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How Digital PRs can Overcome the Ad Blocker and Engage Consumers Who Hate Sponsored Content

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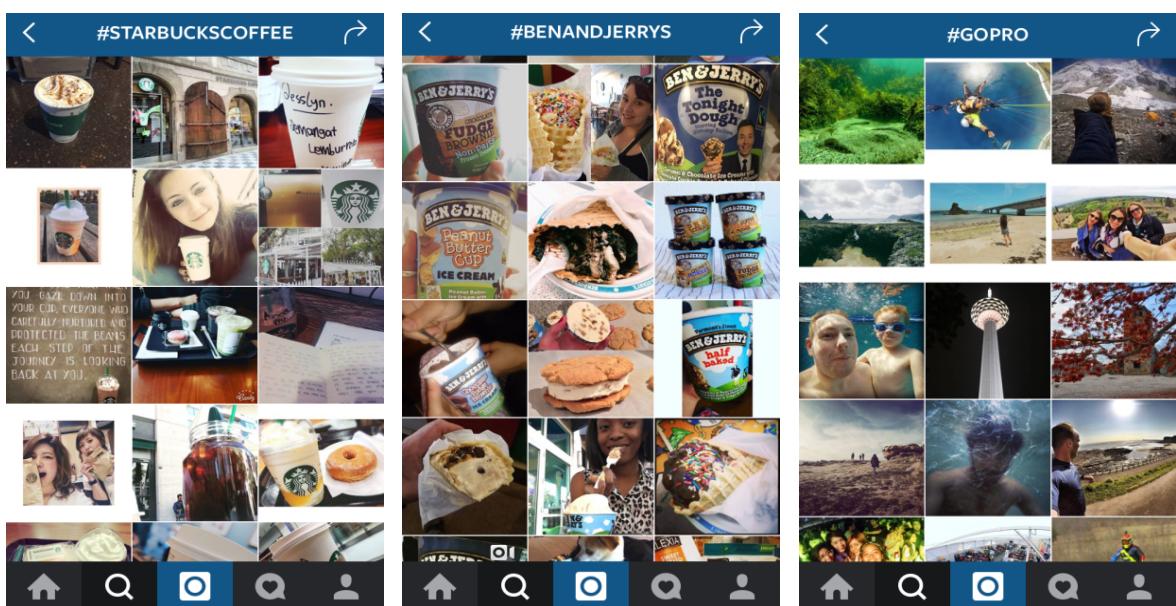
# India Francesca Cane

## How Digital PRs can Overcome the Ad Blocker and Engage Consumers Who Hate Sponsored Content

*Global brands including Starbucks, Ben & Jerry's and GoPro use UGC within their campaigns. As a result, these organisations have a huge online following of opinion leaders, who advocate them across the globe, on platforms such as Instagram.*

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**Figure 1: Examples of Sponsored Content**



## INTRODUCTION

Image is everything these days, and as PR professionals we offer a competitive edge over other sectors by offering flexible, highly targeted campaigns with deep rationale and context. Ultimately, we allow organisations to leverage their strengths to alter or improve public opinion (Business Insider 2011). As a result, the lines between advertising, journalism and PR are becoming increasingly blurred (FT Magazine 2014; PR Week 2015a), with PR replacing much of traditional advertising and journalistic practice. Content created on social media is credited as more influential than traditional advertising campaigns (Watson and Noble 2007; Austin and Newman 2015), so why are our Facebook, Instagram and Twitter feeds still spammed with endless brand sponsored content?

Consumers could not care less about how much was spent on a global campaign, or which model or athlete is endorsing a product. They are increasingly questioning the credibility of celebrities and bloggers (Austin and Newman 2015; Mintel 2015), and are therefore looking to real people as un-biased and trustworthy third-party sources, in comparison to paid-for influencer posts, print adverts, or endorsements (Business Wire 2014; Racked 2015; Smith 2015; PR Newswire 2016).

So, let me introduce UGC, not a new concept, but one which is accelerating, and influenced by increases in mobile technology (AdWeek 2014), and the popularity of content creation platforms like Instagram (CNN 2015; Wallblog 2016). A mammoth 89 percent of customers say that user-generated reviews sway their opinions when shopping for goods and services (Crowdsource 2015), with up to 90 percent of product research made before visiting a store (Campaign 2016). These statistics hint at the influence of UGC as a highly credible information source. It appears that consumers are now using what clothing their online peers are wearing, where they went for brunch, and what workout they completed that morning as information for making their purchasing decisions.

As consumers take control of brands and their marketing messages (Forbes 2015; Bazaar Voice 2016), we need to think of new, authentic and trusted ways of communicating with consumers who are sick and tired of pushy marketing (Marketing Week 2015), and who ultimately want a sense of connection, relevance, truth and interaction (Falcow 2016). Let's be honest, PR professionals have been using UGC for years since the early days of blogging. So it's time to take back the reigns, after all we are the experts. We should own it because we know how to build credibility and stimulate conversations, and ultimately we know what audiences are looking for. Peyman Nilforoush, co-founder and CEO of inPowered, commented that we are "responsible for establishing that baseline foundation of trust... PR professionals know the story that needs to be told for the branded content to continue the conversation and continue to educate and nurture potential customers" (PR Week 2014). So, let's take it back to basics, what exactly is UGC and what can we do to control and influence it? Oh, and most importantly, what is in it for us?

