USER-GENERATED CONTENT: What, Why, and How to Do It Right
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In a society where audiences are increasingly skeptical of traditional advertising, user-generated content is a proven way to help establish and grow your brand and even increase conversions.

This marketing technique takes word of mouth and spreads it across all platforms, from websites to social media to catalog pages. It’s the equivalent of a personal referral, educating and influencing consumers far and wide in both brick-and-mortar and ecommerce businesses.

UGC is so important that we created this no-holds-barred guide on how this powerful tool can be leveraged to increase your visibility, engender trust, and increase sales.
What Is User-Generated Content?

Let’s face it, people don’t trust advertising nearly as much as they used to. Plus, ads can cost an arm and a leg, especially if deployed ineffectively. Not to mention, 30% of your audience is taking action to block ads completely.

While advertising and content creation still represent cornerstones of marketing, smart brands have found that they can use the content that their customers are already creating to support their marketing.

User-generated content is, essentially, any kind of content surrounding your brand that is generated by a consumer. In this guide we’re going to explain exactly how to source that content and use it to grow your brand most effectively.

Recently, leveraging content created by consumers has become a new avenue with which businesses can achieve the same goal as ads or content creation without as heavy an investment. Furthermore, it does so in a way that is both authentic and relatable, which is why UGC is so effective. Not to mention it typically comes free of charge in the form of reviews, testimonials, photos, videos, tweets, Facebook posts, etc.

Essentially it is social proof that you can curate from existing content on the web and social media platforms, or that you can solicit from those that have purchased your products or used your services.

Types of User-Generated Content

Reviews: People love to provide their opinion and there are plenty of platforms to do this. The most successful online retailers offer a section for reviews (Amazon is especially good at this), but you’ll often see people tweeting about the new amazing airline they just flew or posting on Facebook about the week they spent researching and trying out bikes for their commute, with full blown details on each one, including their final purchase.

Photos/Videos: Consumers post pictures of their new purchases all the time on social media, often with a quick tagline, a few words of praise, or a hashtag. It might be the newest technology device on Facebook, an item of clothing on Instagram, or a tweet on the best coffee in town. There’s also videos that show a product in action, as well as how-to and review videos.

Blog Posts: Bloggers are great educators, and whether it is fashion, tech, or food blogger, they spend an inordinate amount of time entrenched in their chosen subject. In addition to edifying their following, they will often test out new products or services and write a review. While some brands pay to have their items reviewed, most people can tell the difference between a sponsored blog post and a genuine review. These reviews are what you’re after—an honest critique that their followers trust.
Social media comments, posts and Likes: Consumers tend to be excited about new purchases or experiences, some like to brag, others like to educate. It can encompass all platforms: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, LinkedIn, Reddit, Google+, etc.

**Forums:** Forums are an old-school way of sharing knowledge that began in the early days of the internet but continue to be popular today with consumers of all ages. They provide help in the form of how-to tips, user guides, workarounds, as well as recommendations and reviews. It’s easy to pull quotes, pictures, videos, and other content from forums, so long as you receive permission first.

The list above is just a sampling of the ways your customers can generate content for your brand. For more ideas about the various uses of UGC, be sure to take a look at this helpful guide.
Why You Can’t Afford to Ignore User-Generated Content

As you might imagine, user-generated content can be a powerful influencer. Its beauty lies in the fact that it can be used on virtually any marketing channel, with a minimum of effort and cost. For example, Rivet Works user Austin Canoe and Kayak uses it to fuel creative and engaging blog content production.

What’s more important is that it’s something consumers are now demanding. For example, in our own consumer insights survey, 71% of people across a variety of demographics said they wanted to see more social proof from the brands they purchase from. This demand is truly why brands need UGC.

This content marketing strategy is being used by heavy hitters in the corporate world as well as small start-ups and boutique retailers. It works equally well for both large and small companies, brands/products and services, and does so without requiring a huge budget.

User-generated content is the equivalent of a personal referral, vouching for a product or service without being paid for it. This type of content engenders trust with potential customers, increases your visibility, shows brand loyalty, and increases sales.

