

Nescafé Brews Buzz Via Blogs

Marketers Are Enlisting Online Communities To Help Craft Pitches

By MAX COLCHESTER

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PARIS--When Nescafé launched its Dolce Gusto coffee maker earlier this year, it turned to bloggers.

Nescafé, a division of Swiss food giant Nestlé, placed an ad on French Web site BlogBang.com, which has a community of more than 2,000 bloggers. The site sent a message to its members telling them about the ad campaign, which came in the form of an interactive game. The bloggers were asked to put a link to the game on their sites. In return, Dolce Gusto's home page posted links to the blogs that joined up.

BlogBang also has tried to draw bloggers into the creative process. Companies looking for new ways to pitch their products can post requests for bloggers to develop their own campaigns. BlogBang's members can then put their homemade ads on the site. The one that gets the most clicks is spread around the bloggers' Web sites, and the author of the winning ad earns a fee. Garnier, a division of cosmetics group L'Oréal, advertised its Fructis hair gel this way. Garnier couldn't be reached for comment.

The site's creators hope this will open a frontier in advertising by allowing consumers to have a say in how pitches are crafted. It also has the potential to give brands a new way to interact with consumers.

"The advantage of using blogs is that the message gets around very quickly, and it focuses on our target audience" of 25- to 35-year-olds, says Muriel Lienau, director general of Dolce Gusto. "It really created a marketing buzz." Within three weeks of its launch, Dolce Gusto's ad was displayed on 500 blogs, and 320,000 people had played the online game.

Marketers and their agencies have been searching for ways to harness user-generated content on the Internet. They now see blogs as a way of getting their ads out in a quick and original way. What BlogBang is trying to do is take the relationship a step further by cutting bloggers in on a share of the spoils.

The site, created in June, acts as a conduit between companies and the blogosphere. Firms pay €10,000 to €20,000, or about \$15,000 to \$30,000, to place their ads on the site. Bloggers pick their favorite ads and put them on their personal blogs. The bloggers are paid depending on how many times they can get their readers to click on the ads, usually about 80 European cents per thousand hits. BlogBang keeps a third of the fee and gives the rest to bloggers who participate.

BlogBang, 60% owned by French advertising giant [Publicis](#), is looking to tap the European Internet-advertising market, now valued at €7.5 billion (\$11.15 billion) and set to increase to more than €16 billion by 2012, according to Forrester Research Inc.

"By getting people involved in the creative side of things, it gets them talking about the product with their friends. This creates interest," says Julien Braun, one of BlogBang's founders. Mr. Braun, a mathematician by training, believes that by giving bloggers the power to choose ads, he is opening a market that previously was too fragmented to tap. The site says it has 2,200 members and six million unique users a month.

Financial incentives play a big part in luring the bloggers. Eric Dupin, who writes a blog about high-tech news from his home in Lyon, France, is an avid user of the site. "The advantage for me is that I can select the adverts that are relevant to what I write about," the 45-year-old says.

BlogBang runs at a loss, but Maurice Lévy, Publicis's chairman and chief executive, whose company has invested more than €1 million in the project, believes that this is a market that will develop.

"We are getting involved in the world of blogging in a very positive way. It allows us to look into this universe and detect what the trends are before others catch on," he says.

Graham Hales, chief marketing officer for Interbrand, a global branding consulting firm, says that forms of advertising like this, which give control to the customer, will be vital in the future. However, he notes that firms should be careful about paying bloggers to put up ads, because it may look like the blogs have sold out.

"The whole idea is that blogs are not policed and that the content has been generated by the user. It gets more difficult if it clearly isn't," he says. Trust and transparency are vital if companies want to affiliate themselves with the blogging community. They also need to provide something that will enhance the bloggers' experience if it is to catch on.

As for the homemade ads, some Internet users are yet to be convinced. "I try to put them on my site, but they are not good quality and no one clicks on them," says Mr. Dupin. "People like professional adverts."