

UGC: The Art of Social Marketing

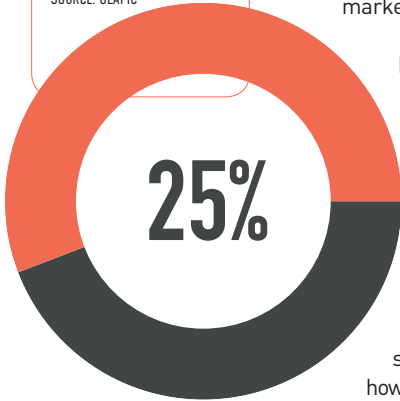
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INTRODUCTION

Social media has given rise to many new phenomena, but one of the most interesting is user-generated content (UGC). Camera-enabled, always-connected smartphones offer consumers the opportunity to share the minutiae of their lives. And while many selfie their way through their days as a way to share with friends and family, others use their cameras to share images and videos with the world.

25% OF SEARCH RESULTS FOR THE WORLD'S TOP 20 LARGEST BRANDS ARE LINKS TO USER-GENERATED CONTENT

SOURCE: OLAPIC



Consumers use social media not only to show off what they are going to have for lunch, but also what they want to buy, what they have bought and how things work, and fit. This material is marketing gold to retailers.

For retail brands, UGC is rapidly becoming a key component of their marketing campaigns as it offers a number of advantages over traditional marketing.

Consumers like and trust the views of their peers over those of brands themselves. Seeing what a peer thinks about something is much more authentic. From a practical standpoint, UGC can show off what goods look like and how they work in real life. In the fashion retail space, potential customers get a better understanding of how a dress or top looks on a real person and how it hangs, flows or fits. For technology companies, UGC can help consumers learn how to use their products. Look at the number of consumers that turn to YouTube and social media to augment the instructions that a camera, tent or software product comes with.

Perhaps the biggest reason to consider UGC? It is cost-effective and more compelling than traditional advertising and marketing messages.

Companies that A/B test user-generated content vs. staged photos and videos often find the user-generated content more engaging.

And it works particularly well with millennials. According to Bazaarvoice¹, more than 80% of millennials say that UGC has an influence on whether they buy or not. And they are the most prolific shoppers, spending more money online than any other age group despite having lower incomes than older adults, according to Business Insider².

UGC also delivers another perk: better SEO. According to Kissmetrics³, “25% of search results for the World’s Top 20 largest brands are links to user-generated content.” Positive customer reviews can raise your SEO ranking, while analysing the words and phrases most frequently used by your audience can improve your keyword optimisation research.

In this ebook we’ll help you understand:

- What UGC is and why it is important.
- How to collect it.
- How to curate it.
- How to use it in marketing.

We’ll also provide some examples of great UGC campaigns.

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“For retail brands, UGC is rapidly becoming a key component of their marketing campaign as it offers a number of advantages over traditional marketing”

PART ONE:

WHAT IS UGC?

User-generated content conjures up images of selfies, people's dinners, or videos of cats doing amusing things. However, there is much more to it than that: increasing numbers of consumers are logging their experiences – good and bad – with items and services, showing off things that they have just bought and posting their wants and desires. Many are also keen to offer helpful hints into how to operate things or 'hacks' that help you get more out of the goods you've bought.

Taken together, these public contributions offer brands a powerful library of content that can be used in marketing, promotion and even development of new products and services. Let's review several UGC options.

SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT: PICTURES, VIDEOS AND TEXT

The richest and most obvious source of UGC is social media. Given the functionality of smartphones, this content now features not just words but also photos and videos of products being put through their paces in the real world. The visual content is particularly useful for prospective customers.

According to research from visual commerce company Olapic¹, 74% of people have hashtagged a brand name while

uploading a photo. Forty per cent of them do it to show their immediate friends and family what they have bought or what they like, while 45% look at user-generated content for inspiration at least once a day.

The Olapic research also notes that social media users are seven times more likely to trust UGC images than advertising, while 76% of those that do trust UGC view content posted by other customers as more trustworthy and honest than advertising.

As a result, 56% are more likely to buy a product after seeing it featured in a positive and relatable way through UGC and 49% are more likely to buy products endorsed by UGC.

