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How to unlock the power of UGC: The ultimate guide

Your comprehensive introduction to the who, what, why, and how of successful user-generated content

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In today's ever-evolving marketing landscape, staying ahead of the content demands is challenging. At the same time, research repeatedly stresses one crucial thing people seek as they navigate the customer journey: **the importance of authentic content**.

Authenticity allows brands to connect with their customers on a deeper level. At Emplifi, we believe that customer stories, brought to life through **user-generated content (UGC)**, hold the key for brands to deliver this authentic content at scale.

Smartphones have empowered anyone to let their creativity flourish. Creating high-quality content and sharing it on social can be done in seconds. By tapping into this, you can communicate your brand's story in a more authentic and genuine way — from your customers' perspective.

It has become clear that a robust UGC strategy has become a way for brands to uniquely stand out from their competitors. As importantly, to build trust with your audience in the process. It's time to embrace UGC's power to captivate your target audiences, foster authenticity, and drive success in your marketing and commerce campaigns.

Zarnaz Arlia
Chief Marketing Officer, Emplifi

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Introduction

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As a marketer, the content you share on behalf of your brand can help you achieve important goals, like building brand awareness (marketing campaigns) and driving conversions (sales campaigns).

You can, and should, spread the word about your brand — but it's your customers who are your best marketing asset.

What sounds "sales-y" coming from your brand can sound more authentic when it comes from real-life customers sharing feedback without any prompt or compensation.

Brands of all sizes across various industries have started embracing user-generated content (UGC) as a strategic part of their campaigns and content needs. From social media to product page displays, featuring UGC across your top marketing channels amplifies the organic word-of-mouth with which your passionate fans are already engaging.

Created in partnership with HubSpot, this guide is for anyone looking to start using UGC as part their marketing mix, or just looking for ways to amp up their efforts.

We will dive into:

- **Why your brand needs to leverage UGC, beyond just social media**
- **How to design a UGC strategy and select the best UGC platform**
- **Best practices as you start implementing your UGC strategy**

User-generated content (UGC)

Any form of content including blogs, social media posts, reviews, videos, and beyond **created by users instead of a brand or design studio.**

What you will find in this guide

What is user-generated content (UGC)?

UGC is any form of content — like blogs, social media posts, reviews, videos, and beyond — **created by users instead of a brand or design studio**. UGC around brands and products is often shared on social media — an increasingly vital place to discover new products — making this channel exceptionally valuable for brands looking to source authentic content from their community.

People are constantly sharing their experiences and opinions about brands, whether promoting them to friends and family, leaving a review on the brand's website, or taking their feedback to social media.

While UGC is often created organically by users, it's also possible to encourage its creation. For example, brands regularly inspire their followers to share their experiences on social media with posts mentioning the brand's handle or a specific hashtag. Brands can also solicit UGC directly from customers by asking for photos or reviews after buying.

We'll explore some of these methods later in this guide, plus an example of how one brand is successfully sourcing and leveraging UGC as part of their marketing mix.

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45%

of U.S. consumers get inspired for new products via their friends or acquaintances.

Stats you need to know

UGC doesn't just get consumers more excited about making a purchase — it often convinces them to do so. Here are some key figures around conversions and average order value (AOV) based on Emplifi's benchmark data looking at brands leveraging UGC.

Automotive
1.3x increase in AOV
2.8x increase in conversions

Beauty & Cosmetics
100% increase in AOV
2.6x increase in conversions

Fashion & Apparel
1.3x increase in AOV
2x increase in conversions

Food & Beverage
1.2x increase in AOV
90% increase in conversions

Home & Décor
1.6x increase in AOV
1.5x increase in conversions

Retail
1.4x increase in AOV
1.6x increase in conversions

Sporting & Outdoor Equipment
97% increase in AOV
100% increase in conversions

Travel & Hospitality
100% increase in AOV
1.4x increase in conversions

Source: Emplifi Benchmark data, 2022.

