Advocates in Bloom

Creating consumer connections by engaging advocates

People used to largely rely on expert opinion to inform their decisions: industry norms, government standards, academic research. But channels like Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and blogs are giving us the opportunity to have our decisions influenced by a new breed of self-proclaimed experts.

An emerging group of advocates is connecting with people at a very personal level, and many of these individuals have amassed an extensive following. The result is a collective of informed, passionate, and influential people who sway others to buy or not to buy, to engage or disengage, or simply to take a second look at what’s happening in the world.

Companies that have learned to tap into the mojo of these advocates are drawing in new consumers and tightening their relationship with existing ones. Those that can convert this voice into action can create new markets, or even new movements.

TAKE ACTION – designing for Advocates in Bloom

1. Let the mavens lead
   Leverage the authentic relationship between advocates and their followers. Leave a broad space for this trust to grow.

2. Speak plainly
   Be clear and transparent about your relationship to these well-respected confidantes. Let your agenda be known up front.

3. Connect through real people
   Don’t confuse these new gurus with celebrity spokesmen or messengers for hire. People relate to real-life experiences, true passion, and genuine desire to share.

4. Extend your fans’ reach
   Expert fans connect with each other through websites and social networks. Identify and empower these communities to create advocates who are intimately connected to products and brands.

Lauren Shimek
Grace Hwang
Hyper-local fresh eggs

Thomas Kriese decided to raise chickens in his suburban backyard after reading a newspaper article about the trend. From there, he started Urbanchickens.net, a blog offering tips for raising the birds.

Thomas is one of many who are spreading the news about urban chickens and the opportunity for the freshest, most local eggs. Since his blog was featured in Plenty magazine, he has been focusing his efforts on legislation to legalize chicken husbandry in urban and suburban areas. In the meantime, chicken rearing is slowly but surely becoming a movement.

Nikki, an avid blogger herself, came across Urbanchickens, and in a few months, she was overseeing the construction of her backyard chicken coop. Several chick eggs later, she celebrated the beginning of her own bird family. Now, she is active in the urban chicken blogosphere and has joined a “chicken-sitting” community, to help watch over birds home alone.

How can you build a grassroots experience into a mass offering?

Keep it clean

While working for a nonprofit and looking for frozen lunches on a budget, Abi Jones was inspired to launch HeatEatReview.com, a website that reviews convenience foods. The website lets readers sort reviews by ratings, dietary needs, ingredients, and brands.

As Abi’s website has grown in popularity, she has had to make difficult choices. After experimenting with paid posts, she decided not to accept money or free products from manufacturers. "I felt a little dirty," she explained. Her policy resonated with readers, who overwhelmingly approved.

However, there is a business side to HeatEatReview. Abi uses BlogHerAds, which independently chooses advertising for the site, and reviewers are paid for each written post. As for interacting with food companies, Abi does appreciate when manufacturers alert her to new products.

She takes her position very seriously, considering both the reader and manufacturer: “Product reviewing involves people’s livelihoods. There’s a lot of responsibility.”

How can you support authentic product champions without overtly selling your message to them?

Gadget guru

Alton is an expert when it comes to consumer electronics. Although he graduated from high school only two years ago, friends, family, amateurs, and expert peers turn to him for advice, which he doles out on Facebook and tech-related forums.

People come to Alton with a list of specs, and he directs them to the most appropriate option. His word (or post) is gospel to many who don’t have the time or the know-how to feel confident about what to buy.

How might businesses identify and leverage emerging “experts”?

Penny for your thoughts

As blogs, social media sites, and viral marketing continue to grow, some have raised questions about the role of corporate sponsorship. Companies like PayPerPost, which connects bloggers to paid posting opportunities, have sparked a debate within the blogging community about the potential impact of sponsored posts on unbiased content. The Federal Trade Commission will soon update its “Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising,” exploring guidelines around paid endorsements on blogs and other social media.

What opportunities exist for companies and advocates to define and communicate their relationship?

Building a bridge

Lauren Luke is a 27-year-old single mother with a lifelong passion for makeup. On July 22, 2007, she posted her first make-up lesson on YouTube. It has now had more than 40 million views and is the most subscribed YouTube site in the UK.

Now, two years later, Lauren has her own line, featuring handpicked color palettes and kits with exclusive video tutorials. The launch featured a training session with Sephora pros and a tour of a new Sephora store in New York City.

How might you enable brand-building initiatives from the ground up, one subscriber at a time?