Building for *Closeness*

Heads Up *with* Hinge

What we learned about *designing for closeness*

We have more ways to connect than ever, yet too many of us still feel alone. The technology shaping our social lives was built for more — more reach, more contacts, more engagement. But feeling close takes more than being connected. It takes intention and technology designed to help us get there.

On October 8, 2026, Hinge hosted Heads Up, a one-day gathering in Brooklyn that brought together leaders across tech, culture, wellness, and academia to ask how we build for real connection. Across sessions, labs, and hallway conversations, one idea kept returning: At its best, technology is the catalyst that gets us closer to each other. It can create the opportunity, but people do the work of being present, being vulnerable, and showing up over time.

This guide gathers the ideas, tensions, and open questions that emerged throughout the day, exploring what it means to design for closeness and how we can build technology that brings us closer together.

closeness crisis *noun*
The widening gap between how digitally connected people are and how close they actually feel to others.

“Technology can create the opportunity for people to experience deep closeness with each other.”



JACKIE JANTOS,
CEO, HINGE

We have more ways than ever to stay connected to our friends, our families, our communities, and the things we love. But staying connected doesn’t always mean feeling close. The kind of closeness that comes from being together in person can feel harder to find.

We are spending less time with each other in person, and even less time simply talking out loud. I worry about what we lose when those everyday moments disappear.

I recognize this drift in my own life. When I walk into a room where I don’t know anyone, reaching for the phone in my back pocket can feel more natural and less awkward than saying hi to someone. But those small moments of eye contact and conversation are opportunities to feel seen, to see others, and to connect. These small moments do more for our soul than the solo scroll on our phones. And we know it.

At Hinge, we’re on a mission to make the world a less lonely place. That means thinking about how technology can help us find our way to each other, and knowing when it should step aside. That’s why we brought people together for Heads Up. We wanted to learn from the founders, artists, researchers, and community leaders already helping people feel closer. Our purpose was to explore what’s working, build community with others working toward the same goals, and explore how we can build technology and spaces that meet people’s needs.

What follows is what we learned. I hope it gives you something to bring into your own work, and if nothing else, a reason to lift up your head and start a conversation.



JACKIE JANTOS,
CEO, HINGE

Featured Contributors



Ally Millar
Senior Product Marketing Lead, Pinterest



Alphonzo Terrell
Co-Founder & CEO, Spill



Andy Dunn
Founder & CEO, Pie, and Co-Founder & Founding CEO, Bonobos



Ben Celebicic
Chief Product & Technology Officer, (CPTO), Hinge



Bridget Todd
Podcast Host & Tech Commentator



Debbie Millman
Designer & Podcast Host



Esther Perel
Psychotherapist & Relationship Expert



Grace Brown
Founder, Andromeda Robotics



Graham Dugoni
Founder, Yondr



Jackie Jantos
CEO, Hinge



Kahlil Greene
Gen Z Historian



Linda Dounia Rebeiz
Artist & Designer



Manoush Zomorodi
Journalist & Podcast Host



Michael Skolnik
CEO & Co-Owner, Soze



Nayeema Raza
Host of Smart Girl Dumb Questions Podcast



Rana el Kaliouby
AI Scientist & Entrepreneur



Saeed Jones
Poet & Podcaster



Sari Azout
Founder, Sublime



Saumya Gupta
Founder, Build IRL



Teya Knapp
CEO & Founder, A Safe Space Mentor



TJ Driver
Co-Founder, Brick



Tony Marx
President & CEO, New York Public Library



Trisha Prabhu
Founder & CEO, ReThink Citizens



Xavier ‘X’ Jernigan
Original Voice of DJ and Spotify Trends Expert

Themes Discussed

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Technology shouldn't compete with our humanity for attention. Speakers explored how we rebuild the habit of being present with each other.

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Not every bit of friction is a bug. The effort, discomfort, and privacy of being in person are what make closeness real.