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Why you need to include UGC in your marketing mix

1. UGC promotes transparency and authenticity

Two things that are hugely important to today's consumers. When shoppers see people who are like them naturally endorsing a brand or product, they're more confident to make the same purchase. A study from Edelman found that advertising has only half the impact of earned media — this suggests that people prefer to hear directly from technical experts or people like themselves.

How much impact does brand authenticity have on consumers' buying decisions?

See the infographic

2. UGC helps contextualize your products

Shoppers want to see products in action, whether it's yoga apparel on a real person out in the world or ingredients from a food brand used to create a delicious plate. In any industry, this context allows prospective buyers to imagine owning and using your product in their daily lives.

This can take on many forms. Paint and wallpaper brand Farrow & Ball shares UGC from real customers in an on-site, shoppable UGC gallery to show site visitors how their products cater to different styles and rooms when looking to transform their homes. Read the full story

UGC helps prospective buyers imagine themselves owning your products and using it in their daily lives.

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3. Leveraging UGC shows that your brand cares

Interacting with UGC shows customers that you truly value them as a part of your online community, and your dedication to supporting them. You're also showing that you actually listen to them, and make improvements based on their feedback.

It also helps show that you celebrate your shared values. For example, consumers today expect diversity in marketing, and want to see people in ads who represent the broad spectrum that exists in the real world. Brands using UGC to embrace diversity in body types, races, genders, and sexual orientations can see an improvement in how consumers perceive them.

4. UGC helps promote trust in your brand

In an age where any brand can create a social media ad or run a commercial on a streaming service, people tend to trust their peers over brands themselves. When a consumer can easily access UGC from people like them, they're more likely to trust your product's quality — and your brand in general.

NAVY Hair Care is one eCommerce brand that not only showcases a high volume of reviews from real buyers, but also publishes visual UGC on product pages for site visitors to peruse. This helps them deliver a more genuine experience than relying solely on promotional content from the Marketing department. Read the full story

Less than **50%** of US consumers think ads are somewhat or very trustworthy — with only **19%** feeling this way about ads on social media.

Source: Statista, "Trust in advertising according to consumers in the United States as of January 2021, by medium", March 2021.

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5. UGC = cost-effective, scaleable content

It takes time to create quality content in-house. Plus, marketing teams often have to outsource content creation to meet demand, which can be expensive and fall behind in priority when budgets are tight.

Leveraging UGC can reduce costs and resources needed on your team's end, giving you more time to focus on strategizing and measuring success. This comes with the added bonus of building an engaged community because it showcases your customers and establishes a relationship with them. Plus, identifying a few fans who produce quality content related to your brand paves the way for partnerships at scale.

In the next section, we'll look at the most common types of UGC that you can leverage in your marketing mix, and what you need to know as you plan your strategy.

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The 4 types of UGC and how to use them

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The UGC your brand is interested in using comes in multiple forms. Maybe it's a TikTok video where a customer excitedly talks about a new eyeliner you released recently. Or a picture on Instagram of them smiling in the mirror before going out in one of your dresses. It could be an X post gushing about their recent experience at one of your stores, or maybe a review that praises your new line of athletic shoes.

Each one can be quite effective UGC content for various brands, but each also comes with its own strengths and challenges for anyone choosing to put it to use. Let's look at the four main UGC types your brand should consider using.

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1. Video

Advantages

- **Engagement:** Consumers engage heavily with video, giving it tremendous reach.
- **Dynamism:** Hearing and seeing the user's excitement is impactful.
- **Versatility:** Video clips are versatile for sharing across many social platforms.
- **Shoppability:** Video content can be directly shoppable, helping it hit the bottom line.

Challenges

- **Quality:** The video quality may or may not be up to your brand standards for a variety of reasons.
- **Editing:** In many cases, it'll be necessary to edit the video, adding time to the process.

Most effective for

Brands that create products that really shine when brought to life with an enthusiastic customer, like Fashion, Beauty, and Consumer Electronics.

