

The power of positive feedback

Are you looking for suggestions for a new restaurant to try this weekend? Could you use a reputable caterer to host a surprise birthday party? Or maybe you just want ideas for a recipe to spice up tonight's dinner.

First stop: The internet. It's the quickest go-to that puts recommendations and ideas on virtually any topic imaginable at your fingertips in just seconds.

Whether it comes in the form of product reviews, gardening tips, or shared recipes, content provided by other users online is invaluable. It's also useful to businesses that rely on it to help increase traffic to their websites and in turn, increase brand identity and advertising revenue.

For example, every month, 135 million people visit Yelp for recommendations and reviews on everything from auto mechanics to hair stylists and cruise lines. Founded in 2004, Yelp has generated more than 95 million reviews, all contributed by the public, for free. Websites like Yelp depend on user-generated content for their success, and the more familiar they become, the more their profit margins grow.

"Numerous surveys show that buyers go to online reviews for information about a product before they make a purchase," says Assistant Professor of Information Systems Yili (Kevin) Hong. "They are impacting the consumers and having an effect on businesses."

For many, contributing ideas and opinions online is as routine as searching for it, but it's a slippery slope: It's not always easy for businesses to persuade visitors to contribute. "User-generated content is essential in today's world," says Professor of Information Systems Bin Gu. "But the fundamental question is, how can we motivate people to share more content?"

That is the key issue that inspired Gu, Hong, and six co-authors to research different methods of addressing this

challenge. Two studies and their findings are outlined in the paper, "Effectiveness of Performance Feedback in Stimulating User-Generated Content."

The research examines the role feedback plays as an intervention in encouraging contributors to share more, and what type of feedback is most useful in generating maximum results.

Measuring performance by 'likes'

In one of their studies, the researchers used a mobile recipe app in which users upload photos and recipes of food they prepare and then receive "likes" and comments.

Weekly push notifications told users how many people benefited from their contributions, where they ranked among contributors, and how many other users they beat in numbers of "likes."

"We look at the social value orientation, how people generate contributions," Gu says. "Some people contribute purely because of their reputation. Some people are concerned about their welfare, while others are concerned about their health and the well-being of others." And some like to come out on top.

Men were most responsive to the competitive message, providing more content after learning how many other users they've outperformed in numbers of "likes."

Women, on the other hand, were more motivated by altruism, offering more contributions after receiving messages that tell them how many people they helped with the content they shared.

Feedback motivates high achievers

According to their research, past performance does, in fact, influence future results. Individuals who received higher numbers of "likes" tended to contribute more content when they received the push notifications, while those who received fewer "likes" retreated.

"It's similar to a high-performing middle

school student," Hong says. "If teachers say the student is doing well, they'll work harder." Likewise, if a student is not doing well and a teacher points that out, they get discouraged.

"The research shows that we should give high-performing users the notifications, but not the low-performing users," Hong explains. "If they are not performing well, the platform should not send a push because it will discourage them."

In the second experiment on crowdsourcing internet marketplace Amazon Mechanical Turk, the researchers paid workers to provide advice that could be used to help new employees perform effectively and efficiently. The findings were "notably consistent" with those of the first study.

How it all adds up

While user-generated content isn't necessarily a direct link to profitability, it ultimately does impact a company's bottom line because more content attracts more users and prospective buyers to the website.

Hong, Gu, and their colleagues identified the types of messages that encourage men and women to contribute more content and learned how feedback stimulates content among high- and low-performing users.

Armed with insights like this, "companies can shape their strategy to encourage users to contribute content and get better results," Hong says. "User engagement is all they need to achieve, and they want to capitalize on it."

Most importantly, Gu explains, the results show the vast potential of how powerful, meaningful feedback can inspire a person's contributions to society.

"We should not just think about recipes," Gu says. "This knowledge has a lot of value to individuals and society. It can motivate people to donate more blood, for example. There's tremendous social value." ■

— Claire Curry