

Is your Facebook contest illegal?

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Social Media Club Great Lakes Bay and the Midland Daily News are co-hosting the !gnite conference from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Thursday, Sept. 22, at the H Hotel in downtown Midland. This story was written for a special section on the conference in Sunday's Daily News.

Hosting a contest on Facebook is a powerful way to gain followers, build excitement and increase fan engagement. However, Facebook's promotion guidelines are strict and govern much of what can and cannot be done on the platform.

There are numerous page administrators of companies -- ranging from small businesses to major brands -- that violate Facebook's guidelines without knowing it. These page administrators are taking the risk that if a promotion is in violation of any policies, it is grounds for Facebook to remove any materials related to the promotion or disable the page, application or account. It is very important to take these guidelines seriously.

To determine if a contest falls within Facebook's rules, visit www.facebook.com/promotions_guidelines.php for the legal terms. It can be confusing so this article will explain in plain English what it means.

What exactly defines a contest?

A contest can be considered a competition, sweepstakes or other similar offering that is used for promotional purposes.

According to Facebook, "A 'competition' or 'contest' is a promotion that includes a prize and a winner determined on the basis of skill (i.e., through judging based on specific criteria). A 'sweepstakes' is a promotion that includes a prize and a winner selected on the basis of chance."

Therefore, any contest where a winner is selected would fall into Facebook's terms of a contest.

What is the best way to run a contest on Facebook?

The Facebook promotion guidelines state that a third-party app must be used to conduct a contest. Check out apps such as Woobox, Wildfire, North Social, Freepromos and Offerpop to get started.

The third party app must also be used on a separate "canvas page" on Facebook, which is called a link (was formerly called a tab).

What types of contests can be run on Facebook?

As long as Facebook's guidelines are followed, a page administrator can come up with any crazy, creative contest. However, here are some tactics to stay away from:

1. Selecting a random fan or requiring a fan to like the page to win. Facebook's functions cannot be used to collect entries or gain "Likes". However, you CAN restrict a contest to only fans who like the page.
2. Requiring contestants to post photos on a wall, upload a photo or post a status update. Fans cannot upload photos or content directly to Facebook. Any photos or content that are required for entry to win a contest must be done through a third-party app.
3. Contact the fan who won via Facebook's e-mail, chat or posting on a wall. Again, Facebook's functions cannot be used for anything related to the contest. The winner must be notified through the third-party app, or contact them by another e-mail account or phone.

Make sure to check the promotion guidelines before beginning a new contest. Facebook has the right to modify its guidelines at any time without notice so stay up-to-date.