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Being seen isn't equally safe for everyone. Designing for the people least served makes products better for all.

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Every design choice teaches people what gets rewarded. Speakers proposed measuring what happens in people's lives off the screen.

The *Attention* and *Habits* We Need



The *Attention* and *Habits* We Need

Closeness starts with attention, and attention is the thing our devices are best at taking. Our contributors returned again and again to the idea that the closeness crisis and the attention crisis are the same problem seen from two sides. When our focus is fragmented, we lose the patience that real connection asks of us. Contributors discussed what it takes to get it back.



"The closeness crisis, for me, is indistinguishable from the attention crisis.

When our attention is hijacked — when we cannot process anything with patience and contemplation — what do we lose?"

SARI AZOUT
FOUNDER, SUBLIME



53%
of U.S. adults say they spend too much time on their smartphone,

rising to 70%
of adults 18 to 29.

ACCORDING TO PEW RESEARCH CENTER SURVEY
MAY 2026 - JUNE 2026





"If you eradicate specificity because the same message or the same emoji applies to three immediately different life events, you're not able to connect."

ESTHER PEREL
PSYCHOTHERAPIST & RELATIONSHIP EXPERT

"Social media is a platform for performance... And we cannot get close to people when we are optimizing for performance and approval."

SARI AZOUT
FOUNDER, SUBLIME



During the pandemic, Saeed Jones, author of five books and a creative writing teacher, found he could no longer get through a few pages. So he bought three hourglasses: 15, 30, and 45 minutes. No notes, no looking things up, just sitting with the page. Weeks of 15-minute sessions slowly rebuilt the focus he'd lost.

> “I realized what I was doing was rebuilding my skill of thoughtful attention. And if you can do that with a book, you certainly can do that with another person.”

SAEED JONES
POET & PODCASTER

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Presence is where closeness starts.

Our devices fill every pause, and the pauses are where we used to connect.

Focus takes upkeep.

Like any skill, it weakens when we stop using it. Small, deliberate practices can help us train the muscle.

Attention shows up in the details.

Empathy comes from truly listening and responding to what someone is sharing, instead of giving a generic reply. It’s how we make people feel heard and understood.

THE QUESTION WE’RE STILL ASKING

What is a social practice you've dropped, and what would it take to pick it back up?

“Do more of what matters. Everybody’s got stuff that matters in their life that they want to do more of, and habits that get in the way.”

TJ DRIVER
CO-FOUNDER, BRICK

Friction for *Deeper Connection*



Friction for *Deeper Connection*

Technology has spent decades removing friction by making things faster, easier, cheaper, and always available. But the experiences we value most often run on a different current. During our prototyping lab session, we asked what happens when builders design friction back into products, spaces, and experiences on purpose to protect the effort and privacy that closeness depends on.



> “Playing a melody faster doesn’t increase your enjoyment of it. Hiking to the top of a mountain, the view is better because of the effort it took to get there. You can call it friction, or you can call it the meaning bound up in the process.”

GRAHAM DUGONI
FOUNDER, YONDR

At schools using phone-free pouches, teenage girls told the team they could finally eat lunch without worrying about being filmed and posted. The point, Dugoni argued, isn't only attention. It's whether young people can live outside a fishbowl long enough to take risks, which may be the most important part of being a kid.





"The friction [of in-person contact] is what allows us to come together with people we usually would not be in touch with, and to think of them as people anyway. That's where basic respect starts."

ESTHER PEREL
PSYCHOTHERAPIST & RELATIONSHIP EXPERT

54%
of people globally almost always or often choose alone time even when they have the chance to socialize.

HINGE SOCIAL ENERGY STUDY
10,000 PARTICIPANTS ACROSS THE U.S., U.K., AUSTRALIA, FRANCE, AND GERMANY, MAY - JULY 2025



"How can you ever be intimate without privacy?"

