

USER-GENERATED CONTENT STRATEGY TIPS



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This piece originally appeared in ClickZ

Allowing people to influence, shape, respond to, and create their own content is still surprisingly a tough hurdle for many brands to get over. In past columns I've talked about motivating participation within brand content programs, as well as how new open technologies are influencing and shaping how and where we ask people to participate. So, once you have a great brand content show idea, how do you get a brand comfortable with opening that program up to real conversation?

Every brand and client is different. However, you can be more successful by confronting and then avoiding a number of concerns and common mistakes that have arisen again and again over the past few years. Here are a few specific things to think about before pitching your case and or beginning your user-generated content (UGC) strategy:

The Equation of Control

One of the most common concerns for marketers is losing control of the brand message. This is because at the heart of user-generated content is interpretation; someone is taking her perception and understanding of the brand and creating her own opinion, vision, and message.

Laying out benefits to counteract this loss in control is vital. In a recent Nielsen poll, up to 90 percent of the respondents said they trust recommendations from people they know and 70 percent said they trusted consumer opinions posted online compared to only 37 percent of respondents trusting online video ads. In other words, you gain trust by allowing people to interpret your brand and spread the word for you -- it's roughly twice as effective!

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Giving them tools to do that and freedom to shape the message means that more ears will be willing to listen. That's one step closer to getting them to take in (and notice) your brand and message.

Deciding the Right Moderations Level

Loss of control is also often rooted in the fear of getting negative feedback and response. We have all heard and seen the nightmare stories!

While some would say that vulnerability and subjecting oneself to harsh user opinion is good, such as this example involving Dell, for a brand in the long run, less adventurous brands have options as well.

Crafting community guidelines, using filters, embracing new moderation tools, and being transparent about what is and isn't being reviewed are all good tips to get in the game.

In the end, people will find a way to give their opinion of your brand -- with or without the brand's participation. It's better to understand and act upon that powerful insight.

Setting Up Low Barriers to Entry

One of the biggest mistakes? Asking too much from both your client and the audience at project launch. Building a brand content strategy and creating value for that audience is the first step. Then, decide what level of participation is really right for the demographic you are targeting.

Launching an experience and expecting people to upload videos, photos, and commenting right away is unrealistic. People need tasks and incentives. And, more importantly, they need to engage long enough with your program to know what it's about. That takes time. Allow both your audience and client to ease into audience participation. For instance, starting with rating and commenting through open social technologies is an easy way to start without as much investment.

Broaden Beyond the Brand Message

When it comes to UGC videos, there are a lot more options beyond UGC contests. A solid brand content program will be most effective if it first finds a need that is missing for the audience of both the brand and the content creator.

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Once that need is identified, developing a broad enough sphere of topics, storylines, and/or information to keep that audience engaged is key. No one will be entertained or seek information that is so obviously tied to the same message over and over again.

A great example is to broaden the message to general lifestyle interests or educational needs. This will broaden what kind of content you can ask from your audience. In other words, just because you're marketing cheese, doesn't mean that your audience wants to see only cheese cooking shows and enter cheese recipes! Appeal to an audience's broader interests, and that content will mostly likely appeal to a broader audience.

Keeping It Alive

Once you have sold in and built a UGC strategy around your brand content program, it's important to listen and be responsive to what the participants have to say. Have a live forum or personally reach out to your most passionate participants to have them help shape future iterations! Also, make sure to lay out an editorial calendar and figure out a promotional strategy that will help sustain that audience base over time.

Lastly, keep in mind that when it comes to online content, lunchtime is the new primetime. Scheduling for new show updates, new promotions, or general updates should take this time-period into consideration. While we may be creating in a new on demand world, new studies are showing peak times of engagement.