User-generated content is especially important when targeting younger generations who rely heavily on feedback when considering purchasing from a brand.

One study found that 84% of Millennials reported that UGC has at least some influence on what they buy, and 86% believe that UGC is generally a good indicator of the quality of a brand, service, or product.

They trust UGC 3x more than info on a company website or news articles on the company, and 8x more than traditional advertising.

Those are some big numbers.

While personal content on social media isn’t necessarily intended to be a marketing vehicle when posted, it certainly can be turned into one.

Why User-Generated Content Works

Real life experiences can make for some very powerful marketing. Consumers naturally prefer honest content from real people, even those that they don’t know personally.

By its very nature, user-generated content is trustworthy. You cannot buy that level of trust; it must be earned. And those that read the reviews, see the pictures, watch the videos, and see the “Likes” climb on sites like Facebook are more inclined to believe this peer feedback over advertising and other sources of information (websites, news articles, etc.) It’s the credibility factor at work. In fact, according to our consumer insights survey 53% of consumers say they are more likely to purchase from a store that features UGC.
By embracing the customers who provide this information, reposting their reviews, showcasing a thank-you note, highlighting their images and videos for all to see, you are further stimulating engagement. You’re reinforcing the public’s perception of your brand/product or service. Not to mention that much of the content is inspiring and educational, touching people on a level beyond that of consumerism.

Consumers literally become brand advocates, helping to connect your brand with others like them, building a community that contributes to your bottom line.

6 Important Benefits of User-Generated Content

There are a number of benefits to user-generated content beyond the obvious bottom line sales numbers. Let’s take a look:

Encourages more engagement: UGC entices action from those consuming it. Whether it’s looking at your Facebook page or checking out your website, user-generated content stimulates its readers to do more, find out more, and even want more.

Builds trust with consumers: While companies that have been in business for decades have naturally developed consumer trust over time, those that are newer, have lost trust, or need to ramp up trust can turn to UGC. Establishing credibility through the words of consumers repeatedly singing your praises has value beyond anything you can buy or manufacture yourself. The truth lies in the authenticity of the pictures, the smiles, and the excitement that user-generated content brings to the world. You can’t manufacture that on your own.

Provides SEO value: User-generated content is free qualitative content. Qualitative content affects your SEO ranking, so typically the more you have, the better your rankings. For more on how to improve ranking with UGC, don’t miss this guide.

Reassures purchase decisions: If a consumer is on the fence about a product, they’re going to do some research to make sure it’s the right decision. From Amazon’s reviews on every product to a blogger’s passionate ramblings about the newest tech gadget, UGC affects purchasing decisions, more so than any ad or product description ever could.

Saves time: Brands that consistently engage customers to share content get a stream of assets to be repurposed across marketing channels that they normally would have to produce on their own. Automated solutions maximize this time savings even further.

Increases your follower count: Remember that television commercial for Life cereal where the boys get Mikey to try the cereal? If Mikey likes it, then everyone will like it. It’s that way with social media. A review or mention of a brand/product or service from one person encourages others to like it, thereby increasing those that are exposed to your social media accounts, many of whom will choose to follow you.
Examples of Effective User-Generated Content

Coca-Cola has one of the more memorable user-generated content campaigns in recent memory. It’s one that went hand in hand with a series of commercials, thereby providing an even bigger impact.

Several years ago they created the “Share the Coke” campaign, where they labeled bottles and cans of Coke with names (Mike, Alex, Grant) or descriptive words (Beautiful, Better Half, Sidekick). The idea behind the campaign was to connect people and encourage them to share a Coke.

The impetus behind the contest was to get inspiration for their next cup design, with the winning entry becoming a limited edition Starbucks cup. They received over 4,000 submissions in the first few weeks alone.

Now imagine how many people saw each of those 4,000 social media posts. That’s a lot of free exposure for Starbucks, not to mention they got a free design out of the deal.

They invited people to Share a Coke with [name on the bottle] and then share their story, either in words or pictures. The campaign increased their market share by 4% in their category (a huge number in the non-alcoholic drink sector) and increased consumption in young adults by 7%.