GRAHAM DUGONI
FOUNDER, YONDR

> “High-quality connection requires inconvenience, friction, discomfort: all the things technology is very well suited to remove from our lives. So it’s on each of us to figure out where we draw that line, and how we build intentional friction into our lives.”

TJ DRIVER
CO-FOUNDER, BRICK





KEY TAKEAWAYS

Efficiency isn't always the point.

Some tasks are better when they’re completed quickly and easily. But the experiences we value get their meaning from the time and effort we put into them.

Surveillance impacts intimacy.

When anything can be filmed and posted, people stop taking the risks connection requires.

Friction can be a feature.

Intentional friction is what pushes us across the room to a stranger, and builders can choose where to use it.

Look for what’s become easier than it needs to be.

Some conveniences remove effort that was doing something useful for us. Relying solely on an AI meeting summary, for example, takes away the utility of taking your own notes, which helps you remember the conversation.

THE QUESTION WE’RE STILL ASKING

Which frictions in our lives are worth protecting?

“We need more friction in digital spaces.

And that needs to be baked into design.”

TRISHA PRABHU
FOUNDER & CEO, RETHINK CITIZENS

Building a *Less Lonely World*



Building a *Less Lonely World*

Modern loneliness doesn't look like isolation. It looks like a full feed of content from people we've followed for years and an empty calendar. Closing that gap takes deliberate building, in the places where people gather and in the technology they interact with. Speakers described the conditions connection needs, and the role technology can play in meeting them.



> "Modern loneliness masks itself as hyperconnectivity. You can have a thousand virtual friends and no one to watch your dog. It's less an absence of people and more an absence of depth."

ESTHER PEREL
PSYCHOTHERAPIST & RELATIONSHIP EXPERT

1 in 6
people worldwide are affected by loneliness

ACCORDING TO WHO COMMISSION ON SOCIAL CONNECTION (JUNE 2025)





"Those moments when we feel we are the only person going through what we're going through are some of the most vulnerable in your life. It doesn't even occur to you that there are bridges you can walk to connect with people."

SAEED JONES
POET & PODCASTER

"[Third spaces are] something that's going away... You'd see people on their stoops. You would talk to people at the bodega. That stuff doesn't happen as much anymore."

ALLY MILLAR
SENIOR PRODUCT MKTG LEAD, PINTEREST

"It's a funny thing that we hold these secrets we think are a source of shame... when actually those are the keys to connection."

ANDY DUNN
FOUNDER & CEO, PIE, AND CO-FOUNDER & FOUNDING CEO, BONOBOS

“How do you manufacture community? How do you get people to lower their guard and talk to each other when they’re sitting next to each other?”

TONY MARX
PRESIDENT & CEO, NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY





In an aged care home, a resident — who spoke only Chinese after cognitive decline — had gone a year with no one to talk to. On her first day in the residence, Andromeda's companion robot greeted him in Chinese. He talked with her for over an hour and started consistently coming out of his room for the first time in months. He also began writing her poetry, which she answered with poems of her own.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Closeness is a public health matter.

Meaningful relationships are essential to our health and well-being. Creating opportunities for closeness is a responsibility we all share, from the communities we live in to the technology we build.

Connection grows where design creates the conditions.

New friendships grow when people regularly cross paths and feel comfortable opening up to each other. Neither happens by default for most adults. Products and places can be built to help create more opportunities for those moments to happen.

Technology that gives people more agency feels supportive.

When people can choose how and when technology fits into their lives, it feels like a tool that supports them.

THE QUESTION WE’RE STILL ASKING

What are more examples of technology bringing us close?

“This idea of third spaces... a place where you can hang out and gain new experiences just by being present. I really want to make sure we don’t lose this in this age of technology.”

KATRINA BAWAR
ATTENDEE

Tradeoffs and *Compromises*



Tradeoffs and *Compromises*

Building for closeness comes with tough decisions. Founders and investors spoke candidly about the money they turned down, the growth they chose not to chase, and the business models they're betting on. Their stories revealed a common thread: how a company makes money reflects what it values and shapes how it treats the people who use its products.