There are five major platforms that internet users are active on: Twitter, Pinterest, Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram. Facebook is in the lead, but Instagram and SnapChat are rapidly growing in terms of usage. Many users also link their social feeds together, so posting on Facebook or Instagram will also fire up a post on Twitter.

REVIEWS

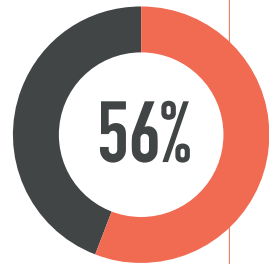
While photos and videos shared across social media are two very visual exam-

ples of UGC, reviews also play a critical role. Since the early days of the web, reviews have been an important resource for shoppers and retailers. Customers actively seek reviews when they are making a purchase online.

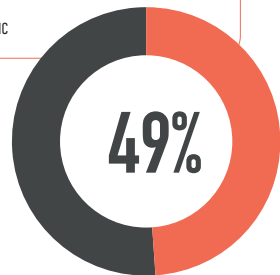
Reviews present a powerful marketing tool: They build trust in a brand or company. According to a study by Brightlocal², 85% of people trust online reviews as much as a personal recommendation, and 58% consider a star rating essential for a business. Moreover, 70% of consumers say they need to read a minimum of four online reviews before they can trust a business.

Reviews can be delivered in many ways. You can collect social media reviews, seek them from your product buyers via email, or use a third-party review site. The latter has several advantages: it saves brands having to do the collecting themselves and it often allows a greater degree of sophistication in how those reviews are used. For instance, a third-party platform can apportion the right reviews to the right product pages on your site. A third-party website can also reach more people. Trustpilot, for instance, currently has some 40 million reviews of 170,000 businesses worldwide.

56% ARE MORE LIKELY TO BUY A PRODUCT AFTER SEEING IT FEATURED IN A POSITIVE AND RELATABLE WAY THROUGH UGC, AND 49% ARE MORE LIKELY TO BUY PRODUCTS ENDORSED BY UGC



SOURCE: OLAPIC



The biggest benefit of third-party review sites is that they are independent and, more importantly, are seen to be independent by prospective customers.

Reviews have to be genuine – and consumers can spot when they are not. Third-party review platforms have built sophisticated technology into their systems to spot fake reviews and will impose penalties.

Reviews can have a positive impact on sales. Star ratings and review snippets, show up now on search engine results. According to Econsultancy³, that can lead to a 10-20% increase in click-through rates.

Using a service to help you email customers with a survey is another option. There are companies that can help you engage consumers that have product experience, encouraging them to not only review your company, products and services, but also help other customers with problems, questions and information.

Platforms that allow customers to talk with each other, answer questions and engage are not new, but there is growing evidence of ROI – not just in attracting new customers, but also in creating loyalty among those that participate in the community. People who receive answers to questions convert at a higher rate than those that don't.

PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT CROWDSOURCING

While social media and reviews make up the vanguard of UGC, there is increasing interest in using data garnered from both to help not only marketing, but also within the wider business to shape product ranges and launch new goods and services.

The idea of crowdsourcing isn't new, however, using UGC to accomplish it is. Looking at how people are talking about your existing products by following hashtagged content and searching out keywords on social media can help you understand a lot about the markets you operate in.

You can look at content and reviews to assess how your existing products are being used and, more importantly, any shortcomings that are being talked about and demonstrated. By assessing all this information, you can effectively crowdsource a vast amount of user data about what your existing customers do with your product, want to do with it, and do and don't like about what you offer. You can also see what they say about the competition.

More subtly, you can use social media in general, and UGC in particular, to understand where there may be gaps in the market for products that you could produce.

The problem with this is how to make it happen. According to a research paper⁴ by MIT PhD student Artem Timoshenko and MIT Kirin Professor of Marketing John R. Hauser: "User-generated content (UGC) provides an opportunity

to better identify customer needs for managerial impact. However, established methods are neither efficient nor effective for large UGC corporations because much content is non-informative and repetitive.”

Their research looked at how machines can assess actual and potential customer needs based on what customers posted on social media, effectively automating the crowdsourcing of data from UGC for product and company development.

