USER GENERATED CONTENT

A white paper by DVO and Gerhard Malojer

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User Generated Content – The what and why.

This white paper aims to provide a unique insight into User Generated Content (UGC), highlighting why it should be an important addition to your marketing strategy.

Takeaways include techniques to help leverage UGC, the gamification element and how it can deliver wider storytelling and interaction for brands.

The demand for content has increased exponentially, driven by a technology empowered consumer.

Introduction

No matter what you label it, content plays probably the most important role in customer communications and marketing in today's world. Powered by the massive expansion in technology we've seen in the last decade and our always-on culture, brands need content to be able to speak to their customers. But the power sits with the consumer and platforms for sharing content are placing constraints on how, when and where content is served to users. So brands need to adapt and embrace new content strategies.

Step forward User Generated Content.

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What is User Generated Content?

Simply put, UGC is content that is generated not by the brand, but by users. But what does this mean within the confines of a marketing strategy?

Our definition for UGC for Marketing is:

 "User Generated Content Marketing is authentic content generated by users in connection to a brand, encouraged by an inspiring and empowering call to action framework from that brand, with the aim to raise brand interest and generate sales".

What do we mean by 'Inspiring'?

We mean using storytelling mechanics that excite a response in users. Looking at Coca Cola's strategy for 'Liquid and Linked', they recognised the global importance of storytelling across all cultures and countries. It's how people share and interact.

What do we mean by 'Empowering'?

Using gamification mechanics (game design elements in a non-game context) to elicit a response. So, what's the prize? Where's the reward for users actually creating content?

Why is UGC a powerful tool?

Word of mouth has always been the most effective, most powerful tool in the marketing ecosystem. It's no surprise that consumers trust each other more than they trust a brand.

Friends, family, colleagues, even strangers' recommendations carry more weight and will deliver a higher return than any customer communication from a brand, even if they say exactly the same thing.

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And technology has made sharing and accessing these 3rd party recommendations much, much easier.

Think about sites like Trip Advisor.

Users will read and react to content from people all over the world that they will never meet, but they trust that content and will let it influence their travel experience. And brands in the space know, a bad review on Trip Advisor can see business nose dive sharply. We are all part of one or more communities and sharing knowledge and experience is an important part of belonging to a community. Technology has expanded our communities and made the world's opinions accessible via our mobile phones. With one click, users determine the content they want and where they want it, not where a brand decides to display it.

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UGC offers consumers not only specific and inspiring information, but also involves them, pulling them into an action or reaction outside of merely a sales transaction. Marketing is no longer a one-way communication and the power no longer lies with brands, companies or providers.

Brands that don't understand or respect this will fail, it's as simple as that. This is where the fundamental power of UGC lies. UGC offers consumers not only specific and inspiring information, but also involves them, pulling them into an action or reaction outside of merely a sales transaction.

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UGC supports, encourages and promotes the transformation of the consumer from the status of passive audience into active user with a powerful voice. With the development of social media, UGC offers users a platform to express that voice with inspiring content that will be relevant in the context of the brand, but always with a very human touch.

This is why it elicits such trust in users on a level unattainable in, for example, one-way brand communications like T.V. advertising.

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Why is UGC so important to a marketing strategy?

Many brands, even ones employing highly experienced marketing professionals, fear UGC. Why?

Simply because UGC shifts the balance of power and control. Many long term brands are used to holding all the proverbial cards. They determine the how, the when and the what of the communication. With UGC, that power is stripped away from the brand and handed to the consumer. But this shift in power needs to be accompanied by a shift in mind-set. Brands need to move from being a publisher of information to a curator of stories.

So, why should brands embrace UGC?

Well, as part of a wider marketing strategy, UGC is a conversation. And no one expects that conversation to be a 100% positive, 100% of the time, that's impossible. But it is how brands deal with the negative elements that's important. Played out on a public stage, showing real conversations, real engagement and a real desire to address users' concerns is in itself extremely powerful. And this is where it can get really interesting and actually more beneficial to brands. The traditional step by step sales funnel of KNOW – LIKE – TRUST – BUY becomes more important for brand communication than ever. On the one hand, brands can build trust by addressing the user as an individual, and on the other hand the user as an individual has the power to express this relationship on the web and via social media. So, by brands ensuring this relationship is positive, the job of positive brand communication is being done by the user on their behalf.

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There are specific stages of a UGC campaign evolving each individual step within the sales funnel.

Step one – KNOW

Knowing the brand requires "How to" content and communication of the company's core beliefs.

Step two – LIKE

Meant to create sympathy and empathy for the brand, which you can do with storytelling around the brand beliefs. During these two steps UGC can grow.

But, the core of UGC is held within the third step – TRUST

Here the full potential of UGC can expand and evolve. It is the UGC creator's challenge to give users a framework and motivation to express the brand experience for whatever that experience is and furthermore to build on it. Again, that's the power of UGC, because right there you get the most valuable and authentic customer feedback. And this is what other users are going to trust the most. Then you can analyse this feedback to improve and strengthen your brand in the market, leading to the gold at the end of the rainbow – **BUY**.

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How gamification and storytelling can be used in UGC strategy.

Storytelling in UGC builds the framework for users to express themselves, tapping into our instinctive need to share our experiences. It acts as an orientation mechanism for users, guiding them to classify and understand the content they are creating. This can then be communicated through to online channels within the storytelling mechanics and should be seamless. Important storytelling in a UGC strategy is the HOW of brand communications. The WHICH impulses should be supplied by the framework and the WHAT are the digital channels employed to distribute the UGC, all with an involving, interactive and transmedia purpose.