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The power of video in driving social media engagement

Video — in its many forms — has an undeniable impact across all the major social media channels.

Learn more in this in-depth report that dives into Emplifi's exclusive data, and see how brands are adapting to changing consumer behavior and preferences.

Download

Unleashing the power of video:
Key trends driving social media engagement in 2023

Reels, live video, and GIFs — a closer look at the impact of video

2. Images

Advantages

- **Shoppability:** Shoppable images work great for brands whose products benefit from still images.

- **Simplicity:** It's super easy for anyone these days to snap a pic of your product to share on social.

- **Volume:** If your brand has a large following, there will be no shortage of images out there on social.

Challenges

- **Volume:** Having so many images out there can also make it challenging to sort through it all.

- **Simplicity:** Because it's so simple to produce, lots of it isn't going to meet your brand standards.

Most effective for

Brands that are visual-heavy, like Fashion and Beauty, can benefit here as they do with video, but images can work especially well for more inert products that don't need as much of a human element to show off.

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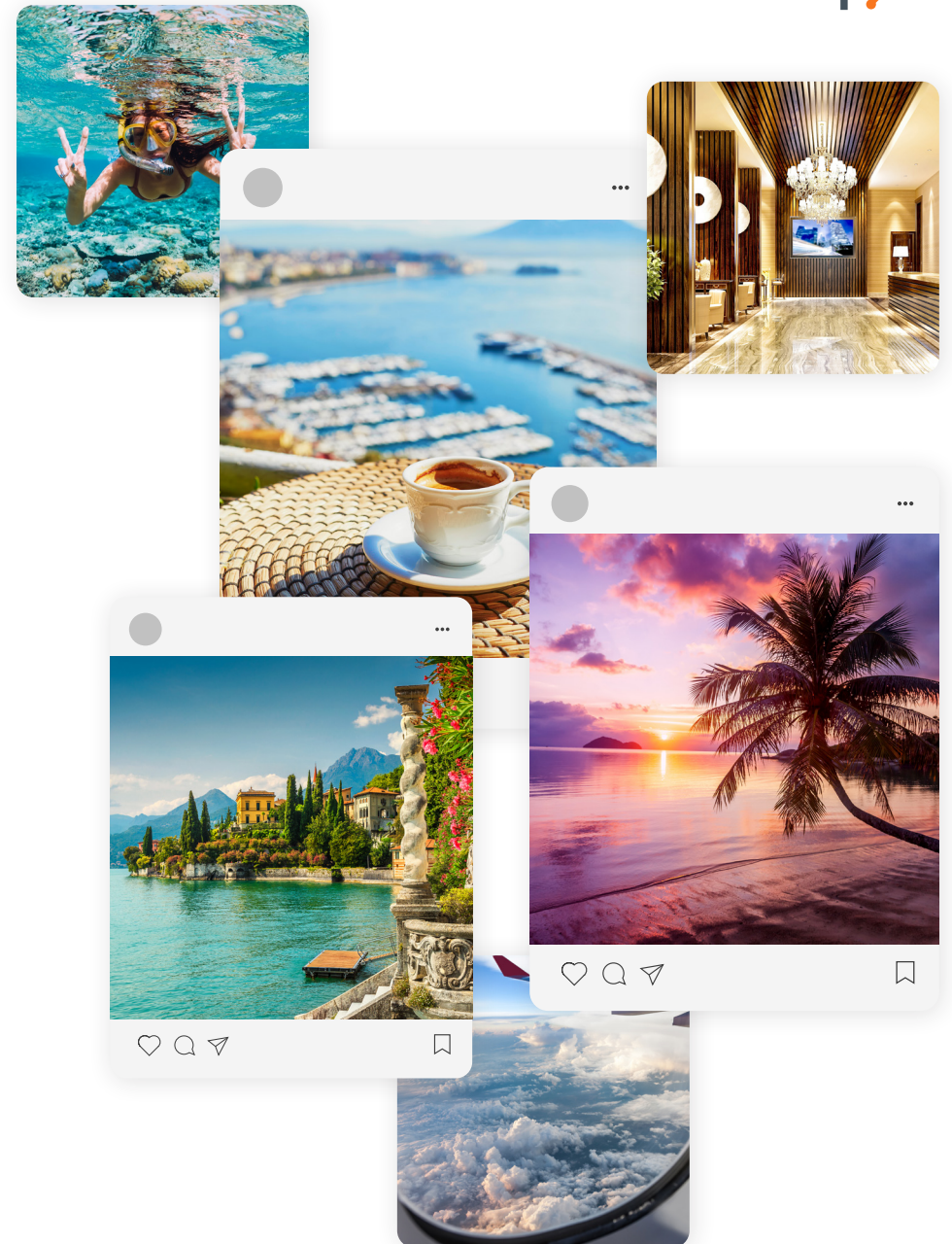
3. Text Posts

