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CONSUMED

Anti-Fan Club

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Rachael Ray Haters

Consumer culture, and indeed popular culture, revolve in large part around shared admiration, shared likes: fandom, in a word, is a thing that can bring us together. But what about shared dislikes? Can a community form around that? What is the opposite of a fan club? The answer is the Rachael Ray Sucks Community. Gathering by way of the blogging and social-networking site LiveJournal, this group has more than 1,000 members, who are quite active in posting their latest thoughts and observations about the various shortcomings, flaws and disagreeable traits of Rachael Ray, the television food personality. “This community,” the official explanation reads, “was created for people that hate the untalented twit known as Rachael Ray.” The most important rule for those who wish to join: “You must be anti-Rachael!” As with any community, the key to attracting members is not just a clear core idea but one that can be fulfilled in a variety of ways. Members of the Rachael Ray Sucks Community certainly do this, criticizing her cooking skills, her overreliance on chicken stock, her kitchen hygiene, her smile (often compared to the Joker’s), her voice, her physical mannerisms, her clothes, her penchant for saying “Yum-o” and so on. The general tone is suggested by the community’s name for the object of its united spite: “Raytard.”

The founder of this enterprise is Misty Lane, 32, of Lansing, Mich., who turns out to be not an angry sociopath but an upbeat-sounding woman who punctuates every other sentence with a friendly laugh. In the context of anti-Rachael Rayism, Lane was an early adopter: she founded the group three years ago, when Ray’s “30 Minute Meals” was just another show on the Food Network. A cooking enthusiast who enjoyed

picking up tips and inspiration from “true chefs,” Lane complained that Ray trafficked in culinary “common knowledge.” And that she kept waving her arms around. “She just used to drive me crazy,” Lane said, laughing.

Sounds like a good reason to change the channel, but instead Lane started her community and alerted the 40 or so people on her LiveJournal friends list. Only a few joined, and the community remained relatively small until it was mentioned last year (in a pro-Ray essay) in the online magazine Slate. By then, Ray was on her way to becoming the pop-culture juggernaut that she is today, with a couple of Food Network shows, a syndicated talk show, a magazine started a year ago that is expected to top a million in circulation in the next few months, plans for a restaurant and even CDs of her favorite songs for kids and the holidays. Meanwhile, Ray-bashing has flourished, too.

Which raises a curious point: While the community is now mentioned in practically every article about Ray, and new members keep chiming in, it seems to have had no impact on Ray’s rise whatsoever. Ed Keller, C.E.O. of the research-and-consulting firm Keller Fay Group, says that while some brand managers live in fear of negative chatter, what really matters in gauging “talk share” is whether positive talk dominates. “If you’ve got a fan base,” he says, “you can weather negative word of mouth.” (And the anti-Ray sentiment may be a special case, given that many of her fans are almost certainly motivated by an anti-sentiment of their own, against complicated cooking and “foodie” culture.)

Lane has wondered why her particular community has received so much attention. “Most celebrities have anti-sites on the Internet,” she points out, and so do plenty of prominent brands, like Starbucks and Dell. Perhaps the real lesson of communities of disregard is that they’re a sign of brand health: nobody bothers to get together to hate an irrelevant entity. Where would the fun be in that?

And while the tone of the Rachael Ray Sucks Community sometimes seems a little unbalanced, fun is basically the point, Lane maintains, of

her “silly hobby.” She spends an hour a day or so on the site, doing basic maintenance, commenting on new posts and, most of all, being entertained. The anti-Ray community is funnier — and far more active — than any Ray fan site she has seen. “It’s nice to find like-minded people,” Lane says. “You think for the longest time that you’re all by yourself, and you’re the crazy one for not liking something. Then you meet other people who dislike the same things you do.

“It’s like a family reunion!” Lane concluded. And then she laughed, quite cheerily.