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## **User-Generated Contests: A Guide to Success**

With the rise of social media and social networking over the past few years, a major shift has occurred in online marketing. Consumers have greater control in marketing campaigns than ever before, and Web 2.0 tools let them take their voices to a new level.

At the same time, the brand effectiveness of traditional online advertising continues to diminish as consumers pay less and less attention to banner ads. This is where social media marketing, and specifically user-generated contests, can play an important role in your company's overall marketing strategy.

First off, let's define a user-generated contest. This is a contest or promotion sponsored by a brand or publisher where consumers submit photos, videos, text, audio or mashups under the guidelines of a sponsor in the hopes of winning some type of a prize. Prizes may range from something major, like the opportunity to star in a user-generated commercial airing on national TV, to something smaller and community-specific, such as free CDs from a particular band. Contest winners usually are determined by popular vote, a select panel of judges, or a combination of the two. And while contests themselves are not new marketing techniques, the evolution of social media coupled with high-bandwidth Internet connections has made it possible to turbo-charge these promotions and drive measurable results.

Before racing out to embark on a new interactive marketing campaign, however, there are some factors worth considering. The points I raise below will hopefully help you make informed decisions that will lead to exceeding your marketing goals:

### **Why User-generated Contests Work for Marketers:**

- **They Create a Dialogue with Consumers** – Given the current online marketing landscape, it's critical for savvy marketers to engage consumers in an open, two-way dialogue. By allowing consumers to contribute to marketing campaigns through photos, videos, text and user-voting, campaigns become personal. You can learn a lot about what resonates with your core consumers in a very short period of time based on what they share with you on the site, as well as what they send to friends and family as contest participants transform into viral evangelists for your brand.
- **They Virally Spread Your Marketing Message** – Assuming your contest site is built well and with the right viral tools at the disposal of users (see the tips below), user-generated contests can be a great way to virally spread your marketing message. What is unique about contests is that entrants have an incentive to promote themselves in order to get the votes needed to win the contest. And as we're learning, in a digital world with a lot of noise, consumers have a higher level of trust and interest in content referred by their friends. This provides brands with an amazing way to expose their message to a new audience of engaged consumers.
- **They Build Community Around Your Brand** – Creating a contest microsite with built-in social networking features provides the landscape for your customers to talk about the promotion. What's a contest microsite you might ask? It's a standalone web site or sub-section of your existing brand web site that is dedicated to the contest and fully customized to your look and feel. In addition to contest rules, guidelines, user entry forms and voting it should utilize key social features allowing visitors to share and interact with the contest entries and each other. Depending on the theme of your contest, this

interactive conversation could be focused on your product or brand specifically or something with which you want your brand associated with. For example, Columbia Sportswear ran an [Adventure Travel Photo Contest](#) with Fotigo to help associate their brand with adventure travel. It wasn't a clothing contest but it was very relevant to the brand.

- **They Allow for Safe Participation in Social Media** – As I often hear many brands are reluctant to turn over control of their marketing to consumers for fear of what the masses might say. Contests can provide a great way for brands to *safely* participate in social media. By clearly outlining rules and guidelines for entering contests and making smart use of prescreen and administrative tools, your brand can remain protected.
- **They Build Your Customer Database** – Because of the viral nature of entrants reaching out to friends and family to promote entries, contests can be a great way to build your customer database for future marketing efforts. It goes without saying, however, that users must opt-in to receive future marketing messages. We all learned from Beacon.

