



## **CUSTOMER-GENERATED ADVERTISEMENTS**

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All opinions and observations expressed in this paper are the author's and do not necessarily represent MMC's position.

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## **Introduction**

Supported by the proliferation of accessible and affordable social media platforms, we have witnessed an explosion in the popularity of user-generated content. Encouraged by the increased interactivity afforded by new media, “consumers,” no longer content to passively consume, are increasingly becoming active in the creation of products. The trend toward inclusion of consumer input in the design, planning, and production of a company’s output has been described as “customer-made” by trendwatching.com. Although a number of companies are taking steps to infuse customer insight and participation in the design of new product development, the trend toward customer-made is most visible in user-generated advertising. A number of companies are embracing user-generated content by including customer-generated advertisements in their marketing mix, often in the form of television commercials or print advertising contests.

But not everyone is a believer. Some detractors challenge that the current trend is merely a passing fad in reaction to the popularity of reality television, American Idol, and YouTube hype. Others note that the advertisements that most often receive the most airplay are extremely well-produced and bear no difference from “actual” ads produced by “actual” advertising companies.

Despite these criticisms, customer-generated advertisements are likely here to stay. Customer participation has long held a place in advertising. Advertising firm Young & Rubicam notes that the use of testimonials and “jingle contests” dates from the advent of the modern advertising age in the 1940’s and 1950’s. Second, if the purpose of an advertisement is to get noticed, user-generated ads are exceptionally successful. By making viewers aware that an ad was made by regular people, companies can generate interest beyond the life of the ad itself. By virtue of participation, consumer-producers exhibit focused attention to the product being advertised. Last, by allowing users to express their own creativity, companies can gain valuable insight into how and why their products resonate in the minds of consumers.

## **Levels of Company Participation**

Although companies differ by the degree to which they sponsor, support, or encourage user-generated advertisements, the level of official recognition has little bearing on the audience size or the favor that customer-produced ads may gain. Examples of the varying levels of company direction over customer-generated advertisements are explained below.

## **Contests**

Among the most popular methods of encouraging customer-generated advertisements is holding an ad contest. During the 2007 Superbowl, Doritos sponsored the “Crash the Superbowl” contest which asked participants to submit 30-second spots to its website for a chance to win a \$10,000

cash prize. The company then selected the top five entrants and allowed the public to vote to select the winner. The website hosted more than 1,000 entries for viewing and allowed users to give feedback in the form of a “Love it!” vote or by leaving comments on a blog. More than eight hours of content and a sticky website were produced for only \$10,000 plus the cost of site development. (<http://promotions.yahoo.com/doritos/>)

### **Sponsored**

Burger King embraced consumer-generated advertising by encouraging the production of short films featuring “The King.” In August 2005, Burger King created a campaign in which 25 Burger King Halloween masks were sent to popular film contributors to Heavy.com. The films that Burger King received back were featured in the “Have It Your Way” branded entertainment section of the Heavy.com website. The CEO of Heavy.com attributed the success of the campaign to the popularity of the “The King” concept in popular culture. (<http://www.heavy.com/search.php?action=videos&tag=the+king&x=0&y=0>)

### **Non-Sponsored**

Harnessing the power of social media blogs—audio, photo, video, or otherwise—a number of consumers are generating advertisements without the sponsorship or even awareness of the companies whose products they are touting. Apple iPod products are a popular inspiration for countless user-generated print ads featuring the iconic iPod silhouettes. A search for iPod on YouTube returns several video homages to the commercials for the popular device. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRt3Yaups1c>) American Apparel has also attracted the attention of aspiring print advertisers. A flickr.com poster known as “GlamazoNYC” garnered much blog attention for its take on American Apparel advertisements. (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/eyewash/sets/948229>). Similarly, Puma received some unwanted notoriety in 2003 when a sexually suggestive print advertisement featuring the company’s products became a viral e-mail phenomenon. After initial confusion over the origins of the ad (whether real or a parody), Puma issued a cease and desist order to blog sites to remove the image. (<http://www.slate.com/id/2081467/>)

### **Recommendations**

The success and failure of these examples of customer-generated advertising suggests several recommendations for companies hoping to harness the power of user-generated content within their marketing mix.

- **Assess your audience**

How likely are your customers to participate in the campaign? Are your customers members of Generation C? Consideration of this question should take into account how media savvy and aware your customer base is rather than merely demographic information.

- **Assess your assets**

How well does your product or image lend itself to customer participation? Is there a natural connection between your product and the use of user-generated content? How much does your

product or intellectual property resonate with your customers? Is customer sentiment favorable? Chevy learned a hard lesson when media coverage of satiric responses to a contest eclipsed the attention for ads in support of the product.

- **Maintain minimum mediation**

Although a company must take measures to ensure that harmful messages are not broadcast, control must remain flexible enough for participants to enjoy the activity. The persons mediating the participation on behalf of the company should be familiar with the nuances of user-generated media and social-media.

- **Share all submissions**

The majority of the participants are spending their time for no reason beyond the joy of sharing their creativity with others. Companies should respect this desire by ensuring that all submissions are given airtime, not just winners.

- **Allow participants to interact and communicate**

The experience and time spent on a website is greatly enhanced by allowing participants to engage in ongoing two-way communication through social media such as a message board.

- **Allow participants to select the winner**

If a company is employing a contest format to solicit participation, the company should embrace the concept of social media by allowing the participants to decide the winner. This step will further increase participation and customer ownership of the creative process.

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