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Blog seeding - best practice.

Introduction to blog seeding

During the release of the business best seller "Freakonomics" the Blogosphere was actively engaged as part of the book's marketing strategy by seeding advance copies to influential bloggers¹ This was considered one of the main reasons that the book grew in popularity so quickly.

The real message here is not that blog seeding was the driver for the book's success, but that this is a significant contributing factor to an overall marketing campaign and can be an incredibly important component if the underlying product is strong. "Freakonomics" is an edgy book, for example making controversial connections between legalization of abortion in the US and reduction of crime twenty years later, it generates debate and is well written.

Social Media impact

It worked well with the Blogosphere because the product was special and "of its time". In our opinion if companies have products that have special features, does something "cool", answers real consumer problems or have status appeal, using the Blogosphere as an additional marketing channel is an obvious use for company resources, but we recommend that companies tread carefully. We talk in this document about best practice for blog seeding. For the purpose of clarification this is NOT a how-to on stealth marketing² or "astroturfing" where marketers play consumers by not being upfront with focus of campaign or origin of information.

Social media and its impact Social media is growing wildly, new social networks emerge every day and there are more than 100Million blogs globally and discussion forums and review sites are still emerging around products, brands and issues. Web users are increasingly going to these sites for information and frequently see them as a trusted source. When consumers get advice on what to buy or use based on feedback in a social media source, this is simply word-of-mouth, a powerful free marketing tool that has been available to companies in the offline world for decades but very hard to control.

McKinsey³ reports the increasing importance of Word of Mouth: for 67% of consumers purchase decisions are influenced by WOM. According to NOP World 93% of consumers identify WOM as the best, most reliable source of information about ideas, and information on products and services.

It makes sense for companies to utilize these networks to help sell products and a recent report from Business Week has found 45% of Senior Marketers believe that buzz and press are the most important factors in building a brand. E-marketing⁴ found out that 70% of 500 marketers are planning a WOM program next year - number 1 growing marketing vehicle.

Definition of blog seeding

Targeting influential commentators is nothing new, with free and discounted products being offered to the well connected for generations. Blog seeding is this practice where the target influentials are bloggers. The benefit is two-fold as these users will be able to offer targeted feedback on the product and if they are convinced on its use then they will pass the message onto others in their network either through their blog or their "offline" network which in turn can increase sales and brand awareness. It should also be clear that if they are not convinced they may decide to pass on a more negative message.

¹ www.globalprblogweek.com/2005/09/19/freakonomics-prmachine-interview

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stealth_marketing

³ www.mckinseyquarterly.com

⁴ <http://www.emarketingassociation.com>

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Selection of participants

Optionally companies can feed bloggers with unique and valuable information. That is common practice for pharmaceutical companies. They provide to selected group of influential bloggers unique set of data about a new drug or results the new tests. Bloggers have advantage to present them as the first ones to their network. Both sides gain: bloggers credibility and trust of their network for reliable information and companies WOM campaign, and guarantee that only precise and genuine information about their product get passed on.

In the Diffusion of Innovations⁵ theory, adoption starts with innovators, early adopters and then the early majority. Blog seeding makes the assumption that the target bloggers fit into these categories and that this will help push the product more in the early majority and then the later majority, which is where up to ~70% of the market resides.

Identifying bloggers to be part of a placement program can be done by the following "common sense" criteria:

Authority: Does the blogger have significant knowledge or passion around the product or service area? This can be investigated by reading recent blog entries or identifying if the blog is structured around the topic area, "Mobile phone blog", and "Golf lover blog".

Prolificness: Does the blogger post frequently? The blogger may have strong feelings around the area but if they are not posting to their blog more than once a month there is a strong possibility that they may not talk about a good or bad experiences in the blog. **Blogger's Community:** This is defined by the following metrics

Links: How many other bloggers reference this blog in their own blog either through "link love" (Blogger is saying "this is a blog I read and I link to it so other users can see what is written") or reference to the blog in a post.

Comments: Many blogs that have good readership do not have many comments; however as a metric for community participation there are no stronger guidelines available. Web users have a strong propensity not to comment, so if a blog attracts commentary they have strong messages or more than average active community.

Feed statistics: How many web users take the blog feed through an RSS reader.

Localisation: Select blogger from multiple regions. This offers not only additional geographical coverage it can also identify issues that may have a local flavour such as compatibility with other devices or unclear language instructions.