### How to Use Contests to Meet your Marketing Objectives

In my own business experiences and in checking things out across the web I've noticed user-generated contests implemented to meet a wide array of marketing objectives. Some of the more common and/or efficient uses include:

- **Launching a New Product** – We've seen this a lot in the music industry as bands like "[Simple Plan](#)" have created photo or video contests to promote the release of a new album. In these campaigns users might submit photos representing songs on an album, develop posters for album artwork, or create music videos for a new single.
- **Launching a New Feature** – Contests can be used to promote a new feature on your site. This works best when it's a user-generated feature like a blog, or the ability to upload photos or videos. To promote new features, you can create a contest with guidelines that encourage the best uses of the new feature.
- **Reaching a New Customer Segment** - One of my favorite examples is the "[Real Men Eat Gardenburger](#)" Contest where Gardenburger used a combination photo and essay contest to extend its reach beyond its core customer base of women and vegetarians to attract male burger junkies. It was creative and fun, and yielded a diverse crop of entries.
- **Acquiring Advertising Materials** – Let users create your next TV commercial, banner ad or poster for you, showing off what appeals most to them about your product. You've seen this done successfully by [Doritos](#) and Taco Bell. Now, the Ethanol Promotion and Information Council ([EPIC](#)) is testing these waters as well, with new user-generated ads touting the benefits of ethanol slated to run during this year's Indy 500.

### Five Tips for Making Your Contest Successful

1. **Clearly Define Your Objectives** – This may seem obvious, but clearly understanding your objectives will help determine if a contest is right for you and more importantly, what type of contest you should run. If a high number of submissions is the goal, a photo contest is the way to go because of the low barrier to entry. If you're looking for high-quality content to be used in future marketing efforts, a video commercial contest might be a better approach.
2. **Choose the Right Partner** – Occasionally when I talk with prospective clients, they say something like, "We have photo upload and ratings so we're thinking about developing

the contest in-house.” That’s like saying, “I’ve got a hammer and a screwdriver in the garage so I think I’ll put in the new transmission myself.” Working with experts can be the difference between a wildly successful campaign and a dud. A few things to consider when evaluating potential partners:

- Do they support photo, video, audio and text?
- Do they have the necessary administrative tools to protect my brand?
- Can they handle the legal aspects of a contest?
- Does their offering have the viral and social networking features built in to make my campaign successful?
- Can the look and feel of the contest site be customized?
- Do I own the user data for participants in the contest?
- Can they help me get distribution and entries into my contest?
- What sort of metrics do they provide so I can measure my success?
- Can they scale?
- Have they successfully run campaigns in the past?

This last question is an important one. There are far more “platforms” on the market than there are experts in social media marketing. Choosing the right partner means finding a company with great technology *and* great expertise in the space.

3. **Promote It** – This doesn’t have to be expensive but you need to promote your contest if you expect to get entries. Your own site, a newsletter or a note to your following on an existing social network like Facebook or MySpace are quick and easy places to start.
4. **Make it Social** – Lack of a social component is probably the single biggest mistake I see when marketers try to execute a user-generated contest. What does it mean to make it social? It means enabling visitors to use social media to interact and communicate with each other and your brand. It means ensuring that the right tools are in place for entrants to promote their entries. And your campaign is designed to be as user-friendly as possible to encourage this behavior. A good place to start is by implementing voting widgets and email tools for entrants to easily contact friends and family and promote their entries on their existing blogs and social network profiles. This can result in driving traffic back to the contest microsite. In addition, commenting, sharing, friend / favorite connections are all vital social networking functionality that will allow users to participate and become engaged in the promotion. Done correctly this will create a micro-community around your brand.
5. **Use the Results** – Often times when a contest is over the marketer fails to capitalize on the great photos, videos, essays, comments and relationships acquired during the campaign. Instead, create a photo or video gallery of the entries on your website or mix a few quotes into your advertising campaigns. Extend your contest site into a branded social network where users can continue to share and interact around your brand. Any of these will strengthen the relationship you’ve built with your customers and make your marketing more authentic.

The benefits of running online user-generated video and photo contests are clear. They create a positive consumer association with your brand by offering tangible rewards for participation. Actively involving consumers in the campaign creates a unique way to inform them of new products and services and make them advocates for your brand. When considering a user-generated contest for your next campaign remember that not all contests are created equal and careful planning can make a world of difference.