Road to Digital Dialogue Filled With Potholes

At iMedia: Marketers Debate Opportunities, Pitfalls of Consumer-Generated Content

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BONITA SPRINGS, Fla. (AdAge.com) -- The iMedia Brand Summit in southwest Florida this week focused not on the art of digital marketing but on the art of digital conversation, a timely topic after the Super Bowl aired three consumer-generated ads.

Unilever's campaign for Dove Cream Oil is a consumer-generated-ad contest in which the winner spot will air during the Oscars.

"Brands that will win will be those whose consumers tell the best stories to each other rather than brands that tell the best story to their consumer," said Sarah Fay, president of Isobar U.S.

Ms. Fay was part of a panel of marketers who detailed consumer-generated campaigns. Nearly every speaker underscored the importance of fostering involvement and dialogue in their marketing plans.

Foolish mistakes

Jason Calacanis, founder of Weblogs and Sequoia Capital's entrepreneur in action, took marketers to task for making foolish mistakes along the social-media way. "Is it so hard that companies act like human beings?" he said. "Why don't people talk like humans to their customers?"

He specifically referenced Microsoft's decision to send unsolicited, Vista-equipped, high-end laptops to several high-profile technology bloggers, a move that created much controversy because it appeared as though Microsoft intended to "buy" good blog buzz around its Vista launch.

All Microsoft had to do, Mr. Calacanis said, was send a letter or e-mail in advance to explain what it was doing -- or post an explanation on its corporate blogs. Instead, it backpedaled from the stunt, trying to explain itself after the damage was done. "They got their asses kicked by the blogosphere," Mr. Calacanis said.

He similarly called out Hewlett Packard's involvement with PayPerPost, which pays people to blog about products and companies; Wal-Mart's faux blog "Wal-Mart Across America"; and Chevrolet's call for consumer-generated Tahoe ads. Marketers should consider the products they're marketing before they open up a campaign to submissions, he said. Chevy's Tahoe was a natural target for criticism, given that SUVs are often blamed for global warming.

Letting go

Babs Rangaiah, Unilever's director-media and entertainment, used the analogy of letting go of your children when it comes to giving up control of brands: "You build them, you raise them right and then you let them go," he said. He outlined Unilever's campaign for Dove
Cream Oil, a consumer-generated-ad contest in which the winner spot will air during the Oscars, and said there have been some disparaging comments about it, but "that's going to happen. We've become accustomed to that."

The company has already seen spoofs of its Evolution spot, in which an ordinary-looking woman is transformed into a billboard model via stylists, makeup artists and computer technology. Some guys have created a "Slob Evolution" spot that shows a normal, clean-cut man who drinks a bunch of beer and smokes a lot and gets fat. "Clearly that is not what our brand is about," Mr. Rangaiah said.

Jill Howard-Allen, online marketing manager, Southwest Airlines, said her company got used to giving up control several years ago when it started participating in A&E's "Airline," a reality TV show that follows the daily travails of the airline business through Southwest.

"Customers just want a chance to talk to you and interact with you," she said. Southwest has launched a user-generated-ad contest where customers submit videos about embarrassing 'Wanna Get Away?' moments, piggybacking on the airline's TV campaign. The winner's ad will air during a National Basketball Association playoff game.

Before you take the plunge
For marketers eyeing user-generated content and playing in the social-media sandbox, Mr. Calacanis outlined his list of criteria every marketer should consider before deciding whether to engage in dialogue with consumers:

The Mom Test: Ask yourself if you'd want your mom to endure this type of marketing.

The Leaked-Memo Test: "If somebody videotaped your discussions about the campaign, and if everything was exposed, what would you be most ashamed of?" he asked. That's the part you decide not to do.

The Too-Easy Test: Marketing, he said, is like going to a very sophisticated dinner party. "You come in, introduce yourself or are introduced. You sit, listen and figure out who's at the table ... and you ease your way into it. You don't have to get to the finish line day one."

The Ask-the-Experts Test: What do people involved in the social-media space think?

There's a small difference between a mistake and a non-mistake, he said. And because there's a platform for people to call marketers out, "the wrongdoers look really stupid."

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