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JANUARY 2007

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Don't Monkey Around User-generated advertising is serious business

GETTY IMAGES

BY JOE MULLICH

Andy Warhol predicted that we'd all have 15 minutes of fame. Today, he might say everyone will have 15 minutes as a copywriter.

On VarsityWorld.com, L'Oreal Paris ran a contest for teens called You Make the Commercial. Old Spice has created a Web site, WhenShesHot.com, that allows visitors to produce their own video clip, complete with music, from a real deodorant TV spot — and then send the creation to a friend. More than 10 million e-mails have been forwarded to date.

And now, user-generated advertising is coming to the mecca of marketing:

Frito-Lay has announced that it will run a

consumer-conceived and -created Doritos ad in a \$2 million Super Bowl time slot. One can only imagine if David Ogilvy, the so-called father of advertising, is rolling over in his grave.

"These ads are more creative and effective because they are made by people who are passionate about the product and who also have an intimate, firsthand knowledge of exactly why people like it," says Charlie O'Donnell, director of consumer products at New York-based Oddcast, which creates technology that allows consumers to generate content. "It is hard for someone who works at an agency being paid to broadcast a message to compete with that."

In a recent survey of 140 advertising industry leaders by the American Advertising Federation, 19 percent said they now advertise on a user-generated content (UGC) site, and 91 percent said advertisers "should exploit the viral marketing opportunities" of such sites. By 2010, downloads from UGC sites are expected to reach 65 billion, according to the market research firm InStat.

Despite those impressive statistics, Doug Rozen, vice president of interactive marketing at Carlson Marketing in Minneapolis, cautions that user-generated marketing cannot play a leading part in a campaign. "It's a flanking strategy," he says, and one that can present serious challenges. The key is how a

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"The days of a brand calling all the shots from on high and waiting for customers to demonstrate their loyalty have gone the way of the dodo bird."

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Don't Monkey Around

company integrates the technique into its overall marketing efforts. Here's what you need to know:

Know thy brand. User-generated advertising is little more than word of mouth, so it will focus on what people think of your brand, good or bad. "If you're an oil company, and gas prices are skyrocketing, you can expect a user-generated campaign to take some shots at you," says Reggie Bradford, chief executive officer of ViTrue, an online video-sharing community headquartered in Atlanta. Topics that people are passionate about — such as politics or sports teams — have led to the most successful consumer-generated messages at ViTrue.

Experts stress the importance of being honest in assessing your brand. While building a Web site that allows people to make commercials is a commendable endeavor, it won't necessarily create brand evangelists.

Take the bad with the good.

"If you empower people to have a voice, that voice will not always be on target with what you want to say," says Brady Gilchrist, executive vice president of strategy for Fuel Industries, a Toronto-based marketing firm. "User-generated content will attract the most vocal users."

Just ask Carlson Marketing's Rozen, who recently worked with a regional packaged-food company that invited consumers to create marketing materials through a special Web site. At first glance, this made perfect sense: Intense user loyalty toward the company's products was the engine of its grassroots success and the reason it was set to go national. However, the national rollout required a slight reformulation of the product, which

The Death of Unified Messaging?

The cost of launching and maintaining a Web site where users create ads depends in part on its success, as uploads and user views gobble up pricey bandwidth. Brady Gilchrist, executive vice president of strategy at Fuel Industries in Toronto, believes \$85,000 to \$150,000 to be a base entry point. That's dirt cheap, compared with a single TV commercial. And it allows companies to target more narrow niches with different messages.

For example, a soccer mom can create a Cadillac Escalade ad, but it's going to appeal to a very different audience than, say, a young DJ who likes the same truck.

A word of caution: When media become fragmented and easy to distribute, brands often lose control of their messaging. "Brands are what consumers want them to be, and consumers are a diverse audience," says Charlie O'Donnell, director of consumer products at New York-based Oddcast. "You need a brand that has accepted the death of the unified brand identity."

User-generated advertising will come into its own, experts say, as use of the Internet expands to demographics beyond the 12-to-28-year-old male group that now dominates it. — J.M.

got a negative response from some customers.

"As much as the people had been loyal, the reformulation made a few of them rabidly angry," Rozen recalls, "so much so that some of their messages on the Web site became threatening

and the company discontinued the user-generated content. If you do this, you have to be comfortable with the good and the bad."

Be flexible. "You need to go where the consumers are, even if that involves holding your nose," says Oddcast's O'Donnell. "We have a few brands that work with us to create animated characters that people can send to their friends. Some companies are very concerned about what kinds of messages people send to each other. If I want to send a potty-mouthed message to someone about how much I love Sprite, and you block me from creating that, I'm going to get turned off and maybe even feel like Sprite is too highbrow for me. You may not like me or what I have to say, but if you want me promoting and buying your product, you have to accept me as is."

Most user-generated campaigns include safeguards against offensive language. However, to get the maximum benefit, experts say, you need to be flexible with copyright and allow people to play with your message.

User-generated marketing, ultimately, is about letting go — and then hoping the result zips around the Internet on its own, creating the kind of word of mouth that traditional advertising simply cannot buy. ●



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— CHARLIE O'DONNELL, ODDCAST