Users don't just write on their social media platforms, they also share video and pictures. Thus, combing social media feeds is no longer an old-school text analytics task, but one that requires much more sophisticated image recognition.

Multiple companies have released artificial intelligence (AI) engines to work on the task, rolling out social media image recognition tools that analyse social traffic – words, images and context of both – and use it to measure consumer sentiment, evaluate trends, gauge the reactions to a product or event and determine the effectiveness of marketing campaigns.

What does this mean in practice? Today, brands can use these tools simplistically

to find posts that contain their brand, or logo, or product. They can also be used to find the most common locations a product is used or talked about. This can be deployed to find the kind of content a brand wants for a specific UGC campaign, to garner a vital and more in-depth understanding of where, when and how its products are used.

As AI technology becomes more sophisticated, it will lead to even more options to assess and understand what is happening on social media and use that data to aid everything from product development to marketing to servicing to loyalty.

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PART TWO:

HOW TO COLLECT UGC

UGC is useful and impactful. Now let's review how to gather it.

SOCIAL MONITORING

The simplest way to find UGC about your brand is to go onto social media networks and look at what people are saying about you. If you already have accounts with those social media networks, you can do this easily by searching for your brand name and keywords and checking direct messaging pointed at you. If not, you need to start one on each feed to find all relevant content.

This will let you see what is being said about you. Step two is to pick up the thread and actually talk to your customers through all these channels. You can start a dialogue, by encouraging them to use the right hashtags or direct message them so that you are involved and notified once they start to post content about you.

Once you have this access, you can start to look at the content you may procure and

ask them for permission to use it. If you ask for the permission publicly, you are tipping off other brand admirers that you are looking for UGC and can inspire them to share their own.

REVIEW MONITORING

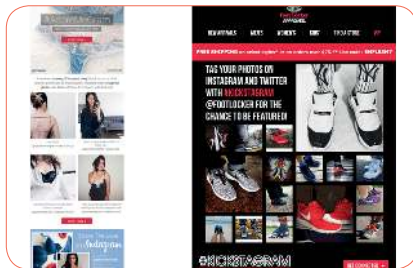
Similarly, you should be looking at all your reviews across your own site, any other third-party sites you use and review sites, blogs and other online properties where you are mentioned. Checking reviews on your own site and across third-parties that you have contracted to work with is simple – if time consuming – as you should have ready access to the reviews and will be alerted either by your content management system, web-host control panel or third-party when reviews come in.

What is more difficult is keeping tabs on where people are talking about you outside of social media. Bloggers will hopefully share their own content via

social media with relevant hashtags and keywords, so you can locate that easily enough through social monitoring.

For other mentions, you will simply have to get busy with Google and set up alerts for when you or key words you are interested in are mentioned.

Another way to garner reviews is to issue short, one-question surveys about what the customer has purchased. This can produce useful, quotable content and also generate invaluable feedback on your products and services that can again feed into product development, product marketing and even website and logistics elements of your sales process. For flash sale sites and rapid-turnover retailers, this sort of feedback needs to be generated instantly, so it is often wise to launch a one-question survey at check-out that asks, “Why did you choose this?”



For less time-sensitive offerings or lines unlikely to be discontinued, this survey can be conducted via email, social media or even SMS.

SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

Rather than just hoping people are talking about you, you can start social media campaigns to generate content that suits your marketing purposes. Work out what you are looking for content-wise and how you are going to use it (see Part 4: how to use UGC), then hit social media.

You don't have to limit yourself to one channel, but it makes sense to start with one channel and create a funnel (through judicious use of hashtags) to direct customers to that channel to deliver the



content.

According to BrandsWithFans⁵, “The best way to source UGC is to focus

on the social networks your brand is already participating in. Instagram and Twitter are the most marketing friendly platforms for hashtag conversations and collecting public photos and videos. Facebook can also be a source of UGC if the brand has an engaged audience that will elicit a high response to Page posts requesting submissions in comments. Facebook is not search friendly for finding public conversations by people (not other Pages) that are re-sharable.”

Basics for encouraging UGC:

- **Choose a unique hashtag** – create one that your audience will readily identify with your brand and what you do.
- **Ask that the audience use your hashtag** – spread the word via social media, your website, email and other marketing channels.
- **Monitor the hashtag** – set up hashtag monitoring using tools that assess where and when you are being talked about and feed you that content.