"My hope is that when we do monetize, it will be freemium, not ads, because ads create a desire to addict, whereas freemium creates a desire to delight."

ANDY DUNN
FOUNDER & CEO, PIE, AND
CO-FOUNDER & FOUNDING CEO, BONOBOS



Two months away from missing payroll, Rana el Kaliouby's company got a call from a government agency offering $40 million, on the condition that it pivot to surveillance and security. The company had committed to using its technology only where people gave consent. They turned the money down and ended up fine.

"We build for resonance, not scale. Sublime means more to fewer people.

The question I would pose to you is: what sort of scale turns you on?"

SARI AZOUT
FOUNDER, SUBLIME

"I think of Sublime as having an exist strategy, not an exit strategy. As long as I can pay my employees at the end of the month and keep going, I'm good."

SARI AZOUT
FOUNDER, SUBLIME

"The biggest dialogue we're constantly having is depth versus scale. Can products that feel warm and connected and welcoming grow to tens, hundreds of millions of people? I've seen that it is possible, if you thoughtfully architect it step by step and stay flexible."

ALPHONZO TERRELL
CO-FOUNDER & CEO, SPILL

"I have a fiduciary responsibility to maximize return for my investors. But I believe it's an 'and.' We can invest in companies that do good for people and the planet and also provide outsized returns."

RANA EL KALIOUBY
AI SCIENTIST & ENTREPRENEUR

While speaking at Heads Up, Sari Azout, founder of Sublime, noted that Sublime means more to fewer people.

It has 100,000 people on the platform, enough to be profitable.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Articulate your values early.

A principle written down in advance gives a founder something to stand on when an offer or a deadline adds pressure. The ones that hold up are specific enough to drive decisions, including which opportunities to turn down.

Resonance can beat reach.

Audience size is only one way to measure success; meaning more to fewer people is a viable business, not a consolation prize.

With AI, the harder question is whether to build.

When new tools can do almost anything, the decision that matters is what to leave unbuilt, which means starting from the human need before choosing the technology.

Doing good and doing well can coexist.

A responsible company answers to four groups: users, employees, shareholders, and society. Checking each one regularly, and acting when any of them comes up short, keeps the pursuit of returns accountable to the rest.

THE QUESTION WE'RE STILL ASKING

Can products built for warmth and depth grow to have millions of active users without losing what makes them work?

“It’s always about knowing what to say no to.

That, to me, is the core human skill.”

BEN CELEBICIC
CPTO, HINGE

How to Invite in *Other Voices*



How to Invite in *Other Voices*

Who is in the room at different parts of the development process shapes what gets built. Speakers argued that inclusion isn't a final check before launch. It starts far upstream, in strategy and design, and it means designing for the people whose needs are least met. Access, dignity, and the data behind our tools all came up as places where voices get left out, and where builders can choose differently.



> “If you are designing for the people whose needs are least matched, you will, by design, design better.”

JACKIE JANTOS
CEO, HINGE

One of Hinge’s guiding principles is to involve the people it designs for at the start of the process. When the team set out to learn from trans daters, they brought in Trans Tech Social Enterprises at the very start of a strategy and design sprint and walked through members' real experiences. Jantos said what the team built from that learning now serves people with a wide range of needs, well beyond the group the work began with.



"AI isn't magic. It's math. It is data. If you want to interrogate the way AI represents a person, a topic, a culture, you have to interrogate the data."

LINDA DOUNIA REBEIZ
ARTIST & DESIGNER

"Who might we be leaving out, whether that be intentional or not... Are we really measuring across all of our user groups?"

JASJIT MANGAT
ATTENDEE

"I have a Gen Z leadership team, and I almost trust them more than my senior leadership team. So I'm optimistic."

