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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF USER-GENERATED CONTENT

Why do bloggers blog and people fall for social media? **Chris Grannell** investigates the psychology of user-generated content.

All over the world, marketers are abuzz with Facebook, Twitter, forums and the blogosphere, but few stop to ask why consumers use these things. As any consumer psychologist will tell you, understanding motivations is the first step to meeting customer needs, so it's high time that we as marketers took the time to understand what's going on. Why do people tweet, post and join online discussions? Who are these people? And how can answers to questions like these help marketers decide whether and how to deploy user-generated content?

In case you're still spelling 'website' as two words, I'll start with a few basics. User-generated content (or UGC) includes online blogs, contributions to wikis, comments in forums, and pictures and status updates on social networking sites. (It's also called 'consumer generated media', or CG, and is a core component of the so-called second-generation web or Web 2.0.) According to Universal McCann, 184 million users have started a blog, although the data on whether they actively maintain their pages is less clear. Nielsen Online claims that by the end of 2008, social networking on sites like Facebook and MySpace overtook email in terms of worldwide reach. A staggering 66.8 percent of internet users accessed social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace, and I

hardly need add usage of micro blogging platform Twitter passed its own tipping point some months ago.

This is not a technical article – I simply want to explore why individuals feel the need to post. Beyond the obvious 'commercial' motivations (e.g. resumé management, reputation and advertising revenue), the other drivers draw on deep human psychology.

THREE PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVATORS

A big clue to these psychological motivators is that most UGC is people writing about themselves. The Pew Internet and American Life Project, which looked at US bloggers in 2006, found 76 percent indicating that they blog to document 'personal experiences and share them with others' and 37 percent reporting that the primary topic of their blog is 'my life and experiences'. A quick look at the winners of the 2009 Bloggies awards shows that this 'me' theme remains overwhelmingly dominant.

So why is it so addictive to write about oneself online? Three themes seem to be universal.

MOTIVATION 1: IDENTITY MANAGEMENT

Anyone using UGC is by definition part of the most media-savvy population to have walked

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the planet. Those alive today (in the developed world at least) understand implicitly the notion of image management.

Moreover, in a world where most media assets are packaged (and arguably controlled) by mass marketers such as Viacom, Warner Bros, Vivendi and News Corp, the ability to create an independent space of your own really amounts to something. Recently published research by Daugherty, Eastin and Bright calls this the 'ego-defensive' driver of UGC creation. In other words, people put fingers to the keyboard for the cause of UGC because it "makes them feel important, increases their self-esteem and makes them feel needed".

One of the latest UGC tools is a small applet that displays your current iTunes track as your status update. To the patrons of the

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early internet on their wind-up IBMs over a decade ago, this would have seemed very peculiar. But today most of us have become used to the idea that – like it or not – how we dress and what we associate ourselves with is driven to a large degree by what we want people to think about us. The little box that says 'Chris is currently eating a gherkin' is surely the purest, most unencumbered form of this self-expressive space.

MOTIVATION 2: KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

The diary-like capabilities of most UGC distinguish it from static material. A study by Gurak and Antonijevic suggests that UGC meets the need for temporal structuring and integrating of past and present experiences. Since this deeply personal need is something that humans have always had, and given UGC's eminent suitability for the task, perhaps this explains why uptake has been so rapid. In cultures like Japan, where diary keeping was commonplace long before the internet, this motivation seems to be a major driver of behaviour.

MOTIVATION 3: SOCIAL CONNECTION

When it comes to community, the appeal of connectedness is clearly a powerful motivator that the online world also seems perfectly designed to exploit. A study by McKinsey concluded that contributors of UGC were motivated in part by "a desire for fame and a feeling of identification with a community". In the same vein, Min Xuan Lee's online guide *How Twitter Changed My Life* makes it clear that social facilitation is a key motivator. She highlights as a major benefit of using Twitter the enhanced ability to "stay connected to people you care about". If Lee is typical, then the social aspects of UGC are as much about maintaining current connections as creating new ones.

MORE 'ME' FOR LESS

Thanks to UGC, social maintenance – even if this means staying in touch with hundreds of contacts – becomes extremely easy. Just ask anyone who's published pictures of a newborn on Facebook or used a blog to update friends on a trip round Europe.