## UGC DEFINED

UGC has been explored extensively by scholars in the field of PR, marketing and communication. It achieved popularity in 2005, and can be described as the various forms of media content, created by end-users, that is available online (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010, p.61). UGC also has the potential to shape consumer brand perceptions, and is an important way in which consumers can communicate with others and express themselves online (Smith et al. 2012, p.102). But don't think it's restricted to Instagram; UGC can take on many forms, including Twitter tweets, Facebook status updates, YouTube videos and consumer-produced product reviews and advertisements.

The web has become a treasure trove of UGC which is regarded as having a huge power in shaping cultural trends, where online users upload content which is scrutinised in regards to its relevance and importance (Doorely and Garcia 2015, p.251). Its adaptability and prominence is evident across a wide range of sectors from fashion brands like Calvin Klein all the way to Ryanair and ESPN (CNN Style 2016; PR Week 2016; Ad Week 2015). But don't just take my word for it. What do consumers think about UCG and how does it influence them? I visited Bournemouth University's Talbot Campus to find out more. Amy a 25 year old postgraduate student commented, "I just think that brand messaging is so pushy nowadays, it's so sales orientated. I'd rather get an honest opinion from someone normal like me who hasn't been paid to post it". Hannah a 19 year old undergraduate student reinforced the strength of Instagram as a UGC platform. She stated, "I'm much more influenced by what I see on Instagram, it's just more real and authentic, and you just trust people to be honest in what they post."

So it is clear that UGC is not something to be ignored. But with our work stack increasing by the day, how can we use it to influence consumer behaviour and does it produce tangible benefits for the organisation's reputation?

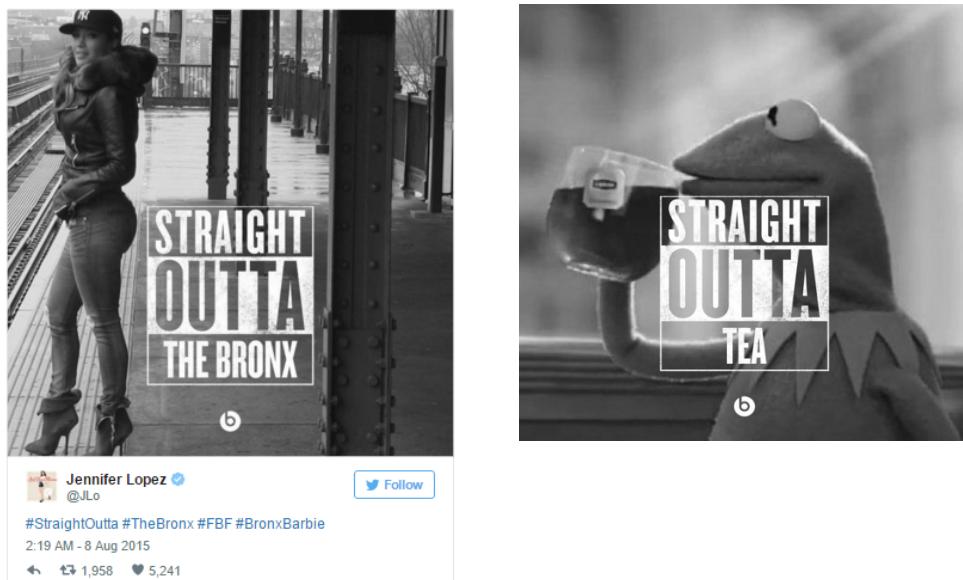
## WHY SHOULD WE BOTHER?

Reputation is a key aspect of our work, perceived as being "a company's biggest asset, the thing that makes you stand out from the crowd" that gives you a competitive edge (CIPR 2016). Research suggests that twenty-five percent of search results for the world's top 20 brands are links to UGC (Smith 2012; Key Note 2015). Integration and encouragement of UGC in campaigns is also seen to drive customer engagement and increase a brand's reputation (Key Note 2015). Research suggests that when brand-related, UGC has strong links with electronic word-of-mouth (e-WOM) (Cheong and Morrison 2008, p.3; Smith et al. 2012, p.103). Thus UGC increases the likelihood of positive information dissemination about the brand to wider audiences, ultimately our goal - right?

There is also the chance that UGC will make your job easier. UGC provides a feeling of involvement to online communities, who are therefore more willing to generate WOM about the brand (Brand Channel 2015). Let's not forget, consumers are stellar marketers (Smith 2015). So let them do the hard work, and get on with the rest of your to-do list.

