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MEDIA SOLUTIONS

20 Expert Tips on Running a Contest Powered by Social Media

By David Spark, Founder of Spark Media Solutions, LLC
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Looking to run a contest, but you're worried nobody will participate?
Or worse, that something could go wrong?

Lucky for you, you've just won the advice of five contest production specialists:

- Natalie Aldern, ibeatYou (<http://ibeatyou.com>)
- Anne Heestand, Brickfish (<http://brickfish.com>)
- Alex Linebrink, Tweet-A-Prize! (<http://tweetaprize.com>)
- Giancarlo Massaro, AnyLuckyDay (<http://anyluckyday.com>)
- Linda Neumann, Brilliant Marketing Ideas, Inc. (<http://brilliantmarketingideas.com>)

Given their experience in operating businesses that launch and manage contests powered by social media, I reached out and asked them to please offer up some tips on how to run a successful social media-enabled contest. Here are their prize winning formulas:

1. Know what you want out of your contest

"When you run a contest you have to decide what do you want out of the contest and what are you willing to give," said Linda Neumann of Brilliant Marketing Ideas, Inc. Do you want to collect names of people who are interested in your product? Or do you want to learn more about your market

by tapping into the community's insight? Either way, you have to design a contest that will attract your specific audience. Try not to always gravitate towards the iPod giveaway just because it's such a universally adored prize. If it's not appropriate for your audience, move onto something else.

2. Keep it simple

Don't get stuck on some big idea or staying consistent with company messaging. Find something small and simple that will be easy to execute and easy for people to participate. Alex Linebrink of Tweet-A-Prize! follows this simple rule: "If I can't describe it in three rules or less, we need to make it easier."

For example, asking people to produce a video is not easy. It requires equipment, skill, and time. Asking people to send in a photo is easy. This is not to say you shouldn't do a video contest. There are plenty of successful video contests, but if your goal is lots of entries, you'll get more submissions with a picture contest than a video contest.

3. Make it fun

It should be fun to participate and watch.

4. Locate your audience

Before you launch a social media campaign, know where your audience is. Don't immediately think Facebook and Twitter. It's very possible your audience is on a special listserv or Yahoo! Group. If they are, then make sure you approach them there.



5. Your audience will surprise you

Expect the unexpected. In fact, you should want that. If you could predict everything that would happen, then you wouldn't learn from your

audience. A contest is a great market learning experience. Be a sponge and be ready to adapt when (not if) necessary.

6. The prize must generate interest

"You need to look at the prize that you are giving away and say 'Would I want that?' 'Would I spend a few minutes a day entering to win that?' If the answer is no, then your contest probably won't do too well," explains Giancarlo Massaro of AnyLuckyDay. From Massaro's experience, electronic prizes do better than all other types of prizes.

The prize doesn't necessarily need to be physical or a service. It could also be a public honor or something that doesn't have an easy price stamp, but offers a lot of cache to the winner. For example, on NPR's "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me" the prize is the voice of radio announcer Carl Kasell on your home answering machine.

7. Let people participate on their schedule, not yours

If you're not constantly offering contests, don't require people to show up at a certain time to participate. Linebrink of Tweet-A-Prize! discovered that simply changing a contest's rules from "Come

back at 9PM to answer the prize question" to "Answer this prize question anytime before 9PM" resulted in a three-fold increase in participation.

8. If you build it, they won't necessarily come

This is a common tenement regarding the Web, but it's especially true with contests. Just posting a contest doesn't cause people to flock. You need to spread the word as much as possible through all relevant social media outlets. Most commonly used social media contest bullhorns are Twitter and Facebook.

9. Give people a reason to want to talk about the contest

They may just want to ask their friends to vote for them, or the contest may simply be funny and they kerning they created something for the contest (e.g. video, image, essay) and they want to show it to their friends.

10. Use a contest to create an audience, or wait to launch a contest when you have an audience

The experts I interviewed, plus the contest examples I've seen provide conflicting advice. If you don't have an audience, it's best to look at your situation and see if you could be successful garnering an audience from zero. You'll need a contest that is either very creative or valuable, and you'll need some people who have an audience that can help you get the word out.

Regardless of which path you choose, you'll still need to "launch with an existing engaged audience to ensure those first entries. People are hesitant to enter when they don't know what they're up against," advised Natalie Aldern from ibeatYou.



11. Monitor entries and content

One of the toughest hurdles people had with contests was simply managing all the entries and the content. If you have a platform that can simplify that for you (e.g. one of the contest experts' services), it will significantly cut down on contest management man hours.

12. Mix it up

Even the best ideas get boring after a while. If you hit a homerun with a contest, don't just repeat it over and over. You'll lose the audience you so quickly built up. "If you really want an idea to last, use it sparingly," said Linebrink. He suggests you throw in some other creative ideas. People may come back just to see what new ideas you come up with.

13. Make judging transparent and fair

Disclose how you're going to determine the winner. Are you going to have judges? If so, who are they? What are their credentials? Or are you going to let the audience decide the winner through public voting. If the latter, then you'll need to disclose voting in process and you'll have to constantly manage people trying to "game" the system. Many people mentioned this was one of the most troublesome aspects of managing a contest powered by social media.