When Cision PRNewswire⁶ launched its #PRis-



Now UGC campaign, it laid out a multichannel content marketing strategy to gather audience submissions, create content and distribute it.

“In the case of #PRisNow, we started with a blog post on Beyond PR, then created customized posts for different social media channels, messaging that internal advocates could share with their networks, influencer pitches, and outreach via ProfNet’s free query service,” the company explains.

EMAIL CAMPAIGNS

Email can also play a big role in UGC marketing, because it taps into your existing user base that is likely engaged with your brand or site.

Here are some things you can do with email to generate UGC:

- **Send out marketing emails specifically asking for content** – Adore Me and Footlocker are two great examples of this. They both sent out emails explicitly asking contacts to engage with them by taking selfies wearing Adore Me clothes and Footlocker-purchased trainers, letting them know their UGC may be used in future messages.
- **Run a contest** – Contests are a great way to integrate social in an email campaign. One example would be a social media scavenger hunt with clues hidden across your social channels. With this type of contest, you’ll want to include email as a part of the campaign with one of the clues coming from

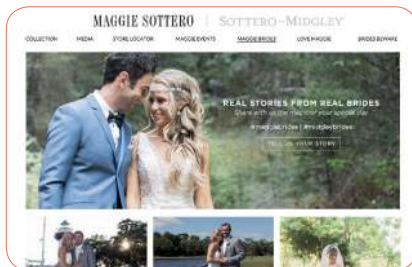
this channel. It can be an effective way to promote your email sign-up via your social sites, as you can advertise the contest in advance on those channels in an effort to gain additional subscribers⁷.

In these examples from Adore Me and Klean Kanteen, both brands do a good job of driving their email subscribers to their social channels.

- **Ask questions and start conversations**

– Does your email include a special topic that connects with people emotionally or includes some kind of unique offer? If so, encourage subscribers to share their response to it with your audiences. You can even ask them to share using a special hashtag and provide a fill-in-the-blank comment. For example: “This 50% discount from @TwitterHandle makes me feel _____. #SavingsDay”.

Here is a great example from Maggie Sottero. Weddings, of course, are very emotional events, and you can do a great job of having past customers relive the moment.



This not only helps connect with past customers but also helps engage future customers.

Another great way to regularly engage users with your emails is to offer a question of the day or week and post answers from subscribers on your social site(s). Be sure to tailor your campaign to your particular social site. For Instagram, allow pictures to serve as answers. In this example from an Overstock.com email (below),



the concept of engagement was there, but it would have been better to include a hashtag rather than forcing people to click through the banner.

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PART THREE

HOW TO CURATE UGC

Getting users to start creating content that you can use is only the first step in a UGC marketing strategy – you have to store it, categorise it, manage it and decide on the best contributions.

So what do you need to do with it to make it useful for your marketing campaigns?

GET PERMISSION TO USE IT

The first and most vital part of the process is to get approval from the content creator to use it. The content may well have been born out of your requests, but it still belongs to the person who created it and you need to make sure that they are happy for you to use it.

How do you do this? Just ask them. This is known as explicit permission. But think about how you ask them. Usually, if they have been inspired by a campaign that you have invited them to take part in, they have given implicit permission for you to use their content – especially if it features a specific and unique hashtag associated with that contest, campaign or call to action. While implicit permission is recognised legally, it is always wise – and polite – to obtain explicit permission.

To do this, you can contact them via the social media feed they have created the

content on. Doing this publicly can be great additional publicity – and will hopefully lead the creator to also re-share your request and drive even more clicks and content creation.

But there is a catch to asking for permission publicly: It opens you to a very public rejection in the unlikely event that they should say no.

Better, ask them via direct messaging, email or other private channels for their permission. If they agree and are really pleased, they will share the request anyway.

If the content was created using your product or brand entirely off the user's own bat and not prompted by a call to action from you, you need to tread even more carefully. Usually, people are happy to share, but since it was unsolicited, you need to send them a private DM or an email to explain who you are, how you found the content and what you want to do with it. And be prepared that they may want a creation credit.

