

FAST COMPANY

Who is Sylvia?

Silicon Valley Public Relations Icon

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Sylvia Paull

Silicon Valley Public Relations Icon

A lot of Silicon Valley insiders first met Sylvia Paull in the late 1980s, when as the marketer for a software startup, she threw some of the hottest parties at computer-industry conventions such as Comdex and Macworld. Bill Gates came. So did nerd goddess Esther Dyson and Grateful Dead lyricist turned cyberactivist John Perry Barlow. Paull began drawing an eclectic mix of the brilliant, the influential, and the ambitious to soirees at her home in the Berkeley hills.

She eventually turned the informal gatherings into the monthly Cybersalon, with discussions on new directions in technology and the ethical questions they raised. One night, a musician started a fistfight during a debate about how artists should be paid in the online realm. But violence was the exception, and the meetings attracted ever-bigger crowds. After cramming people into her small house, Paull moved the event to Berkeley's Hillside Club, where it now regularly draws more than 100 attendees.

"What I do is intentionally serendipitous," Paull says. While she isn't well known to the public--her email address begins with "Whoisylvia"--Paull is one of the most effective behind-the-scenes "connectors" in the Valley. On a typical day, she might introduce her Berkeley friend Wes Boyd, cofounder of MoveOn.org, to Craig Newmark from Craigslist. She took on Halsey Minor as a client when he was starting CNet. She promoted the Ask Jeeves search engine when it had only three employees. More recently, she discovered Scott Redmond, a Bay Area inventor who has patented both a hydrogen-based energy system and a wearable computer. She looks for "obsessed, brilliant people with a vision of the world totally unlike how it is now--not crazy outrageous, but visionary outrageous."

Paull links the hard-core geeks, the entrepreneurs, the media insiders, and the political activists, too. "I call myself a relational database," she says. "I have a very good memory. I go to a lot of events every day, and I know thousands of people. I talk to them, find out what they're capable of doing, and make connections."

Scouting for innovators means that Paull, who's 60, talks with a lot of kids young enough to be her grandchildren. "People here don't even remember the 2000 crash," she says. "We always get an influx of young people with historical amnesia--and they fuel the next revolution." At one event, she met 22-year-old Tyler Ziemann, founder of Affinity Engines, a social-networking site. Ziemann asked Paull out to lunch--but he didn't bring any cash or credit cards, so Paull was forced to pick up the tab. But she was neither dismayed nor surprised. It was a small price for yet one more connection--and you never know where that might lead.



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