

Make Friends, Don't Pitch Them

The latest evolution of the Internet has empowered people on an unprecedented scale, both to express themselves and to connect with others. At the nexus of connectivity and creativity are sites like YouTube, MySpace, and LiveJournal, which allow users to share videos, pictures, and ideas, sometimes accompanied by a great deal of personal information. These forums attract a lot of eyeballs but do they offer opportunities for marketers to build their brands?



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The latest generation of online services allows people to collaborate and share information in many new ways. Readily accessible Internet resources allow individuals to publish their views on personal blogs, and share videos, pictures and personal information with a wide audience. While the logistics of blogging, video sharing and personal profiling sites differ, all of these technologies help to bring people together on the basis of shared interests. In the process, they make public a great deal of communication, which once would have been private.


But sites like MySpace, YouTube and LiveJournal are more than public viewing spaces for material that once would have been posted on a refrigerator or bulletin board. These sites support, cultivate and sustain individual acts of self-expression. Whether it is a carefully considered blog post or a clever video mash-up, people are using the Internet to express themselves just as they once used a cave wall.

What intrigues marketers about these new forms of communication is the notion that a compelling idea can spontaneously originate and then, very rapidly, be passed along to thousands — or, in the case of the homemade video clip created by the Chicago band OK Go, more than 9 million. Therefore, many brand stewards are now exploring the potential of using social networking to exploit such consumer-generated content (CGC).

The Future of Advertising?

The power of CGC became apparent in 2004, before the advent of YouTube, when California high school teacher George Masters created a 60-second animated tribute to the iPod Mini and posted it on his personal website. After news of the spot appeared on a handful of blogs, the ad “went viral” over email and the blogosphere, and received tens of thousands of viewings in a matter of days. Agency professionals and advertising analysts praised the work’s production values, and some remarked that the future of advertising was surging through cyberspace along with the swirling iPods and rainbow-hued hearts.

While that future has arrived and brought CGC along with it, most marketers have yet to fully realize its promise. Far too many marketers are reaching out to consumers on their new playgrounds using heavy-handed old-school advertising techniques. For example, some advertisers have attempted to push brand messages out over a network of “blogs for hire.” But this approach, which offers little advantage



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over traditional online advertising, may be a risky strategy. Consumers are wary of online content unless it comes from a trusted source, and they don't appreciate a hidden sell any more than they relish a blatant one.

Other advertisers have elected to create MySpace profiles for their brands, presumably to make them more attractive to a younger, Internet-savvy audience. Volkswagen's Yourfast profile introduces the weird-looking speed-loving creature who lives inside each one of us and, incidentally, bears a vague resemblance to the GTI Mk V. Yourfast has over 66,000 "friends," but very few of them post comments that have anything to do with the car.

Such "fake" profiles may raise a smile among those who see them, but the risk associated with this tactic may outweigh the benefits. Just last month, the Air Force took down such a profile, placed to drum up interest in new Air Force commercials, because of concern that it was associated with inappropriate content.

The Direct Approach: Blogs

A more straightforward approach is to create a blog to engage members of your target audience directly. Unfortunately, without a significant investment in advertising designed to drive traffic to your blog, few

people will ever find it. While the number of blog readers is still increasing (and now stands at just over one in five U.S. adults, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project), the ratio between bloggers and readers suggests that the majority of blogs reach very few. And blogs lack frequency. According to KMR's UK TGI, while 28 percent of the population claim to read blogs, only 8 percent read them at least once a week.

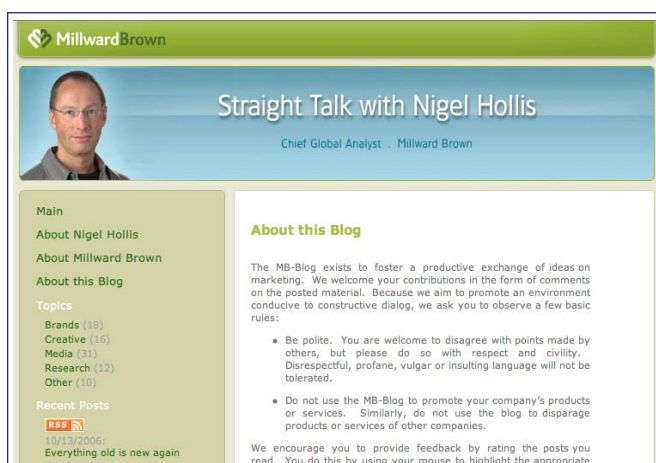
Based on these statistics, it is obvious that individual comments about a brand on a blog are unlikely to create much publicity on their own. Similarly, MySpace and YouTube claim large user bases, but not many profiles or videos are both relevant to a specific brand and seen by a large number of people. The truth is that social networks are not good channels for pushing messages at consumers. Instead, marketers should use them as a forum to stimulate and disseminate consumer-generated content (CGC), which can work on behalf of their brands.

It's About Passion and Spontaneity

Like many of the best-known examples of CGC, George Masters' ad for iPod was created as a passionate tribute to the brand, unprompted by the brand or its agency. People who are passionate about your brand will promote it. Passion may originate from a great brand experience or a strong emotional affinity with a brand, or both. Passionate, spontaneous tributes to a brand are by far the most effective ones.

