the lives of real, nearby individuals. Let's not discount the impact these groups can also have on our landfills and environment. With [chapters popping up in multiple neighborhoods](#), chances are there's one near you! I know that as soon as I am done with my new books, I'll be sure to pass them on to the next deserving Buy Nothing member.

*Deborah and Amy are colleagues at Blink UX and residents of Ballard. Combined they have given away movie passes, a couch, a toaster, a duvet cover, and a golf ball retriever. They've received books, a raspberry plant, and borrowed yard tools. Most recently, Amy scored a free fog machine to take her Halloween decorating to the next level this year.*