Bringing the framework and the UGC together must result in a suitable brand story, reflecting the message of the brand's Unique Selling Proposition (USP). If it doesn't, then the strategy or tactical activity is not fit for purpose. Always remember that being authentic as a brand is the absolute basis of UGC (as it should be for any marketing activity). Sooner or later, consumers will catch you out! Gamification on the other hand, is a tool to motivate users to move through the brand framework you have created. Millennials are natural game players. Gaming is mainstream to them and is woven into their digital experiences. Through gaming, Millennials are used to getting immediate feedback on their actions. Gamification combines motivation and feedback for action and expressions along the brand story content. Storytelling and gamification combined create a powerful and effective framework for the evolution of UGC. They give users the tools to freely express their own UGC creations.
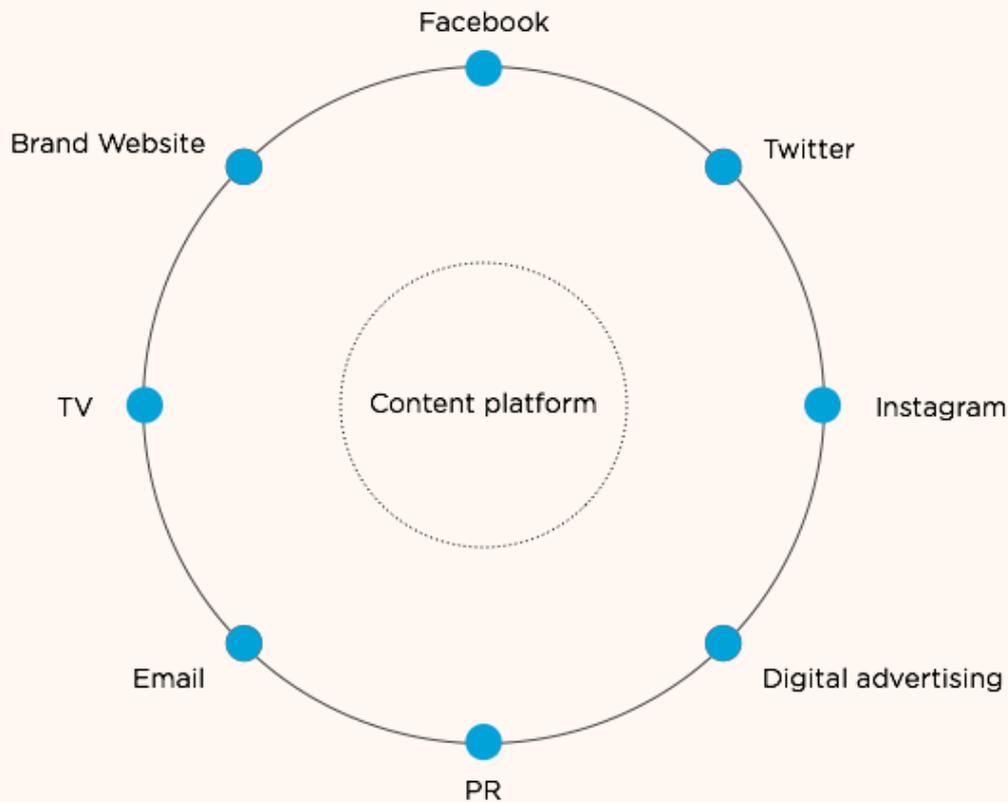
UGC and the Bigger Picture

Millennials naturally lean towards UGC. Taking them and their core values as a basic marketing target group to establish your brand in the digital world is a great tactical place to start. Millennials are the ones the basic mechanics of the digital world are designed for. Users outside of this group will ultimately have to flex to fit in with their requirements, so as long as you're meeting their basic needs, with an eye on bringing your customers along the journey to this point, you're on the right road. Also, be aware that every channel has its own rules, mechanics and advantages (and disadvantages).

A good UGC strategy offers the best channels for user expression, while being linked in an interactive transmedia way. Transmedia connections are of course, the best way for spreading UGC and the intrinsic SEO benefits. Users can build on their favourite channels like Instagram for photos, YouTube for Video, Facebook for experience and personal opinion and Twitter for news and brand interaction.

The more your campaign is conceptualised in an interactive, transmedia way, the more stories can evolve and be told in different ways, relative to the reader, with a broader connected distribution.

An integrated channel ecosystem for UGC

The diagram shows a central dotted circle labeled "Content platform" surrounded by nodes on an outer circle: Facebook (top), Twitter, Instagram, Digital advertising, PR, Email, TV, Brand Website.

Conclusion

Valuable information has always been transmitted within stories. Humans are social beings, therefore word of mouth marketing has always been the most valuable channel for brands to promote and sells their products. UGC marketing specifically supports this attitude by adapting this inherent behaviour into the digital world, providing the framework for positive stories to be created and shared, for the overall benefit of the brand.

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About Ben Dickens and DVO

Ben is M.D. and Client Services Director of DVO, a full service digital agency. DVO is obsessed with delivering revenue and building brands. The integrated communications services at DVO have been curated specifically for client success in the digitally connected world.

As an advocate of strategies that leverage modern consumer behaviour, Ben is particularly interested in developing content marketing, integrated campaigns and applying emotional insights in digital to drive DVO clients' success.

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