Channelling the Passion

To date, relatively few brands have succeeded in harnessing this type of spontaneous creativity, but we can point to a few success stories. Nike-owned Converse invites brand devotees to submit 24-second videos inspired by the athletic footwear. More than 50 of these submissions have aired as TV commercials, and others can be viewed on the Converse Web site. New York-based airline JetBlue invited customers to talk about their experiences with the airline in the JetBlue Story Booth, which toured the country last spring. New TV network Current TV, which relies on CGC for a large proportion of its content, teamed with Sony in its first V-CAM (viewer-created ad message) program, in which the best spots are aired on the



The screenshot shows a blog page for Millward Brown. The header features the Millward Brown logo and the title "Straight Talk with Nigel Hollis" with the subtitle "Chief Global Analyst - Millward Brown". The main content area is titled "About this Blog" and contains the following text:

The MB-Blog exists to foster a productive exchange of ideas on marketing. We welcome your contributions in the form of comments on the posted material. Because we aim to promote an environment conducive to constructive dialog, we ask you to observe a few basic rules:

- Be polite. You are welcome to disagree with points made by others, but please do so with respect and civility. Disrespectful, profane, vulgar or insulting language will not be tolerated.
- Do not use the MB-Blog to promote your company's products or services. Similarly, do not use the blog to disparage products or services of other companies.

We encourage you to provide feedback by rating the posts you read. You do this by using your mouse to highlight the appropriate

On the left side, there is a sidebar with the following sections:

- Main**
- About Nigel Hollis**
- About Millward Brown**
- About this Blog**
- Topics**
 - Brands (18)
 - Creative (16)
 - Media (31)
 - Research (12)
 - Other (10)
- Recent Posts**
 - 10/13/2006: Everything old is new again
 - 10/11/2006:



network and earn the creator a \$1000 prize. The network is currently running similar programs with L'Oreal and Mountain Dew.

Can Your Brand Safely Harness the Connectivity of the Web?

Consumer-generated content provides a voice for both promoters and detractors. The question is whether the balance between the two favors your brand, either in terms of numbers or quality of comment. Big brands that lack strong relationships with consumers may be most vulnerable to attack from online detractors. For example, when General Motors attempted to stimulate CGC for its Chevy Tahoe pickup, environmentalists jumped on the “build your own ad” site to create ads that condemned both SUVs in general and Tahoe in particular. Adding irony to insult, it was the traditional media that spread the news of GM’s miscalculation; the negative ads wouldn’t have received so much attention without offline help.



By contrast, Johnson & Johnson brand Neutrogena was much more successful with the branded video blog, “Visibly Pretty,” which invited young women to share videos in which they discussed their beauty secrets. Not only did the target audience (women aged 15 to 24) post hundreds of videos, but research by Dynamic Logic (a Millward Brown Company) proved that the video blog successfully improved brand saliency and key brand imagery. The research also highlighted the importance of advertising in driving traffic to a blog. Of the site visitors surveyed, 78 percent reported that they were motivated to visit the site by an online ad.

Pundits have been very keen to publicize social networks and their attendant CGC as the next big paradigm shift for the world of marketing. “To succeed you have to give up control,” they claim, totally failing to realize that marketers have never been in control of what people think or say about their brand. What has changed is the visibility of consumer communication and creativity, and the speed with which it can spread (albeit usually with the assistance of traditional media). As Chevrolet Tahoe learned, CGC may not be for all brands. You don’t have to make it easy for people to amplify their negativity.

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Why You Should Get Involved

Pushing advertising to the niche audiences in myriad new web communities does not make economic sense for most brands, but the right CGC strategy can work by building buzz, saliency, and a deeper engagement with loyal brand advocates. CGC can serve as the inspiration for new products or creative content, as well as a vehicle for confirming a brand’s benefits and validating its commitment to its users. A successful CGC strategy will address these four requirements:

Create a sense of community

Social networks online reflect the communities built around strong brands offline; think of Harley Davidson or Manchester United. People are driven to join by the age-old desires for belonging and self-expression. How can your brand bring people together to share their passion? Land Rover retained social network management service LiveWorld to moderate a branded networking site. Called “Go Beyond,” the adventure-oriented site offers users the opportunity to share various forms of content (articles, pictures, videos) about their lives, interests and journeys.



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Inspire CGC that will spread

If you want the word to spread beyond your initial contact group, you must offer something of value. This could be entertainment, advice, or a useful functional tool. Most people think of viral communication as an edgy and subversive video or joke that gets passed from person to person, but people also want information and advice. They want to hear what others have to say, particularly if the source is trusted because of shared interests or experiences.

Be authentic

People respect a brand that has an authentic voice—one that leads the debate rather than responding to it. They distrust brands that seem condescending or duplicitous. Marketers who find ways to engage their consumers openly and honestly will be the ones to win big. Those who try to buy praise or disguise their sales pitch as independent advice risk not only diluting the credibility of their brand, but also that of the medium.

Listen and learn

However you try to leverage CGC to the benefit of your brand, you must resign yourself to the fact that the brand is going to be at the mercy of promoters and detractors. It will be lauded and promoted, warped and derided. By listening to the online exchange, you can learn a lot about the strengths and weaknesses of your brand. This may allow you to identify new opportunities and steer clear of potential disasters.

When people engage with a brand on a large scale, that brand becomes a part of popular culture. This is the ultimate benefit of CGC fueled by social networking. However, few brands inspire the sort of passion guaranteed to make CGC a reliable source of content or publicity. As a result, many marketers would probably do better to look to social networks as a source of inspiration rather than free media and content. And remember, at the end of the day a simple 5-star rating on a product review site may do more for your sales than any prompted publicity could ever do. The best source of positive consumer-generated publicity is undoubtedly a great product or service experience.

To find out more about CGC, please see www.mb-blog.com.