Out of box: If plan is to seed 100 mobile phones then only targeting mobile phone bloggers might lead to an overly homogenous response. It could be interesting to target bloggers that better identify with the emotional appeal of the phone, is it a sporting product (resilient, waterproof etc.) then place with a blogger that writes about biking or water sports, the audience will be different the feedback may also be richer in new insights.

Demographics: These should match with target focus of brand. It is frequently possible to see the age range of the blogger so seeding should be able to match with this. Blog seeding program may decide to take a broader approach, if target is insights from all age groups.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diffusion_of_innovations

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Targeted: The Wall Street Journal is a popular newspaper and predictably companies want coverage there. It is hard to get onto their radar. In the Blogosphere there are also blogging giants who are similarly hard to get in touch with or have many requests for their time. It is advisable in our opinion to work with bloggers who are a particular authority or are a good fit with the seeding strategy. Focus on getting into Techcrunch or Engadget (in case of consumer electronics) is interesting but is not crucial for a successful campaign.

Approach

When target blogs are selected it is important to decide how to approach. Rules for engagement are as follows:

Avoid the Intimacy Trap⁵ : "The marketing person may know a lot about the blogger but the blogger may not know you. So it's easy to become over-personal, colloquial or even slack in your pitch. This can come across as being forward, lazy or careless, even though that's not your intent."

Personalise the message: "You have selected the blogger because it is believed they have talent and passion for the target area. It is important not to insult the person or undermine their time by writing to them via a mailer. A simple message well constructed explaining the purpose of the placement is required."

Incremental approach where possible: Start first pass of seeding with a small sample set, this will give insights into the process and take initial feedback in order to shape rest of campaign. Initial phase might be to place 25% of allotted units; however a decision will have to be made on how this fits into the overall marketing plan.

Openness: Attentio advocates openness at all levels of this process. Explain to the blogger why they have been selected. They are an authority on the topic area and will be able to give insights into use of the product. Their feedback would be gratefully received. If they blog about the experience they should mention how they received the product. They should not be forced to write anything, although they should indicate that if they receive the product they will endeavour to at least to trial it. They should not be paid to trial.

Monitor: Once products have been placed it is crucial to monitor the impact of the campaign. There will be positive and negative feedback. There should also be take-up from other bloggers. Monitoring enables the acquisition of vital consumer feedback and return on investment information. (Disclosure: Attentio offers this service)

Conclusion

As part of an overall marketing campaign and with products that may have specific appeal to bloggers, blog seeding is a useful and relatively low cost/high impact adjunct for marketing initiatives.

Transparency is crucial and goals should be realistic. This will not make bad products sell more (at least not long term) but in a cluttered market for information it can make more people aware of what is out there and enable them to make better decisions.

It is worth noting that industry commentary around seeding is not exclusively positive even in the case of full disclosure. The debate around the Microsoft Acer giveaway⁶ is a good example of this, where disclosure was part of the deal but there were still bloggers that fervently disagreed with the practice. In our opinion, seeding acknowledges the importance of blogging and social media generally and it is inevitable that companies and bloggers will come together more in the future.

⁵ http://worldcadaccess.typepad.com/blog/2006/01/using_and_abusi.html

Attentio is a fast growing market intelligence company based in Brussels, founded in 2004. We are pioneers in Europe in the world of Social Media monitoring, measurement and analysis.

Attentio provides the Brand Dashboard, a web application that enables real-time monitoring and measurement of social and mainstream media. We cover all relevant sources for the brands we track, including but not limited to: blogs, forums, news, and video logs.

We are working with some of the biggest brands including Microsoft, Johnson & Johnson, Samsung, Toyota and with many major European PR and digital agencies.

For more information or to schedule a demonstration of the tools, please contact Attentio Team.

Learn how online market intelligence can benefit your business:

- Measure your PR effectiveness
- Improve marketing return on investment (ROI)
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- Impact customer generated buzz and word-of-mouth
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- Detect early trends and gain competitive advantage

Attentio SA
Studio TROPE
Rue aux Fleurs 32, Level 2
B-1000 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: 0032 221 98 666
Fax: 0032 221 75 083
mail: attentiocontact@attentio.com
blog: <http://www.attentio.com/blog>
twitter: attentio
web: www.attentio.com



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