Another oft-referred-to UGC campaign is Starbucks’ White Cup Contest. Launched in 2014, the coffee retailer served their drinks in white cups (with only the logo showing) and asked consumers to “mark up your macchiato, doodle on your doppio, or craft your cappuccino” and post pictures on social media with the hashtag #whitecupcontest.
We’ve made a case as to why user-generated content is a beneficial addition to your marketing strategy. It’s cost efficient, requires limited oversight, engenders trust with consumers, expands your brand recognition, and contributes to the bottom line.

If you’re thinking about creating your own UGC strategy, we’ve outlined a primer to get you started on your journey.

1. Set goals for the user-generated content you’ll collect.

One of the most important aspects of any marketing campaign is goal setting.

What do you want to accomplish from your user generated content marketing?

It’s crucial to identify your goals early on so you can determine the steps necessary to achieving them. When you know what you’re setting out to accomplish, you can reverse engineer the actions you’ll need to take to get you there.

Are you looking to increase the time on site for your products pages? If you’re like most business owners you’ll likely be aiming to increase your overall conversions as well.

Once you’ve set your quantitative goals, it’s also important to understand how you plan to use the UGC you’ll collect before starting your search. This will help you to both identify where you should look and how to go about soliciting more from your customers.

Are you looking to repurpose new and existing UGC into new forms of advertising, or are you simply looking to repost customer content on your social channels?

For example, if your goal was to create a compilation video to run on Facebook that showed a variety of your customers using your brand’s new hair care products successfully, you would likely want to search YouTube and Facebook for video uploads, or use one of the tools listed at the end of the guide to help you gather more content.

However, if you were simply looking to build some momentum behind your outdoor supply company’s social channels, you may find it more effective turning to Instagram to start a contest around a unique hashtag and reposting submissions.

As you can see, the goals you set for your user-generated content marketing will play a pivotal role in the types of content you collect and the way you go about doing so.
2. Select channels to focus on for collecting your user-generated content.

Identify the channels or social platforms that you are actively engaged with at this time and where you have a high response rate or an established following. Even if you don’t have a large email list or you don’t currently have large followings on social, it’s important to choose platforms where your customers are actively engaged and responsive.

Email:
Email is still one of the most effective ways to reach your customers. When you consider that the majority of email is opened on mobile devices and these devices represent the perfect tools to capture UGC, you can’t ignore the potential for great content. We have a full write-up on how to ask your customers for content, read it here.

Website:
Static buttons placed on your site can increase your user-generated content submissions dramatically. You’re already driving traffic to your website. Why not make the most of that traffic and make the ask for customers to tell you about their experience? Check out this example on how to use your website to drive UGC submissions.

Inserts & Product Packaging:
Harness the momentum you’ve created after making a sale and use your customer’s excitement to your advantage. By including an insert in your packaging you’ll be able to prompt the recipient to share about their experience while they’re primed.

Social Media:
Social is an excellent outlet for both sourcing and repurposing UGC. Here’s a quick breakdown of how to get the most out of each social platform:

Facebook:
Facebook is great for sourcing engaging, user-generated photos and video. A simple search in the Facebook search bar for your brand or product name will return results that include “Public Posts” where people have mentioned your brand.

Twitter:
Some of the best user-generated content comes in the form of tweets. With a 140 character limit, people tend to post very clear and concise feedback for your brand. It just so happens that shorter is often better, as it helps to get the point across before you lose your audience’s attention. As pictures are worth 1,000 words, Twitter is also a great place for well-captured images that go along with tweets. Twitter is a great place to search for your custom hashtags.

Instagram:
Instagram is all about photos and, more recently, videos. If your customers are taking artsy shots of your products or using them in interesting ways/locations that make for great photos, Instagram is a great platform for you. It’s another place to search for your brand’s hashtags.
YouTube: YouTube is an excellent place to source user-generated content. For starters, everyone wants to be a vlogger these days. That means they’re investing the time and money (for equipment) to create videos reviewing products just like yours. Reaching out to these influencers and aspiring influencers is a great way to grab content that you can then repurpose.

LinkedIn: LinkedIn is strictly for professional content, making it a great place for B2B brands to source quality UGC.

