



Part Three: Online Contests

With online contests, walk a fine line

[ivor tossell](#)

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Social media are a fickle thing. When people are trying to win things, social media are fickle still.

Running a contest over social media can be a good way to get the word out about what a small business does, and what it has to offer. But it also lays traps for businesses and users alike.

To keep things from going sour, a fine line needs to be walked.

All things in moderation

One of the first decisions a business will need to make in running a contest is how entries should be moderated.

Should those submitted to a contest site be posted automatically? Should they be fed into a queue to be first vetted by a moderator, to make sure there's nothing untoward hiding in there? Or is a hybrid option the best?

Different businesses will have different priorities. Larger businesses tend to be very brand-conscious, which leads to a desire to filter materials associated with their name.

This can lead to stifling delays. Ben Pickering, chief executive officer of [Strutta](#), a Vancouver-based Web service that helps businesses run contests, cites a photo contest for [Johnson & Johnson](#), which netted 25,000 entries, tying up a moderator around-the-clock to approve them. Users started to wonder where their submissions had gone.

“People get impatient,” he says. “There’s something to be said for getting it up as soon as possible.”

Smaller operations are typically less hesitant and more eager to generate buzz. The more user-generated material a contest can show for itself, the more vital it will seem, and the more eyeballs it will attract.

What’s more, users are motivated and gratified by the promise of seeing their work posted live.

The downside, of course, is that the Internet is an unpredictable place.

The potential for prank entries always exists, as does the existence of dissatisfied customers and the occasional rogue weirdo.

Rather than throwing the gates wide open with no control, the better way is to adopt a flagging system that relies on the vigilant eyes of other users to point out troublesome entries.

People who have put effort into a legitimate contest entry have a stake in pointing out fraudulent entries, so they can usually be counted on to weed out the trouble-makers.

The stuffing of online ballot-boxes is another pitfall to watch out for, and is an argument in favour of going with a full-service contest provider.

Given an incentive to solicit votes, users can pull out all the stops, legitimate and not. Contest-management systems, like some online-polling systems, will keep an eye open for duplicate votes and dubious voting patterns.

Be social – but not too social

Running contests on social networks can generate buzz by encouraging entrants to share the fact that they’ve entered, pass their contest entries around (if, say, they’re photos, stories, or videos), and rope in friends to vote for them.

However, the temptation to harness users’ enthusiasm to send a contest viral can lead marketers down a dangerous path: Too much virality can actually poison the waters, and leave a brand with a black eye.

For instance, one form of contest that was briefly in vogue – but still persists – uses Twitter as a vector, asking users to tweet out a particular promotional message, or a variation on one. The contest-runner then searches out contest entrants, and makes an award by random or by jury.

It sounds like a great way to generate publicity – every contest entry doubles as a promotional message.

But this approach does a disservice to both entrants and their social-network contacts.

Users enter contests to win products, not to sell them. Linking a contest entry with a promotional message can be seen an inauthentic endorsement – the very opposite of what makes social-media word-of-mouth valuable.

It can be detrimental to a user to be seen as an opportunistic skill, rather than an enthusiastic fan of a product.

Similarly, such messages are mostly annoyances for that user's social-network friends. A genuine product recommendation is a useful thing to read, but an attempt to win a product is just noise, since it's impossible to tell if it's a real recommendation or merely a play to win free products.

The same goes for any social-media contest that asks users to create content touting a product or service. Social media contests, like all marketing, needs to give something back to its audience.

If your contest asks entrants to generate content that's interesting, funny, inspiring or worthwhile for the general public to see – whether a photo that's worth sharing with the world or a creative item that could give readers pause to think – then it will genuinely be worth sharing between users.

If it merely asks entrants to repeat a pitch, it can drag your business into the legions of social media annoyances.

Be ready to respond

“As soon as you open up the social marketing door, if one person doesn't like something you did, it could go viral,” says Randy Mitson, who runs the marketing for [Algonquin Outfitters](#), an Ontario chain of outdoors suppliers and tour operators.

Once, a user who'd received a defective product took his complaint public, describing it as a “garbage product” on a contest's [Facebook](#) page, and threatened to spoil the whole affair.

Mr. Mitson responded to the complaint immediately, both in public and in private, placating the user and offering a replacement before the problem got out of hand.

The lesson, he says, is that a solid customer-service operation needs to underlie any contest attempt. Problems will crop up, and they'll need to be dispatched immediately.

And if a business is struggling on the customer-service front, a contest might not be the best option anyway.

“You can't possibly expect that giving stuff away in a contest is going to solve those problems,” he says. “It's going to make them worse.”

The series continues next Monday. Other stories can be found on the [Web Strategy](#) section of the [Report on Small Business](#) website.

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