



## **SOCIAL MEDIA & USER-GENERATED COMMERCIALS**

**By Jennifer Brusa**  
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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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As social media becomes an integral part of society, user-generated commercials are positioned to play an even greater role in influencing customers. From the phenomenon of commercial spoofs posted on YouTube to multi-million dollar Super Bowl ads, user-generated commercials are becoming more widespread and getting more attention than ever before.

User-generated commercials are a natural result of social media outlets and the availability of professional-grade tools for amateur producers. There are thousands of commercials on Internet sites such as YouTube and Google Video that were generated by users to spoof existing commercials or to promote a product they feel passionately about. Its popularity started in 2004 when an Apple user created a commercial that many felt was better than Apple's official commercials. Now user-generated commercials have hit the mainstream with campaigns such as [www.chevyapprentice.com](http://www.chevyapprentice.com) where consumers can create their own ads for the Chevy Tahoe.<sup>i</sup> This year's Super Bowl also featured numerous user-generated commercials. Doritos ran a contest featuring a grand prize of the winning user-generated ad being run during the Super Bowl. Chevy and the NFL also ran ads that were created based on the ideas of consumers.<sup>ii</sup> These commercials not only served the purpose of generating interest before the Super Bowl but continued to create buzz afterwards. For example, the finalists for the Doritos advertising spot can still be viewed on YouTube or on the Doritos' managed site, [www.crashthesuperbowl.com](http://www.crashthesuperbowl.com).

There are benefits for companies featured in user-generated commercials but it is not without a price. It is difficult to match the enthusiasm of a commercial that is created by an actual user that is passionate about a product. There is also a lot of buzz created before and after a contest when user-created contests are conducted. The content created by consumers serves the purpose of gauging a brand's position as well as consumer interest in the product. However, the nature of social media takes the control of content from the brand managers and gives it to the consumers. A simple search on YouTube yields thousands of commercial spoofs that twist the original campaign's message. Mastercard's "Priceless" campaign is a good example of the dilution that can occur. Also, specifically for companies that sponsor user-generated advertising contests, there is the risk of commercials being generated that do not present the products in the most favorable light. This can be seen with the Chevy Tahoe campaign. There were many commercials that were created showing SUVs' negative impact on the environment. Chevy was aware of the risks and apparently decided the buzz was worth it. Ed Peper posted the following: "Early on we made the decision that if we were to hold this contest, in which we invite anyone to create an ad, in an open forum, that we would be summarily destroyed in the blogosphere if we censored the ads based on their viewpoint."<sup>iii</sup>

As consumer-generated advertising becomes more prevalent in social media, companies need to take an active role to determine how best to leverage this trend. According to Joel Lichtenberg, there are essentially 5 rules to follow: 1) Be the master of ceremonies, 2) Let users aggregate content that is not yours, 3) Set and enforce reasonable policies, 4) Be honest, and 5) Do it.<sup>iv</sup>

These rules essentially mean that companies should provide the forum and set some general ground rules but cannot interfere with the content being created. A basic premise of social media is honesty and openness, so companies cannot attempt to control or censure content and must allow it to flow freely. Some user complaints regarding the Chevy campaign were inability to save the created commercial and limited choices of creative elements. Some companies do embrace this idea as shown by the Doritos campaign, which agreed to run the winning commercial without editing it. Although companies are able to generate interest in user-generated commercials through contests, this may not be a sustainable way to stimulate interest in the long term. Companies will have to find ways to leverage social media to generate content independent of contests or other gimmicks.

User-generated commercials serve to influence customers through their content or the spin on the existing brand image of the product. Everyday consumers will probably never replace advertising agencies because of an agency's ability to leverage enormous resources or the control an agency provides a company over the branding of products. User-generated advertising will continue to influence consumer buying decisions as more people turn to their peers for information rather than company-generated sources. The challenge for companies in the future will be to harness this creative resource and leverage it to enhance brand image and product loyalty.

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<sup>i</sup> Li, Charlene. "Kudos to Chevy Tahoe: It takes guts to brand with social computing." [http://blogs.forrester.com/charleneli/2006/04/kudos\\_to\\_chevy\\_.html](http://blogs.forrester.com/charleneli/2006/04/kudos_to_chevy_.html)

<sup>ii</sup> Sutel, Seth. "Amateur Ads Follow Super Bowl Tradition." *chron.com*. <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/ap/fn/4525944.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Peper, Ed. "Now that we've got your attention." *GM FastLane Blog*. [http://fastlane.gmblogs.com/archives/2006/04/now\\_that\\_weve\\_g\\_1.html](http://fastlane.gmblogs.com/archives/2006/04/now_that_weve_g_1.html)

<sup>iv</sup> Lichtenberg, Joel. "Balance Brand Control with Users' Voices." *imediaconnection.com*. <http://www.imediaconnection.com/content/13206.asp>

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