

Cultivating Effective User-Generated Content

Bob Maynard and Robert Stribley, July 2009

It's an increasingly brave and rich new world of content we have at our fingertips these days. Consequently, companies are developing content by injecting it with colorful doses of writing, video and photography created by citizens and customers, rather than paid employees: we call it user-generated content (or UGC).

During the recent protests in Iran, for example, we saw the media delving deeply into Twitter and other social networking sites to harvest information from a society whose government keeps a tight rein on the flow of information. Despite the inherent issues with incorporating UGC, use is consistently on the rise. So with a teeming universe of content available out there, where do companies that are hesitant to enter the arena begin?

Entering the Game

Companies can start by recognizing that user-generated content comes in myriad forms. They should determine which types are appropriate for their sites, and which types their users are best suited to create. But, for many companies, opting out of the benefits that user-generated content affords is no longer a healthy decision.

Chiefly, companies need to see beyond the perceived risks of user-generated content. They should understand how to adapt their current staff to support a user-generated content model. How they make these changes will depend on the company and its needs. It might mean encouraging subject matter experts to blog about innovative thoughts the company is discussing, thereby sharing their intellectual capital with a broader audience. Or it might mean employing a moderator – or a team of moderators – to review user comments for a new transparent section of the corporate web site.

Companies should also learn to overcome internal concerns regarding content authenticity, spam, and hate speech with an overall focus of maintaining the brand in the presence of so many contributing voices.

The Varieties of User-Generated Content

From homemade music videos to passionate political debates, user-generated content is transforming the way people learn, share and play, both online and offline. Aspiring performers rely less on open-mic gigs to find an audience, just as politically minded citizens rely less on town hall meetings to ensure that their voices are heard. The web has supplanted “real life” as a premier public space, offering countless platforms for self-expression and community building, and has been helped along by the proliferation of user-generated content.

But it's not a one-size-fits-all situation. The spectrum of user-generated content types ranges from the relatively simple (e.g., comments and reviews) to the exceedingly complex (e.g., social

networks and multimedia file uploading). Deciding which type of user-generated content to implement on a site depends on several factors: What do users expect to see at the site? Is the “official” site content engaging enough to demand user feedback? And how will users be incentivized to contribute, anyway? Honest answers to these questions will help lay the groundwork for smart implementation.

To accommodate the influx of user-generated content, companies should take practical measures such as purchasing extra storage space and anticipating significant increases in site traffic. They may also need to reassign or hire additional editorial and content strategy staff to manage the new flow of content.

All Things In Moderation

Companies do have effective methods for moderating this content at their disposal, so they should formulate a clear plan for governance before they invite users to contribute to their sites. Depending on the company and the visibility of the content, rigid moderation by company employees may be required, effectively requiring a review of any content before it’s posted to a site. Often, however, users can assist in moderating or contributing content by rating comments, reporting spam or abusive behavior. A combination of corporate and consumer moderation might be appropriate depending upon your needs.

Who can afford to do what? Well, largely un-moderated comments may be an option for some sites – especially distributors like Amazon, which allows for blazing criticism of products they sell, but don’t develop and produce. However, while product manufacturers or service providers may be understandably reluctant to allow unbridled reviews on their sites, an appropriate level of moderation can help protect brand integrity while still allowing for greater transparency. For example, if Bank of America can display customer reviews of their online banking tools (reviews which are likely moderated and ones users can additionally rate and/or report), maybe Apple should consider displaying them for the iPhone.

Companies do have choices – and plenty of them. They have choices from the increasingly myriad types of user-generated content: blogs, micro-blogging venues (like Twitter), comments, user reviews, ratings, profiles, discussion boards, photos and video, and so on. And they have choices in levels of moderation and visibility for that content. However, they need to consider these alternatives and make the choices smartly, but quickly, since paralysis on this front will only place them further behind the curve.

About the Authors



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