UGC can make your campaign go viral (that is occasionally) (PRNewser 2015), which we know is easier said than done, but ultimately a PR dream. A great example of this is Universal Studios and their 'Straight Outta Somewhere meme generator', available through Dre Beats and Apple, for the movie 'Straight Outta Compton'. This generated a global viral sensation and even had celebrities like Jennifer Lopez and Lil Kim getting involved in the action (Smith 2015; iDigitalTimes 2015). So why not try your luck?

**Figure 2: The Beats 'Straight Outta Meme-Maker' (iDigitalTimes 2015).**



UGC can help you add a real feel to your products and in doing so increase consumer interaction (Key Note 2015). Paul Dalessio, SVP in FleishmanHillard's digital group noted that "UGC content that is light and fun helps us make an emotional connection to a client's offering, product, or service" (PR Week 2015b). Therefore, UGC can make your product appear more accessible, which can open up wider audiences who may not have interacted, or considered the brand previously. For example, Olivier Rousteing, Creative Director of Balmain, recently previewed Balmain's SS16 ready-to-wear collection on his Instagram feed. Although many of his 1.3 million followers may not be able to afford the clothes or lifestyle, they could be part of the conversation, by retweeting or reposting their favourite images (CNN 2015).

UGC also provides a source of data for which PR professionals can learn and better understand consumer motives, thus allowing you to tailor future campaigns for increases in engagement (Earl and Waddington 2013, p.123). It has also proved useful to meeting consumer expectations and desires. For example, it encouraged Burger King to bring back their Chicken Fries (PR Newser 2015), and influenced Pret a Manger to change some of their recipes to vegan. Pret's Head of Social and PR Julia Monro commented on the insight UGC provides and how it impacts upon them and their customers. She stated, "the brand has been able to introduce new products, bring back old ranges and adapt existing items [...] by making these changes, it means a product or range becomes available to a whole new set of customers" (Marketing Week 2015).

**Figure 3: Burger King's Chicken Fries (Burger King 2016).B**



## HOW PR CAN NURTURE UGC

Make it easy for consumers. Take a leaf out of Calvin Klein's book and give the content a place through the use of dedicated webpages for which people can upload their content onto (Calvin Klein 2016). When formulating digital PR campaigns, do not be afraid to stay above the noise through continually encouraging your audiences to generate content (Business Wire 2014). Most importantly, do not underestimate the power of hashtags and social media handles. Again Calvin Klein is a prime example of why this works. Mathew Yeoman, a Social Media Analyst writing for Social Media today (2016) commented on the importance of the hashtag for the brand. He noted that without it much of Calvin Klein's content would lose its relevance, as it would just be "more pictures of sexy people in their underwear."

**Figure 4: Calvin Klein #mycalvins Campaign (Calvin Klein 2016)**

Taking these steps makes your job easier, allowing you to share the best content on your own social media platforms. This in turn builds trust with audiences through high levels of credible UGC and facilitates two-way communication between brand and consumer. It also gives content a location, a purpose and relevance, allowing you to measure the impact, reach and scope of the campaign as well as audience sentiment. Thus also providing the information necessary for formulating how the campaign could be repurposed in the future (Bazaar Voice 2016).

Engage in a two-way conversation with your UGC creators. This is often seen as scary and unpredictable. However, research shows that brands which engage and respond to online feedback, even if it's negative, are seen as more transparent, trustworthy and reputable (CrowdSource 2015; Falcow 2016). So, if the UGC is negative, ask them what you can do to turn it around. Likewise, if it's positive, thank them for their efforts and, to reiterate, encourage them to continue to endorse the brand. A perfect example of this is GoPro who often post their 'photo of the day' on their Instagram account. This thanks the content creator for their use of the product, and makes them feel a sense of connection between themselves and the brand, and ultimately lets other online users see the product in action.

**Figure 5: GoPro 'Photo of the Day' Feature**



Put your audience in the limelight. As an expert in building reputation and facilitating relationships, you need to think about how you can help your online audiences achieve their 15 minutes' worth of fame. In doing so motivate and encourage them to create content about how your product is used in their everyday lives (Content Marketing Institute 2015). Take Coca Cola for example, it encouraged users to share their exclusive brand experience, through their #ShareaCoke campaign. Audiences were encouraged to post content of themselves with their exclusive personalised coke bottles that were limited to 150 names. The relationship aspect and uniqueness of this campaign was incredibly successful, as "78 percent of consumers feel that brands that create unique and personalised content are more interested in building a relationship with them" (Grimes 2013).

**Figure 6: #ShareACoke Campaign (Independent 2014)**



The evidence is clear; the power and influence of UGC is growing. UGC gets you closer to your consumers, keeps you relevant, and delivers long-term results, as well as allowing you to continually improve your campaigns and audience interactions (Wallblog 2016). All you need to do is motivate consumers to get involved, give the content a location, and praise and reward them through two-way conversations. Then sit back, relax, and let your followers do the hard work.

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