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TEN MOTIVATORS THAT INSPIRE PARTICIPATION



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A brand content strategy isn't complete without inspired user-generated content (UGC) and audience participation. But, unlike banner placements and pre-roll, you can't just buy this type of attention with ad dollars.

The "if we build it they will come" syndrome is still prevalent today and it has two primary symptoms: the belief that you have to build an audience from scratch, and the belief that participation is a given. While the first symptom is easily curable, inspiring participation requires a lot more sweat and feverish hard work.

The path to recovery starts by asking the question: What is the motivation?

Most psychologists generally agree on two types of human motivations: intrinsic and extrinsic. We're either motivated by internal passions, or we're encouraged by external reward. Generally, theorists suggest that intrinsic motivators should dominate over extrinsic motivators. However, brands have somewhat of a disadvantage when developing brand content strategies. Ask yourself, why would anyone want to participate in a brand-developed experience when there are endless unbranded community outlets for people to be a part of?

The answer? Create a balance between both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, passions and reward. For while the easiest way to drive traffic and participation is to reward with cash, prizes, and other extrinsic motivations, concentrating solely on external incentives can lead to what psychologist call the over-justification effect -- when offering cash rewards and prizes undermines the "intrinsic motivation in previously enjoyable activities." In other words, you've diminished the passion point that brought them there in the first place.

That's not to say that promotions and rewards can't stimulate participation. But in order for participation to be sustainable beyond a promotional timeframe, there must be an underlying purpose created that appeals to a person's innate desire to participate on her own. Thus, an overall intrinsic need is created.

Now, there are no hard-coded rules around what mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators will spark community participation. A lot depends on the audience demographic you are trying to reach and the level of participation you are trying to inspire. In studying a number of successful UGC communities over the years, I started to keep a running list of motivations. Here are my top 10 motivators:

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Make It Easy

The fastest way to demotivate is to make participation too difficult. If someone has built up the energy and is interested enough to submit a thought or upload a video, the last thing you want to do is have the user interface get in the way or ask the person to register. Don't gate simple levels of participations like rating, commenting, and polls. And make sure they can find the "comment" button!

Make It Fun

This seems obvious. But unless you're giving away lots of free merchandise or cash, most people won't participate in something that's not enjoyable -- ultimately defeating long-term brand strategy goals.

Give Me Cash

Giving enough extrinsic motivators can inspire a short-term intense level of participation -- no matter how remedial or unworthy the task. However, a winning strategy is to combine cash and prizes with intrinsic motivations. Make it fun and easy, or provide something useful -- then apply ongoing rewards to jumpstart participation in lulls. Sprinkling cash and promotional incentives throughout a program versus just launching one big sweepstakes can also help overcome the over-justification effect.

Give Me Access

Give people access to something they can't get anywhere else. This could include the chance to meet or communicate online with a celebrity talent, or as simple as early access to ticket sales or retail events. In addition, developing a live, real-time online event can create an additional sense of urgency that can help drive participation.

Make Me a Star

Everyone still wants her 15 seconds of fame. Right now the promise of stardom or recognition is still a leading motivator. In fact, the desire for fame taps into both the intrinsic hierarchy of needs and an extrinsic motivation by feeling rewarded. Whether such motivations are sustainable is still to be determined!

Create Something Useful

One of my personal favorite motivators is to create something useful. Seeking out your audience and filling a need that doesn't exist are sure ways to win people over and get them coming back for more.

Let Me Influence

A natural place for a brand to play when considering a UGC strategy is to let your audience influence the development of a product or experience. People want to know that their opinions matter and that they can help shape and define the world around

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them. And it is a great way for a brand to win loyal participants. Just make sure to follow up on your promise!

Give Me a Challenge

People love to be challenged. Not only because solving puzzles and uncovering clues is fun, but it also leads to bragging rights and recognition. One only has to look at the proliferation of alternative reality gaming and crowd sourcing to see its success. In addition, adding layers of rewards or allowing deeper access through discovery is another great way to keep motivation up.

Be Altruistic

Nothing drives motivation more than tapping into people's altruistic passions. Adding charitable contributions or striving to improve something in the world taps into people's intrinsic desire to be good and do good. And that's something that doesn't require additional rewards to be sustainable.

Surprise Me

Challenges when developing a participation strategy for brand content include keeping things fresh and providing a reason for people to keep coming back. This requires brands to listen harder, evolve with the needs of their audience, and know when to kick in more extrinsic motivations to jumpstart interest and spark participation. Delight your audience with the unexpected and maybe they'll surprise you in return.