ANDY DUNN
FOUNDER & CEO, PIE, AND
CO-FOUNDER & FOUNDING CEO, BONOBOS

"The fact that this is going to exist in our lives is already decided, but how the relationships that we have with these technologies work is still yet to be written."

GRACE BROWN
FOUNDER, ANDROMEDA ROBOTICS

72%
of Gen Z say brands should make them feel good.

Gen Z is clear about what they want from the products in their lives. The next step is a say in how they're built.

ACCORDING TO EDELMAN GEN Z LAB, THE GREAT GEN Z DIVIDE, 2025



> “I don’t think young people don’t want to be online. I think they want to be online with dignity. If we spend our political capital on [banning smartphones for kids under a certain age], we can’t spend it on the harder question: how do you engineer for dignity?”

TRISHA PRABHU
FOUNDER, RETHINK CITIZENS





KEY TAKEAWAYS

Check who is in the room.

When the team making a product doesn’t reflect the people who use it, the fix is to bring those people in before you make decisions, starting with the ones whose needs are most often overlooked.

Interrogate the data, because that’s where representation is decided.

AI reflects the records it’s trained on, and those records carry the unevenness of the institutions that produced them.

Voice has to come with decision-making power.

Products that shape young people’s lives are often built without giving them a say in the decisions. Product councils and board seats give them a real vote on what gets built and whether it ships.

THE QUESTION WE’RE STILL ASKING

How do we share decision-making power with the people our products affect?

“The model that has been forced on us is youth participation and youth voice instead of youth power.”

TRISHA PRABHU
FOUNDER, RETHINK CITIZENS

The *New Rules* for Tech



The *New Rules* for Tech

Every interface on a platform or app carries a point of view. Speakers argued that the incentives driving consumer tech are upside down, and that the people building it should care as much about humans as about technology. The new rules they proposed: measure what happens to people's lives, think in years rather than quarters, earn trust through consent, and remember that the shape of our future with AI is still ours to decide.



> “Product design is inherently culture design. Interfaces are just opinions embedded in pixels, and algorithms are just opinions in mathematics.”

SARI AZOUT
FOUNDER, SUBLIME

ACCORDING TO A 2026 PAPER OF EVERYDAY-CONVERSATION RECORDINGS

~28% fewer words spoken per day in 2019 than in 2005.

PERSPECTIVES ON PSYCHOLOGICAL SCIENCE (MARCH 2026)





"When you are focused on the outcomes of the people you're designing for, success begets success."

JACKIE JANTOS
CEO, HINGE

"You cannot be focused on just 3- to 6-month outcomes. You need to be looking at 5- to 10-year outcomes."

ALPHONZO TERRELL
CO-FOUNDER & CEO, SPILL

"At the end of the day, it all comes back to: do you trust the people you're connecting with? For us, that's respecting people's privacy and consent, including the data you use to train any algorithm."

RANA EL KALIOUBY
AI SCIENTIST & ENTREPRENEUR

"Bring as much humanity into every part of the process, because people can feel it on the other side. Don't do an AI product just for the sake of using AI."

XAVIER 'X' JERNIGAN
ORIGINAL VOICE OF DJ AND SPOTIFY TRENDS EXPERT

“We have held the moral bar for the leaders of our biggest consumer technology companies extremely low for far too long.

The people building technology that impacts human beings should care as much about human beings as they care about technology.”

ALPHONZO TERRELL
CO-FOUNDER & CEO, SPILL

People often join a platform looking for community and connection. But a platform's metrics quietly set its rules, and over time those rules crowd out the values people came with. Azout calls this value capture, and says builders should name the point of view their interface carries.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Product design shapes how people treat each other.

A like button doesn't just count reactions; it teaches people what gets attention and approval.

Measure human outcomes.

Define success by what improves in people’s lives after they put their devices down.

Make decisions on a longer horizon.

Weigh what drives results this quarter against what builds user health and a healthy business over the next five or 10 years.