14. Disclose sponsorships

If a contest is being sponsored, disclose it. People know you need to make money, and they respect that. What they don't respect is when you try to take advantage of their trust. If you manage it correctly, people will actually come to love your sponsors because they're the ones making the fun contest possible.

Legal risks to avoid

"Contests can offer many benefits to companies; however in addition to the legal requirements that apply to all types of contests, there is an inherent risk in putting so much power in the hands of consumers," said Gonzalo Mon, an attorney in the advertising law practice group at Kelley Drye & Warren LLP (<http://kelleydrye.com>). Mon has extensive experience with legal issues with regard to promotions, sweepstakes, contests, and user-generated content.

Here are some of Mon's legal tips to consider whenever launching a contest powered by social media.

Promotions laws apply

"Promotions in which consumers are invited to submit entries for the chance to win prizes are subject to a patchwork of laws across every state. These laws may regulate, among other things, whether consumers can be asked to incur any costs to enter, how winners may be selected, and what must be disclosed in ads. Make sure you comply with the relevant laws or you could find yourself on the wrong end of a regulatory investigation or lawsuit."

Companies can get in trouble for what consumers do

"Entries submitted by consumers often contain content that violates a third party's rights or some law. For example, an entry could infringe on copyrights or trademark rights, or contain false claims or defamatory content. In some cases, the company running the contest can get sued over content posted by consumers. Tell people what they can and cannot post and make sure you promptly address problematic content."

15. Don't shoehorn a brand into the contest

If a brand wants to fund a contest and be associated with it, then great. But if a brand demands that it actually be included as a requirement for contest entry and it doesn't fit, then don't push it. For example, don't run the contest, "Write an essay on how Diet Coke will help the rainforest."

16. Don't create endurance contests

"The longest time to"-type of competitions are boring for everyone and they don't make good Internet content to watch.

17. Create long enough deadlines

A contest needs time to build up interest, for people to get the courage to enter, and then to actually create their entries. This is not true for all contests such as ongoing trivia contests or contests where participation only requires signing up (e.g. "Become our Facebook fan" or "Follow us on Twitter").

18. Announce the winners quickly

When the contest is over, that's when interest is the highest. It's also the best time to announce the winner. People will be more willing to enter a future competition if they know they'll be recognized.

Legal risks to avoid (continued)

Public voting can lead to public problems

"Many companies that run contests like to have the public vote for winners. Although this offers various benefits from a marketing perspective, it also creates some legal risks. In some cases, public voting can cause a contest to run afoul of state contest laws. Moreover, entrants may try to find opportunities to artificially inflate their votes. Make sure you pay attention to legal requirements and take steps to deter fraud."

For more, read Gonzalo Mon's article, "Contests with Consumer Generated Content Pose Risks as well as Rewards." <http://bit.ly/NROvU>

19. Capture information from interested parties

The goal of a social media-enabled contest is to keep the conversation going after the contest. That requires you to capture the user. Currently, the most common ways of required registration are through a Facebook fan page or following a company profile on Twitter.

20. Create repeat customers

A contest is often a great excuse to introduce yourself to your audience. But that's all it is, an introduction. Since you're capturing your audience through social media tools like Facebook and Twitter, continue the conversation. Talk to them even on issues that have nothing to do with the contest, and make sure you're very responsive to questions. If you maintain conversation flow and interest, you'll achieve what every business wants, repeat customers.



David Spark

About David Spark

David Spark is the founder of Spark Media Solutions (<http://sparkmediasolutions.com>), specialists in building industry voice through storytelling and social media. For more than fourteen years, Spark has worked as a journalist reporting on the tech industry in print, radio, TV, and online. His articles and advice have appeared in more than 25 publications and media outlets including eWEEK, Wired News, PC Computing, PC World, TechTV, and Smart Computing. In addition, Spark spent ten years in advertising and corporate entertainment as a new media director and marketing creative. While not covering the tech beat or managing ad campaigns, Spark squandered more than a dozen years working as a standup comedian and comedy writer for The Second City in Chicago. Currently, Spark is a regular contributor for John C. Dvorak's Cranky Geeks, KQED's "This Week in Northern California," Mashable, Socialmedia.biz, ABC Radio, and hosts his own podcast "Be the Voice." David Spark lives in San Francisco, a city he loves so much he's become a local historian offering walking tours to locals and tourists. For more, read Spark's blog "Spark Minute" (<http://sparkminute.com>).

About Spark Media Solutions

Spark Media Solutions offers services in the creation and management of editorial, production, distribution, and social media to build industry voice. Spark Media Solutions works in conjunction with public relations, marketing, and branding efforts to turn any business into a media network with its own editorial and industry conversational voice. Our plan of attack includes assessment of your audience, editorial development, efficient production, and expanding distribution channels. Spark Media Solutions is based in San Francisco. (<http://sparkmediasolutions.com>)