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The Do's and Don'ts of Running Social Media Promotions

A guide to getting quality fans and followers

By Jennifer Pullinger – April 2, 2012



Social media promotions (contests, giveaways, sweepstakes, and the like) are one of the easiest ways to grow your networks. The ultimate goal? Higher engagement levels, return on investment, conversion rates, and responses to calls to action.

Yet, sometimes, behind that seemingly large network is an audience of uninterested

consumers (cue cricket chorus) who were merely attracted by the incentive or freebie. The challenge for brands is to craft a promotion that will attract the right audience in the first place, or make sure those who only wanted the discount or chance at winning a prize still have a place in informing overall future marketing strategy. Here's how to make that happen:

Don't rely on the "placement crash."

Marcus Fischer, CEO of the Minneapolis-based digital agency Space 150, says contest- and giveaway-driven social media promotions have the potential to be "one-hit wonders" that produce a "quick blip" on the radar and then quickly fade in impact. "One of the things that we really try to do is to use social media where you are actually making it a strategy, not just a tactic," he explained. Social media promotions have their place, but if brands continually ignore the need to tie promotions back to marketing or business goals, he added, "one of the big fears is that social media will be relegated to a junior status and not a business status."

Jason Cormier, co-founder of social media agency Room 214 in Boulder, Colo., likens social media promotions to traditional public relations efforts. "It seems like people that are short-sighted on this thinking are trying to get that hit, that spike in traffic or all of a sudden that burst of fans," Cormier said. "It's what we refer to as the 'placement crash,' where if you look at the Web analytics of a PR hit what you'll see is you've got the awesome spike, and then 48 hours later, it's completely dead and you did nothing with that traffic afterwards."

"A social media promotion should have something to do with the brand itself."

Do use content to (re)engage.

Avoiding that "placement crash" is key to creating a long-lasting, engaged community of true brand loyalists. Fischer explained, "I think the bigger part of that is what's the long tail effect? That's really where engagement is a key way to see how long do people keep commenting. Are they coming back and posting something? How much are they liking something and engaging?"

"Bottom line: The how of that is really going to be based on what's the content that you are putting out versus what's the promotion," added Fischer. "Is what you are saying relevant enough for someone to actually come back, listen, share and participate?"

A brand's social media promotion strategy must go hand in hand with its content strategy, said Fischer. "If you think about 'Why would I take part in this?' or 'Why would I transact?', well it's because I might win something or I'm getting something. But then for that engagement and that authentic connection, then it comes down to, 'Why should they care?' and 'Why would they share?'."

Cormier says there is a wealth of data available through Facebook that social marketing practitioners can access to inform future strategy, an advantage of the growth in your fan base that comes with a contest or promotion. When a fan authorizes a contest or sweepstakes app, for example, you not only can glean the interests, preferences and demographic data on the fan who already likes your brand, but you also get that same information on their friends. "And when you start to look at clustering that can happen inside of those kinds of data sets, you start to gain a lot of insight on how you can better position advertising and even create content," said Cormier.

Don't just give away iPads.

Chris Tuff, senior VP and director of earned and emerging media at Atlanta-based 22 Squared calls this the worst type of promotion for one reason: A social media promotion should have something to do with the brand itself. "Unless I'm Apple," he explained, "I'm attracting the fans that just want that iPad2 and aren't necessarily going to be engaging with me for any long-term reasons."

However, he says, you may still be able to salvage some of those new fans and followers through Facebook's advertising program, Reach Generator. "So, if I had lower than 30 percent organic lift with my brand, I can put a \$200,000 buy over a three day period to ensure that I'm hitting 75 percent of my fan base. So, Facebook is now saying, 'Yeah, we understand that that's out there; here's a way that we can guarantee that you can reach those people,'" Tuff added.

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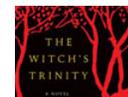
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The power of Facebook's paid ad solutions, like sponsored stories, is less in targeting a brand's current fan base and more on the friends of your fan base, says Tuff. "So one thing working in the contest's favor, regardless of what you are giving away, is that the more fans you have, the more ads you can get out there with social context applied to it," he said.

"The more fans you have, the more ads you can get out there with social context applied to it."

Do make them participate.

To be effective, brands need to make sure they set up their promotion in a way that encourages or requires a higher level of participation, Cormier says. "So when you get that level of participation where someone is engaging with your content and maybe they are engaging with it in a way that is also making it so that others see they are engaging with it, then you bypass some of the people who like to enter contests for fun, who don't care about the brand. They care about nothing but winning the prize," he said.

One way to get fans to participate in a contest or sweepstakes and keep them coming back for more is through gamification like leader boards or badging "where you achieve different status levels by accomplishing things or doing things, and you get a badge that encourages you to do it one more time or reach the next level," said Fischer. Foursquare is clearly a model in this case.

Don't discount Twitter.

While Facebook's advantage over other social networks is the amount of data and insight that brands can collect from fans and "friends of fans," Twitter does have its advantages when it comes to social media promotions.

For example, Twitter's terms of service and guidelines for promotions are much more lenient than Facebook's. "So, I could go ahead and do a contest or sweepstakes on Twitter without having to get someone to do the rules and regulations and all that stuff which Facebook is so strict on enforcing," said Tuff.

"I also think that Twitter is going to start evolving their brand pages to have a much more conducive landing experience much like that of Facebook's for a brand to run contests and sweepstakes," added Tuff.

In the end, the maxim to keep in mind is that it's not the brand with the most fans or followers that wins. "It really is probably better stated 'The ones with the most engaged fans wins -- the one with the fans who comment the most or who post to their own page,'" said Fischer. "It really is a community that's for and driven by the fans versus instigated or pushed on by a brand to say, 'Hey, here's your latest promotion. Please pay attention.'"

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