Trust is built on consent.

Respect privacy and be clear about the data behind every algorithm.

THE QUESTION WE’RE STILL ASKING

How do we bring the nuance of in-person connection, the smiles and the tone, into the connections we make online?

“They should be asking their users: does this content make you feel safe, seen, celebrated?

And if the answer is no, what can we do differently?”

ALLY MILLAR
SENIOR PRODUCT MARKETING LEAD, PINTEREST

What Comes Next?

Nine principles for building for closeness

PRINCIPLE 1

Build for depth.

Quality matters more than quantity, so judge every feature by whether it makes interactions richer or moves a connection forward.

PRINCIPLE 2

Preserve the effort that fosters human connection.

Easier isn't always better, so keep the small efforts closeness starts from, like an awkward hello or an honest answer, and remove only the friction that serves no purpose.

PRINCIPLE 3

Make closeness a ritual.

Closeness grows through repetition, so give relationships a standing time and place with enough consistency to survive busy weeks.

PRINCIPLE 4

Give the people you serve a say in what you build.

Share real decision-making power with the people a product serves, starting with those whose needs are most often overlooked, so their participation changes what gets built.

PRINCIPLE 5

Build a clear user path out of the product and into real life.

Design so people can reach a point where they put the product down.

PRINCIPLE 6

Let human needs guide AI's role.

Start with the problem, and ask whether AI can help lighten the burden.

PRINCIPLE 7

Commit to values even when it's difficult.

Define the promises you'll protect and the boundaries you won't cross, and use them to test every decision.

PRINCIPLE 8

Make safety foundational.

Build protections in from the start, and keep those protections in place even if they slow sign-ups or growth.

PRINCIPLE 9

Measure success by how people's lives improve.

Make well-being and real-world outcomes, like belonging and feeling understood, the primary measures of success.

Emerging trends we're following

The counterculture to digital addiction.

Phone-free schools, devices that lock away distraction, and a growing appetite for unplugged time are now familiar. As more of us unplug, will we start to miss the online spaces where many of us found friends and community?

AI companions: support or substitute?

Companion technology is arriving and advancing fast. The open question is whether it supports human contact, as Andromeda's robot 'Abi' is designed to do in care homes, or takes its place.

Gen Z as co-designers.

Young people are asking for real decision-making power over products that shape their lives, from seats on boards to a say in what features get built.

The artisanal internet.

More builders are making products meant to mean more to fewer people, choosing resonance over reach.

Rebuilding third spaces.

Libraries, clubs, and recurring gatherings are being designed for conversation between strangers, bringing the places between home and work back into focus.

“Society always has to be in sight. We all have to be thinking deeply about whether what we’re doing is going to have long-term benefits for us as a whole.”



BEN CELEBICIC
CPTO, HINGE

We started Heads Up with a hard question: We’ve never been more connected to technology, so why do so many of us feel alone? I ended the day more optimistic, because of what the next generation of builders is already creating and what’s still possible when we put our energy into bringing people closer together.

Leading a team of passionate product and technology people, I spend a lot of time thinking about the choices behind every aspect of the product. What challenges are people sharing with us? What should we make easier? And when should technology get out of the way?

Heads Up reinforced how much those decisions matter. The choices we make as technology leaders reach millions of people. They can help someone feel safe enough to be themselves and interact with the world around them. I care deeply about where those choices lead and the responsibility we have to get them right.

Building a more connected, less lonely world will also take an ongoing commitment to each other: sharing what concerns us, learning from one another, mentoring people with ideas worth pursuing, and putting those ideas into practice.

Thank you to everyone who brought their experience, curiosity, and care to Heads Up. I’m looking forward to what we build together from here.



BEN CELEBICIC
CHIEF PRODUCT & TECHNOLOGY OFFICER, HINGE

Visit the Heads Up Newsroom Hub for in-depth articles, media, research, and supporting content ↗