Brian Gibbs, principal fellow in Marketing and Behavioural Science at Melbourne Business School, thinks that the efficiency that
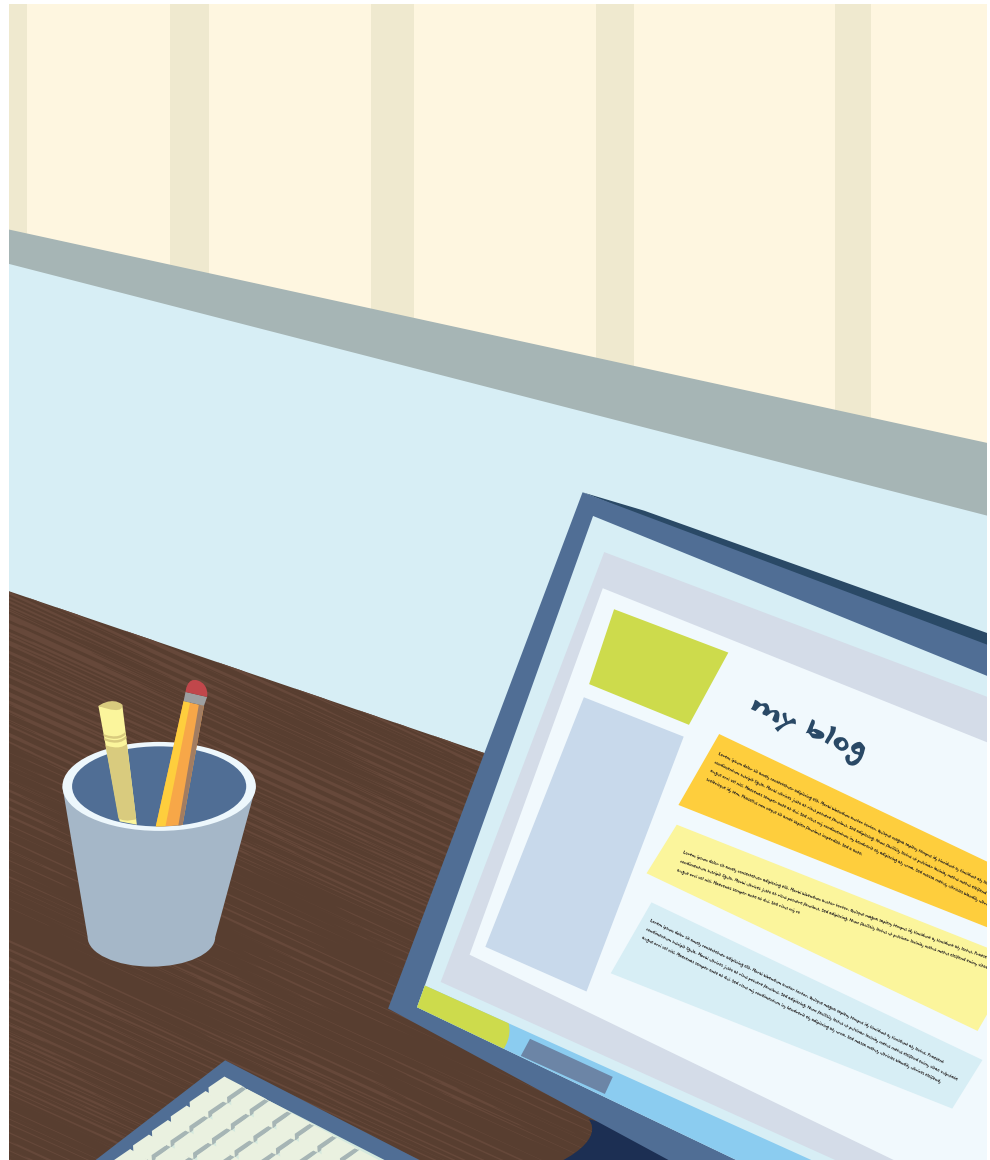
UGC can achieve alters the economics of all the motivations. not just the social ones.

Gibbs suggests, "The unique circumstances in which UGC occurs means that traditional theories of 'reasoned' action might not entirely capture what's going on… it helps to think about the low costs of UGC as well as its benefits."

The cost (in terms of time and effort) of reaching hundreds or thousands of readers is negligible compared to the cost in traditional forms of publishing, especially considering the potential return for the connection-hungry blogger or poster. The marginal cost of gaining an additional audience member is essentially zero.

"In this sense UGC can be viewed as having a cost structure a little like that of spam," says Gibbs. "Because of the enormous

economies of scale that the internet can provide, behaviours that would otherwise be seen as insufficiently rewarding suddenly become worthwhile and significant."

He also notes that some UGC behaviour may become habitual – almost automatic. Again the fact that UGC can often be extremely easy and immediate may distort how our brains engage with it and assess its costs and benefits. He reminds us that UGC is a broad church.

"Some UGC behaviour is clearly considered and thought out. But at the low stakes end of the spectrum, some 'decisions' about whether and how much to engage in UGC behaviour may involve very little cognitive processing at all," explains Gibbs.

If you were inclined to dismiss some UGC as mindless, it turns out that you may

have been right after all – at least some of the time. Sometimes a Tweet can be little more than a twitch.