Snapchat: Snapchat or “Snap,” is a very effective platform for UGC marketing. Be it with contests, takeovers, or some other form of simple but uniquely incentivized prompt, you can get your customers uploading snaps in hopes of making it into your feed. Snapchat is a great place for reaching younger audiences.

3. Decide where to use your user-generated content for the most benefit.

After you’ve decided where you’re going to gather your UGC you’ll need to determine where you’re going to use it to derive the highest benefit. Once again, it’s important to focus on relevant channels where your audience is actively engaged.

If you’re sharing on social media, be sure to focus on channels that your audience actually uses. For example, don’t waste your time sharing on Snapchat if you cater to more mature audiences and don’t share on LinkedIn if your content isn’t relevant to your audience’s professional needs.

Test your email list, too. You may find that your click-through rate goes up when you add UGC to an email, or that your overall conversions increase when you share your UGC with the segments of your list who have yet to make a purchase.

Finally, be sure to test various placements on your website to see how they affect your most important metrics. You may want to implement a welcome pop-up with an especially effective piece of UGC, or keep a carousel of rotating user images on your homepage.

The point is to determine where your UGC should be used to deliver the most impact. Like all marketing, effective UGC marketing is all about optimizing your return on investment. That means getting the greatest results from a minimal effort and investment. Driving those results means focusing your efforts on the appropriate channels.
4. Clearly communicate your intent to your audience.

This is another very important step. By helping your audience understand exactly what you’re after, you’ll be able to spend less time generating more of what you need. Work to guide your customers toward creating the types of content you need to achieve your goals.

It’s easy to make the ask on your social channels, especially if you already have a substantial following. However, it’s typically far more effective if you can isolate the segment of people who have already purchased from you. This could be done with an incentivized Facebook retargeting campaign or a tool like ours that helps you automate the process (more on that in the next section).

The key is to set clear guidelines for what you want to receive. If you’re only looking for video submissions, communicate that. If you’re only looking for videos of your products being used in unique and unusual ways, make that clear.

For more, be sure to read our recent article, “How to Construct a Well-Defined Ask”.

5. Repurpose the content you’ve collected.

The more content you can generate, the better. It’s a common assumption that UGC is “ugly”, but that’s just not so. With the advances in mobile camera technology customers are able to take high quality photos and videos more easily. Their authenticity and relevance far outweighs any composition errors that your customer might have missed when framing their shot.

All that content can be difficult to keep track of. It’s up to you to create a system that allows you to repurpose your UGC most effectively.

We built one into our platform that automates the process, but you can also do it via traditional channels. You may find that screenshoting Instagram posts and capturing YouTube videos to store in a central database like Google Drive works for you.

Once you have content coming in and you have a system in place to repurpose it, it’s up to you to decide whether or not a piece can be used, where/how it can be used, and whether or not it’s the most effective piece for the job.

Don’t settle!

Choose content that reflects your brand, is relevant to your audience, and supports your user-generated content marketing goals. UGC is a great way to express your company in a new way, blending the creativity of your customers with the distinguishing characteristics of your brand.

Much of your user-generated content marketing will revolve around social media, and social is a place to build your community. By sharing real-life feedback from real-life users of your product or service you’ll be able to connect with people on a deeper level.

Encourage sharing, communication, and support among your following. That means being there to answer questions, providing feedback, and replying to comments on your posts, too.

A fun way to engage people is to run caption posts where followers create fun captions for UGC photos. You can also poll your users by posting multiple photos and ask your followers to vote for photo #1 with a heart emoji and photo #2 with a smile emoji.

The point is to use social and UGC as a chance to interact more closely with your audience than you would be able to with traditional advertising.

7. Recognize people for their user-generated content.

When you use someone’s content, whether on social or in an ad, be sure to give credit where it’s due. Rather than feeling obligated to credit them, make it a fun and engaging experience that inspires others to want to share their content as well.

Establish “Fan-Art Friday” where a customer for your art supply brand gets to have something shared with your following, or “Where in the Wild YOUR BRAND Is This Week,” where customers of your outdoor apparel brand show off what they’re wearing in an idyllic natural scene.