Advantages

- **Universality:** There's nothing easier than typing a few words to express enthusiasm for a product.
- **Tagging:** Typically, it's easy for consumers to tag you.

Challenges

- **Non-visual:** For brands that thrive on showing off their look, pure text isn't likely to hit in the same way.
- **Grammar:** People aren't always going to write with perfect grammar, and you have to watch out for that.
- **Anonymity:** This can be a strength on social, but it can hurt the credibility of UGC.

Most effective for

Brands that don't rely on visuals so much for their appeal, but instead focus on people saying good things about them. This could include restaurant chains, food products, and some electronics.

4. Customer ratings and reviews

Advantages

- **Breadth:** Customers who take the time to write reviews often go into a lot of great detail.
- **Importance:** When consumers are thinking about making a purchase, reviews are often essential.
- **Verification:** Reviews often give you the chance to label them a "Verified purchase," adding credibility.

Challenges

- **Volume:** Not only will you get a lot of reviews, but they'll be on lots of different sites for you to find.
- **Anonymity:** Reviews can be anonymous, which leads to candor but doesn't help a brand with credibility.

Most effective for

Brands that offer products that consumers who may need additional help to differentiate and evaluate — such as CPG or insurance — or that they may find difficult to understand.

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Why marketers love UGC

In the UGC spirit of giving external voices a chance to say it better than you do, here's what some marketers and thought leaders have to say about the value of UGC:

8:24

"When people share their experiences with a product or service, they are seen as more credible than the brand itself.

This is especially true in today's world, where consumers are more skeptical of traditional advertising and prefer to make purchasing decisions based on the experiences of others."

Robert Katai @katairobi

"UGC is a gold mine for brands.

It shows the product from the consumer's point of view, which is a rare perspective to get."

DonYé Taylor @donyetaylor

"UGC truly allows brands to publish high-quality, socially relevant content without overhauling their whole marketing team.

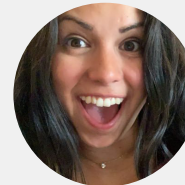It brings all the benefits of content without the stress of content creation!"

Nicole Tabak @nicoletabak

"When brands utilize UGC in their marketing, it creates a sense of trust between the brand and its customers.

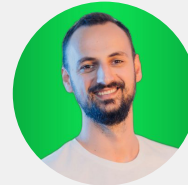And as we know, most people value genuine word of mouth."

Codi Dantu-Johnson @Codishaa

"The great thing about UGC is that it's the closest we can get to true subconscious communication.

The human brain has developed to understand body language and facial expression quicker than written or even verbal language UGC fills that gap."

Sarah Levinger @SarahLevinger

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UGC: The confidence boost your audience needs to buy

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In today's digitally-driven world, brands have numerous opportunities to engage with their audiences. However, capturing their attention and convincing them to make a purchase can be a challenging task. This is where UGC comes into play.

Brands can derive value from UGC in various ways, such as improving email marketing engagement and conversion rates, adding credibility to paid advertising campaigns, enhancing social content for more reach, and generating brand advocacy through word-of-mouth marketing.