According to lawyers at Shareroot⁹, getting this permission can be surprisingly difficult and so many brands prefer to simply use content their users

generate as they see fit without asking for permission explicitly or creating a situation where it is granted implicitly. Using photos that feature unintentional “brand placement” for marketing purposes has created some of the biggest legal headaches for brands in almost every industry.

Using content that was not specifically created for your brand (via a campaign, for example) without permission could land you in hot water. This includes photographs of a celebrity using a certain brand or private photos with accidental brand placement.

Businesses can be sued for the above situations on the grounds of unauthorised use of an individual’s image for marketing purposes. The bottom line? Don’t use content without the creator’s permission—it’s not worth the trouble.

As always, it is best to check with the legal department when embarking on a UGC campaign – just so you all know what you can and can’t do.

HOW TO STORE IT, CATEGORISE IT AND MANAGE IT

Once you have permission and have got hold of the content, you then face the challenge of what to do with it: where do

“Businesses can be sued for the above situations on the grounds of unauthorised use of an individual’s image for marketing purposes”

you put it and, more pressingly how do you categorise it in such a way that you can use it?

The technology space around UGC is buzzing as more and more companies recognise the value of this type of content for their business. Olapic, Stackla, Annex Cloud and others all play into this space with platforms and solutions that help you manage and curate content.

The easiest thing to do is to opt for a content management engine that will collect, collate, categorise and curate content. Using machine learning and AI – today’s argot for algorithms that look for patterns – these platforms can trawl social sites and other online feeds, looking for keywords, phrases, hashtags, logos, images and more and pulling them in for deeper assessment.

Once collected, all this content is then subjected to a much deeper interrogation by AI to determine much more accurately how on-brand the content is, or how well it fulfils whatever criteria you have imposed on it for your UGC campaign.

There is typically a stage for humans to review the content before it is then cate-

gorised and stored, ready for use. The really clever engines also feature the ability to manage the rights too, requesting rights from the creator and managing the outcome. They then store and organise all this content in an easy-to-use dashboard that the marketing department can use to find what they are looking for – knowing where it came from, when, why and from whom.

MODERATION AND SELECTION

Part of the process of picking the content involves making sure that it is on-brand, that it doesn’t infringe other brands’ copyright, or interfere with people’s privacy and that it is neither indecent nor offensive. This can be largely automated. But deciding what content is actually good is much more subjective.

Here humans come into play. For big brands, there could be thousands, hundreds of thousands or even millions of bits of relevant vetted content. Machines can whittle this down to a manageable amount, but then people have to step in to assess what content fits with what they are trying to achieve.

To achieve this, marketers can make use of the aforementioned dashboard to pick the content they want (and to make sure

that the AI hasn't overlooked something really offensive). They can manually select the pieces of content they want to use and where and how.

With reviews, some degree of automated moderation occurs to weedle out things that are offensive and, with the increasing sophistication of third-party systems, fake reviews. This streamlines the vetting, but all reviews still need some sort of manual intervention before going live.

Reviews are interesting as they often beg a response – particularly the bad ones. While a brand or business should never get into a slanging match with a customer – least of all in public – a bad review handled well can turn into a PR win. If you understand their problem, and can fix it, you can showcase it online.

CONNECTING CONTENT TO CAMPAIGNS

Mapping the content that you have garnered to the right campaigns and products is a tough call – made tougher as the volume of content goes up.

Here you need again a combination of machine learning and human input. Depending on what you want to do – an email campaign, a social media campaign, or even a social selling campaign

(as we shall see in Part 4: How to Use UGC) – you need to be able to pick the right content at the right time and deploy it. You need to link your content management systems to your marketing systems to try and automate as much as possible. But be prepared for some manual tasks.

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PART FOUR

HOW TO USE UGC IN MARKETING

The effort to gather and curate all of this user-generated content will be for naught if you don't effectively deploy it. There are three things you can use UGC for: engaging customers and fans; selling directly; and helping consumers learn more about your products, business and customers.

ENGAGING WITH CUSTOMERS

As you roll out UGC, watch which customers contribute the most and see how their posts do. Are there certain posts that seem to gather lots of likes? Or get re-shared frequently? Start to turn these into brand advocates – with sweeteners of early access to new lines, money off, or even just the glory of being a brand advocate.

