

A USER-GENERATED GENERATION: TURNING CONSUMERS INTO CONTRIBUTORS

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With a wealth of ways for people to create their own content, and for brands to directly interact with their following, we consider how brands can turn their consumers into contributors.

Despite launching just 10 months ago, Twitter's mobile app, Vine, is already offering brands new ways to engage with the public. Flat rental service Airbnb recently ran a campaign that crowd-sourced Vine clips from fans for its short film 'Hollywood & Vines', whilst John Lewis has jumped at the chance of getting its fans to make their own video-clips, adding a Vine competition to its new ad push for home insurance. It ran a much-lauded stop-motion TV ad showing a family's possessions gathering on the lawn to pose for a photo with the endline "If it matters to you, it matters to us." The Vine competition asked members of the public to make their own short video clips about the possessions that matter to them and post them to the 'What Matters' microsite, which shows 140 of the Vines, some of them quite stunning.

The rise of user-generated content signals a huge transformation in the relationship between brands and consumers. Where once we awaited the latest ad campaign from Nike, Guinness, or Levi's, now we are increasingly taking part in creating brand content ourselves. We're keen to comment and get involved via Facebook and Twitter, and if we really identify with a brand or product, we're prepared to upload photos of ourselves using it in entertaining and creative ways. In September, Time Out magazine published an edition composed of articles submitted by readers, while Ben & Jerry's used Twitter to ask fans to create new ice-cream flavours.

Social media has unleashed the creativity of the public while the arrival of the smartphone and its seamless integration with social channels has super-charged our ability to engage on the go. This is manna from heaven for brands attempting to boost their engagement with consumers in an increasingly fragmented media world. What better way to ensure you cut through the clutter than by getting consumers to actively

think about and then engage with your brand, and to work with – or for – you? Connect and identify with your audience and not only will you get them talking, liking, following and sharing your content, you'll get them contributing as well.

The concept of audiences actively getting involved isn't exactly new. Previous campaigns such as Mercedes 'You Drive', Walkers' 'Do us a Flavour' and the Doritos 'Crash the Superbowl' harnessed the power of public opinion to actually affect an outcome. Mercedes used it as an opportunity for their ad's storyline to be decided by a hashtag vote, Walkers received 1.2m entries from the British public in their quest for a new flavour, and Doritos asked members of the public to create TV ads for them. However, the increasing ease with which fans can get involved with the brands they love is revolutionary. So does user-generated content form part of the future of brand interaction with consumers?

The important thing to remember is that the success of any user-generated campaign boils down to the way the brand inspires its consumers to create. The John Lewis insurance ad was a beautifully-executed piece of advertising with a strong idea at its heart. Insurance isn't just some low-interest category bought on price – it is about valuing the important objects and possessions in your life. It was this proposition that motivated users to take part, and subsequently yielded some brilliant results. Whilst there could be fears that inviting the public to get involved has the potential to harm brand image, the vital ingredient is the strength of the creative idea and the control of its execution. In the age of user-generated content, there is a great opportunity to create a powerful and engaging creative platform which will inspire people to take the brand into their own hands and become creators in their own right.