By incorporating UGC into their marketing strategies, brands can not only derive value in terms of improved engagement and credibility but also address consumer concerns and build trust. Building trust is crucial for brands to establish strong relationships with their customers.

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Consumer concerns in buying online

Online shopping has revolutionized the buyer experience, providing convenience and accessibility. However, it has also led to safety concerns from consumers, according to our survey of over 500 U.S. employees of businesses that sell on social media.

For instance, just 47% of social media users feel comfortable buying through social apps, with the main concern being that companies aren't legitimate. Brands often struggle to build trust in the highly competitive and sometimes scam-filled online shopping environment. These concerns can significantly hinder the buying process, making it crucial for brands to address them effectively.

47% of social media users feel comfortable buying through social apps, with the main concern that companies aren't legitimate.

Source: 2023 data compiled by HubSpot

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The power of UGC in easing customer concerns

UGC serves as a powerful tool in alleviating consumer concerns and building trust. By incorporating real customer experiences and opinions, UGC creates an authentic representation of the brand to help establish trust between buyers and sellers.

For instance, in our survey, one small business seller shared that the biggest benefit of social media is the ability to "build brand awareness with real-life people giving their own personal experiences."

Leveraging UGC not only addresses consumer concerns but also has a significant impact on brand awareness and sales. Through our survey, 87% of businesses reported increased sales through the use of UGC, and 92% said it increases brand awareness.

Additionally, consumers find UGC 9.8x more impactful than influencer content. By harnessing the power of UGC, brands can effectively boost brand awareness and ultimately drive sales.

Building a strong community for UGC mining

To fully capitalize on the potential of UGC, brands need to build a strong community. Building a successful community has multiple benefits, such as allowing you to:

- Tap into customer needs and preferences, gaining valuable insights and feedback.
- Provide support for your audience, fans, and customers more easily.
- Learn about your customers' wants and expectations regarding products, services, support, and more.
- Build strong relationships directly with customers and prospects.
- Provide additional value to the customer.

Creating a space for customers to engage with each other and directly with the brand also opens the door for users to share their own content and experiences. This content, with the members' consent, can be shared as UGC across brand channels — in fact, according to our research, three out of four businesses repost UGC.

To build a strong community, consider various strategies, such as creating engaging content, encouraging user participation, rewarding contributions, and fostering a sense of belonging. Learn more in our step-by-step guide to launching a successful online community.

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Boost confidence: Embrace UGC for brand success

In an increasingly digital marketplace, consumer confidence is vital to a brand's success. UGC proves to be a powerful strategy for boosting audience confidence, addressing consumer concerns, and building trust in the buying process.

By incorporating UGC into their marketing efforts, brands can enhance brand awareness, drive sales, and ultimately thrive in a highly competitive landscape. So, embrace UGC and unlock its potential to create a loyal and engaged customer base.

UGC stats to know

- **87% of businesses** reported increased sales through the use of UGC

- **92% of businesses** said UGC was effective in promoting brand awareness

- Consumers find UGC **9.8x more effective** than influencer content.

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How to launch a successful UGC campaign

How to launch a successful UGC campaign

Need help finding an initial pool of UGC related to your brand, or trying to figure out where to start?

Don't stress — there are quite a few ways to nudge your followers in the right direction and discover existing social content related to your brand that you may not be aware of.

UGC campaigns are designed purely to increase your pool of content to use later as marketing material, and they have the added benefit of engaging your online community authentically.

Emplifi has found that **77% of people are willing to grant permission for brands to use their content**, meaning there's a good chance you'll be able to repurpose a high volume of customer content across your marketing channels.

Let's look at how you can level up your UGC campaigns to collect high-quality content, as well as some best practices you'll want to keep in mind as you move forward.

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Always include these in your UGC campaigns

☑ A branded hashtag

Whether you use a dedicated hashtag or just use your company name for this, you'll want to promote these hashtags everywhere. Attach them to all your social posts, post them on your site near all social content, and place them prominently on your social channels.