This is where UGC comes into its own. While it may be easy to look at it as just a way of reinforcing your relationship with your existing customers, it plays a role in acquiring new customers. It's a multiplication effect. First, those posting attract the attention of their followers and then those followers attract additional attention.

Reviews, too, are about engagement. Encouraging people to write about their experience builds a bond between you and them. While many people will only write a review unbidden if they are upset about something, actively encouraging happy customers once you have seen them post something positive on social media can yield positive results.

With reviews, you need to work out where best to use them. Applying them to a specific product or service page on a website is a given, but you can also pull them out to use in specific marketing campaigns or beyond. If you send out a marketing email about a particular product, include some of the best reviews you have on that item.

And getting positive reviews – and the stars that come with that – helps you engage further. Not only has that customer had a positive experience, but starting a dialogue with them about their review can make them more engaged with you as a brand and more likely to come back to you again. It also makes them more likely to recommend you to friends and

beyond – igniting again the whole brand advocacy dynamic seen with other UGC campaigns talked of above.

However, speed is often of the essence. As we have seen, for flash sales or limited edition lines, it is often best to request reviews, surveys or stars at the immediate point of sale and to then use that data on your website and social feeds instantly.

SELLING THROUGH UGC

While brand engagement and loyalty are must-haves, the real end game is to sell more. After your UGC campaigns have garnered all this interest and set you up as a social and celebrated brand, you need to use this content to sell.

Use your images and videos to push out marketing materials with a sales-focused message. If you ran a competition on who has the best Instagram post about your trainers, now is the time to put those winning trainer images to work for you as part of more traditional marketing campaigns.

Here you can use the imagery and video on social channels, but also you can stick them up on a billboard or build them into email marketing campaigns. You might focus on one “social product” per week or day that has a special price.

You can choose one user-generated product photo as the main hero image and give credit to the user. Or you might consider testing an email that features multiple products, such as a clearance email. Run an A/B test¹¹ using social or UGC photos in the email versus the standard stock product images. In both cases, analyse how these social selling messages convert compared with your static promotional messages.

Deploy your best reviews in email marketing about specific products or services. Let them do the selling for you.

Running social media campaigns shows just how interactive you are with your customers, so you need to leverage that. Anecdotally, brand engagement rises nearly 30% when consumers are exposed to a combination of UGC and professional content¹². This is because they trust the views of their peers and like the look of the pro content.

LEARNING FROM UGC

Learning from what the collected content tells you is one of the most overlooked aspects of running a UGC campaign. UGC can tell you so much you didn’t know about your customers, your products and your business.

For starters, you can see which products are most popular. But it goes way beyond that. Look at the pictures: do clues such as the lighting show when people tend to use your product? Can the surroundings tell you where and how they use it? Maybe there is even a timestamp. This information is vital as it can help you better target your marketing, but it can also help you understand your users, tailor your products to their needs and launch new offerings.

Hootsuite¹³ offers a great example. It ran a photo contest with a Canadian cheese company where they asked fans to take a picture of their favourite recipe using the company's cheddar. Not only did the cheesemonger get hundreds of UGC photographs, but they also learned exactly what their customers liked to do with the cheese. This information can be used not only to drive future campaigns and content marketing initiatives, but also to drive future business partnerships.

Reviews can also tell you an awful lot about your business. Of course, the good ones and the bad ones tell you what you are doing right and what you are doing less than right, all of which is vital business information. But what subtle messages are tucked within reviews?

Understanding what your customer are commenting on and what images they are sharing (as well as what they aren't) offers vital insight into what your business is doing.

You may find that a review of your Bluetooth headset features a lot of comments about pairing being difficult. Even if it's mentioned in passing and the user clearly figured it out in the end, you need to look at what is going on with your pairing. You can't over analyse your UGC or your reviews.

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PART FIVE

SOME EXAMPLES OF GREAT UGC CAMPAIGNS

Many top brands use UGC to create innovative marketing campaigns that have linked the social world, where the content is created, with more traditional media such as print and billboards.

Here are four outstanding examples.