By helping contributors feel recognized for their submissions you’ll motivate them to continue participating and get more people inspired to follow suit.
8. Test your content.

Once you’ve shared or republished UGC, it’s vital that you test the performance of each to determine what your audience responds to best.

Does your audience like to see people using your product? Do they prefer creative or unusual photos of your product?

The only way to truly identify what resonates with your audience and what they’ll respond best to is to test. Testing will look different based on the application.

For example, if you’re simply reframing photos on Instagram, you’ll use engagement metrics like likes and comments to judge performance. On the other hand, if you’re repurposing content and running Facebook ads, you’ll have a wide variety of metrics that you’ll be able to track.

In these cases you may find that certain types of UGC are more effective at helping to grow your Facebook fanbase, while others are more effective when it comes to driving clicks and purchases. Each time you test you’ll learn more about how to optimize your user-generated content marketing performance and streamline the entire process.

9. Be sure to get permission.

The consumer who has taken the photo, produced the video, or written the prose owns the content. Asking for permission is not only the polite thing to do, but it’s also the law. If you’re manually collecting and repurposing content make sure you ask for permission.

If you are using a User-Generated Content Tool they most likely have rights management baked into the process, capturing the consumer’s agreement to your brand’s right to use the content in perpetuity. See section #3 in this article for a great example of how rights-management issues could impact your user-generated content marketing.
Top Tools For User-Generated Content Marketing

Social Media Contest Software

Everyone’s familiar with social media contests, be it a photo or video contest, sweepstakes, short essay contest, or a contest where people comment on a particular subject. All are great ways to engage your audience, spread the gospel, so to speak, and build a community around your brand or product.

Utilizing contest software, like Gleam or Shortstack, allows you to capture both the UGC and leads for future campaigns, and often increases the success of your chosen contest and helps to boost engagement rates. Much like UGC Content Creation and Publishing Tools, this software has a moderation panel, allowing you to pick and choose what is shared and it allows the contest to be viewed on any platform, from PC browsers to tablets to smartphones.

UGC/Review Generation & Publishing Tools

Review generation and publishing tools, like Rivet Works, allow you to easily invite your customers to share their experiences with your products and brands, display that UGC on your website and on your social media channels, and even track performance metrics across all channels.

You can use existing user-generated content or send emails soliciting additional content (stories, reviews, photos, videos). It makes it super simple for your customers to create their content as it all takes place in a browser window from any type of device.

The software then allows you to moderate and control the stories quickly and efficiently with a single tap. It will also tag and categorize UGC, as well as add geotags if requested. Best of all, you can automatically track the performance of each piece to determine what appeals to your audiences and what types of content you should be working to generate.

Hashtag Research Tools

Because social media is so widespread and useful when it comes to UGC, it’s important to be able to find and curate content that is already out there in the ether, as well as make your content more unique with specific hashtags.

Specific research tools exist to create hashtags that will intrigue and inspire users. They work like a thesaurus; you enter a word or phrase and the tool will find related words and provide ideas for a more creative hashtag. They’ll also provide rankings for words and phrases so that you can see what’s more popular (or over/underused).
In a world where distrust for traditional advertising is growing rapidly, user-generated content is proving itself to be one of the most effective ways to reach new customers. Word of mouth has always been the most effective form of marketing. Today’s technology simply allows us to kick traditional word of mouth into overdrive.

If you’re ready to test UGC with your audience, use this guide to craft your own powerful user-generated content marketing strategy. We’ve supplied you with the foundation from which you’ll build, but be sure to test for the most effective tactics for your unique audience.

Then be sure to explore the tools recommended to help make the process more efficient and generate more effective content. If you’re curious about how Rivet Works can support your brand, be sure to check out our free trial!
Rivet Works provides a powerful platform that enables hundreds of businesses to directly connect with their customers to generate compelling content and data. Global brands, progressive agencies, and online retailers use our rapid-to-deploy, cloud-based platform to drive higher sales, stronger brand, and excellence in operations. More than 30 million consumers have used Rivet Works to influence their online research and purchase journey. Learn more at www.rivet.works.