☑ Clear calls-to-action (CTAs)

Use these when encouraging users to share their own content, while also reminding them to include your branded hashtag. Specificity can be helpful here since plenty of users actually like to know what types of content you'd like to receive.

How to launch a successful UGC campaign

Use a UGC platform

UGC platforms allow your brand to automatically pull in content from social channels (via branded hashtags, mentions, and more) as well as via direct uploads to your website. Your team can then acquire permission from users and publish their content to your website, social media, landing pages, and other destinations. These tech solutions also offer in-platform analytics that help your team monitor UGC campaign success.

Once you have a system like this in place to source and publish UGC, you'll be able to share more customer content on more channels. This creates a flywheel effect; as fans see your brand engaging with and posting other users' UGC, they'll be more inclined to share their own content with you, too.

UGC isn't made for just one channel, so make sure you're sharing your new unlimited creative far and wide.

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What to look for in a UGC platform

☑ **Flexible collection**

Collect UGC (including videos) from your customers via various social media channels like Instagram, TikTok, and Pinterest.

☑ **Customizable widgets**

Set widgets that match your brand's style live on your website, and give visitors the option to filter UGC by product-specific parameters.

☑ **Content scheduling**

Schedule UGC to post on your brand's social profiles according to your content calendar, and update live widgets on your website instantly.

☑ **Campaign management**

Create, launch, and track specific campaigns with branded hashtags to encourage more UGC collection.

☑ **One-step permissioning**

Automatically ask for and collect permissioned content with one click.

☑ **Analytics**

Track which pieces of content and which users show the highest ROI, and map changes in metrics like conversion directly to specific pieces of UGC.

**How to launch a successful
UGC campaign**

Run a social media contest

Offering a prize like a discount code, free sample, or access to exclusive brand news is one cost-effective way to incentivize users to participate in your contests by sharing UGC. Sometimes, even a feature on the brand social account is enough, as people like to feel heard and appreciated by the companies they like.

Start by setting a goal, like increasing web traffic or growing your brand's online audience. Once you've determined your goals, determine the objectives you can measure with metrics like:

- Number of submissions

- Follower growth

- Engagement rate

Outline contest rules on your website, and share your contest across social media, emails, and website displays. A UGC platform can help you monitor submissions without feeling overwhelmed.

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UGC success story

JONES
SODA CO.®

Jones Soda runs an ongoing label contest on their website and offers participants the chance to have their photo used on one of the brand's physical soda bottle labels.

This is a brand-specific and unique way to create buzz without spending excessively while driving significant boosts in engagement and average time spent on their site.

Read the full story
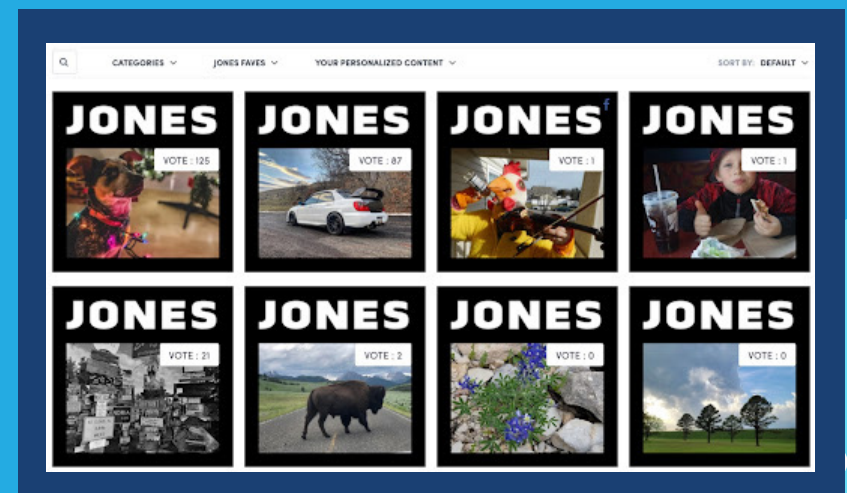
How to launch a successful UGC campaign
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Embrace influencer marketing

Collaborating with influencers and content creators can help you generate UGC and spread your brand online easily and quickly. If an influencer you like publicly shares their support for a brand — and most importantly, they can do so while maintaining authenticity and without sounding forced or inorganic — people can be more likely to buy from that brand, while also building trust and authority. At the same time, influencers can encourage other users to post similar content or stories or participate in a specific campaign.