CALVIN KLEIN'S #MYCALVINS



Back in the 1980s, Brooke Shields provocatively posed in a pair of slender jeans, stating that “nothing comes between me and my Calvins”. In 2016, the company gave a nod to nostalgia while tapping into the modern power of social media by reviving the campaign, this time on Twitter, encouraging celebs and civilians alike to tweet “I _____ in #MyCalvins”.

In just a few months, the #MyCalvins hashtag took over Instagram and boasted over 179,000 photos tagged. The brand

also earned millions of new followers across Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Calvin Klein saw the campaign connecting more deeply with young people than influencer posts or paid ads had.

The images were taken by users, often in their homes or bedrooms, and offered an intimate look at their lives. These personal shots created an emotional connection that can't be achieved in a professional shoot. The brand ultimately set up a #MyCalvins gallery where users could submit the best photos, and it quickly swelled to 4.5 million interactions in four months between celebrity, influencer and brand-posted content.

AERIE'S #REALAERIE



Concerned over the impact of airbrushed images in magazines and the media

on young women, swimwear maker Aerie pledged to not retouch photos of its models in swimwear, and launched the #RealAerie UGC campaign, which encouraged people to submit unedited photos of themselves in the company's product. For every Instagram user that posted a photo of themselves in a bathing suit using the hashtag #AerieReal, the brand donated \$1 to the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) in the US.

The interesting thing here is that it uses marketing to do good – and gives its fans a reason to get involved that is more altruistic than just getting yourself on Instagram. Whether it's an awareness campaign or a donation driver, customers want to buy from companies that support important causes.

BMW'S #BMWREPOSTS

Car manufacturer BMW uses #BMWRepost to share Instagram posts of proud BMW owners and their vehicles. This campaign gives owners a platform to brag about their expensive purchases – and lets BMW show off its proud and loyal base of customers to sell more.

The idea behind the campaign is that consumers on the hunt for a new car will be swayed by all the happy BMW users to take a closer look at the company's offering. It combines UGC and, to some extent, peer approval and reviews in one.



STARBUCKS #WHITECUPCONTEST AND #REDCUPCONTEST



Back in 2014, Starbucks ran a contest to get people to doodle on their plain white cups and enter photos of their daubs via Twitter, the prize being that the best one would be made into a limited edition plastic cup for sale in Starbucks' stores worldwide.

The contest was a triumph of generating brand awareness and interest, attracting more than 4000 entries and creating a storm of social media activity.

Also, each Christmas the coffee company

rolls out a Red Cup Competition, where users submit photos of themselves and the company's special red Christmas cups doing interesting things – all over the world.

The #RedCupContest is a smart UGC campaign that has generated more than 40,000 posts of red cups so far. It incentivises fans to participate and engage online by offering a prize and helps generate sales – because you have to buy a red cup first to take a picture.

SUMMARY

In this era of personalisation at scale, consumers want to be recognised as an individual, not part of a crowd. As we have seen, UGC in all its forms can help deliver that feeling of specialness – as well as brand advocacy, increased reach and more revenue.

Similarly, UGC can help your business understand what consumers like and don't like, how they use your products and how they view your brand.

Taken together, these two aspects make UGC a powerful tool for marketing. But there is a third element: when brands want to reach consumers on an individual level with cool and engaging content – and with consumers expecting this level of personalisation – many run into the problem of cost.

To produce top-end content for marketing requires a great deal of creativity and is expensive, time-consuming and, frankly, difficult. UGC lets your audience do that for you. Millions of brains all looking at your product or brand in their own way leads to thousands of people creating pictures, videos and posts. Within this wave of content, there will be pieces that are truly inspiring – and that have been created for you for free.

In short, UGC not only satisfies customer demands, but also helps do it on a budget. And this is the real power of UGC marketing. Once you can get it up and running, you can produce vast amounts of good quality content that users enjoy and trust – and it leads to brand advocacy, peer group pass-on and setting your brand up to be perceived as one of a kind.

Couple that with the insights it can give you about your customers and developing a UGC content program should be high on your marketing list. But remember – it won't work without using your marketing channels to encourage creation and push out the new campaigns. Traditional marketing channels, such as email, are still vital for both creating UGC generating campaigns and for running marketing programmes that use all that UGC content.

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