I'VE SHOWN YOU MY 'ME', NOW YOU SHOW ME YOURS

Some people say that there may also be some reciprocity at work in driving UGC creation. In other words, because you like snooping on other people's holiday bikini snaps on Facebook, you feel compelled to upload your own. To not do so would be to 'free ride' on the system.

I think this is unlikely to be a major driver of behaviour, however. To me the explanation for the exponential growth of UGC must be that it is directly rewarding, not that people are just doing it because they feel obligated to.

Daugherty, Eastin and Bright have a similar but more basic theory. They suggest that exposure to UGC encourages its creation. They reckon that, as in many aspects of life, future usage is influenced by past experience, thus exposure to UGC will increase the likelihood of the subject consuming more – and in some cases going on to create it. This is the network effect in action, but it isn't anything as cognitively demanding as reciprocity.

WHO'S 'ME'?

It's starting to sound like a compelling story. There are all sorts of benefits to UGC, and those benefits are compounded by the limitless and cost-effective reach of the medium. In combination, this makes the blogosphere pretty unique in meeting deep-seated human needs and in doing so easily and this seems to explain why UGC has taken off so quickly.

With this in mind, which groups are most likely to blog or contribute to UGC? There isn't much research into this area, but one thing that it is clear about UGC is the breadth of its appeal. By and large UGC cuts across all age groups (although the more 'extreme' forms of UGC such as micro blogging or 'always on' blogging are more popular among the image-savvy and technology-native younger generations). It also crops up among all income brackets and it seems to cut across some basic psychographic groups too.

Anthony Baker of Nucleus Digital Strategy says that UGC participants include both shy and extroverted people.

"When I was doing my degree in the early '90s, my lecturer thought that the computer

and the internet would further isolate introverted people by letting them escape from the need to socialise," he muses. "But today, shy people have never been more social or connected, while extroverts are pretty involved too – just have a look at YouTube," he says.

But broad appeal isn't universal appeal – a great deal of people reject UGC on philosophical or political grounds, citing reasons like privacy issues, the time consumed in staying on top of updates and the lack of editorial quality control. Even blogging aficionados will concede that the volume of UGC material – especially when combined with much

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of its inanity and repetition – is stupefying. While there are potential commercial opportunities in converting these cynics to the UGC cause, doing so is unlikely to be easy given the psychological barriers involved.

At the cultural level there are some general trends that can be observed. If the research is right, then UGC plays a dual role – both enhancing the individual and cementing the collective. It turns out that when bloggers build their online identities, they are not only sticking their necks out and being distinctive – they are also promoting their alliances and allegiances. In fact the collectivists have the edge.

Jonathan Sinton from Research International has observed on Marketingmag.com.au that, "The more 'collectivist' a country is, the more likely it is to be a strong blogging nation (assuming an acceptable level of internet access)."

Australia is much more individualist than collectivist China, so it should be no surprise that blogging is disproportionately popular among Chinese internet users. Universal McCann reports that China has 42 million bloggers, more than the US and western

Europe put together. And this is despite much lower per head internet penetration in China than in the other locations.

WHERE DOES 'ME' FIT?

The outstanding issues for marketers are whether and how UGC will fit with their business. Luke Farley, founder of online marketing and tools firm Lcubed, says that many clients are nervous about engaging with UGC.

"Although some marketers are keen to experiment with forums and social networking, many are wary of its 'young and free' nature – perhaps coloured by their own negative perceptions or those of their senior management. Most adopt a wait and see attitude," says Farley.

The motivations set out in these pages remove some of the guesswork about whether UGC is right for your firm. By considering these drivers, organisations can determine whether there is a good fit between customer motives and the space they are in. Broadly speaking, if you can't help customers with one of the main motivations for UGC – identity management, knowledge management or social connection – then it seems unlikely that UGC functionality is for you.

Thinking carefully about which motivator you are seeking to exploit should guide your planning, including whether to build a proprietary application or utilise one of the existing UGC platforms such as Facebook or LinkedIn. For example, the Australian Red Cross campaign 'The Power of Humanity' (which runs on the Red Cross's own website) encourages supporters to add their photo to an online collage to show their support for the organisation. This particular initiative plays to the self-expressive aspect of the image management motivator, and it does so by encouraging users to publicise their allegiances rather than their individuality.

If you are committed to pursuing a UGC path, consumer psychology suggests a number of tactics that should be considered. It goes without saying that if none of these fit with the rest of your business model, you should probably think twice before proceeding. **M**

If you would like to discuss the themes raised in this article, including examples of marketing campaigns that make good use of UGC to connect with customer motivations, head to Marketingmag.com.au/forums.