Create an influencer brief so the content creator will know all the details of your campaign and can work with you to design a mutually beneficial partnership plan. Build a centralized destination for communication with them, and ask them to help create and then share the content your company needs. The result will be better and deeper connections with your most loyal customers, and it'll also grow your content library.

UGC is a great option if you want to build brand awareness and grow your social media following. It's an influential, accessible, and simple tool every marketer should use. As long as your campaigns are authentic, promote something people care about, and are easy to participate in, it will be easy to inspire UGC.

Exclusive insights

Gain the edge with your influencer marketing strategy this year and beyond. **Download "The State of Influencer Marketing"** today to get a full understanding of where the market is and where it's headed.

Download

The state of influencer marketing
2023

The do's and don'ts of UGC management

Like any other form of marketing, UGC campaigns have to be executed strategically. Focus on long-term results; the best community-driven brands seek to become a valuable addition and trusted resource in their customers' lives, and that won't happen overnight.

From collection to publishing, here's how you can ensure you're getting the most value from your UGC campaigns.

DO: Plan before sharing UGC

Does it fit your overall brand message, align with a specific campaign, or blend well with your brand aesthetic and style?
From social media to emails and on-site inspiration galleries, treat UGC like you would any other marketing content.

DO: Ask permission

Even if you're just resharing a customer photo on social media, crediting the original poster is not enough. It's always important to secure proper consent, even if you were tagged by a public account. Because the rules on copyright in social media can get blurry and confusing, it's always better to be cautious. Most UGC platforms allow brands to streamline the permission request process with the click of a button.

DO: Engage and encourage interaction

Ask, and you shall receive! For example, use features like "Share Yours" and Question stickers on Instagram Stories to your advantage. Share content that stimulates discussion about your brand or product, and engage with your community's original posts. This will not only get you free and awesome content but also a chance for some honest insight.

DON'T: Take shortcuts

Before posting on any official company channel, don't forget to verify the source. Reposting an image can seem harmless but, in the age of social media where catfishing and trolling are rampant, there's no harm in playing it safe. UGC platforms can help you ensure (at scale) each content piece is original and authorized.

DON'T: Silo content to one channel

Most UGC comes from social media, but that doesn't mean it has to stay there. UGC is versatile — be sure to also pop it into your other marketing channels such as email, ads, in-store displays and, for eCommerce brands, everywhere on your site.

DON'T: Limit yourself to large-scale influencers

Macro-influencers may receive more likes than your average customer, but don't overlook everyday fans. Featuring stories from people your customers can relate to can also encourage more engagement and build a stronger connection with your customers. For example, micro-influencers may already be fans of your brand, and tend to see much higher levels of sustained engagement because of their niche, targeted, and loyal followings.

DO: Define and measure KPIs

Map specific content creators and social posts to revenue to help your team decide which channels and post types are most valuable across the board. Defining and monitoring metrics like this can also help your team convey the value of UGC to company leadership.

It's time to unlock the power of UGC

Building a community is one of the biggest marketing trends of the past few years, and it's not about to slow down. More and more, consumers are choosing brands that reflect their personal identity and the community they're part of. If you can develop a strong community of customers, you'll have a huge group of brand advocates that will improve the brand's bottom line, along with its access to authentic content for marketing campaigns.

Branded content will likely always have a place in eCommerce marketing, but UGC provides another way to authentically showcase your products through the eyes of passionate customers. Now's the time to move beyond the usual marketing. Leverage technology and social media, and give power to people. Let them tell their peers about their experiences with your brand, and use the branded content you create to support that UGC.

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