



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.



Expert fans

To say Danny is passionate about gaming is an understatement. From his small town in Indiana, Danny founded a website and podcast dedicated to the Madden NFL video game. The show gained such notoriety that NFL players and reps from the gaming company EA Sports came on as guests.

To learn from advocates like Danny, EA Sports developed a Community Leaders Program to invite individuals from the gaming community to interact with developers, preview early versions of games, and offer feedback about new releases. Danny is proud of the EA Sports jersey he received at one of these events and displays it prominently in his home.

In April 2009, EA Sports brought eight expert fans together for a day of feedback. They stayed up until 4 am suggesting changes and sharing reactions to new features. The results of the marathon collaboration were posted on a public EA Sports blog.

How might you engage your most influential advocates to create a lasting drumbeat for your products and your brand?

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 about 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?

PATTERNS are a collection of shared thoughts, insights, and observations gathered through our work and the world around us. We invite you to join the conversation, so we can raise the bar and develop richer design thinking experiences collectively.

Be a pattern spotter: Now that you’ve been exposed to a few different examples, don’t be surprised if you start seeing *Advocates in Bloom* patterns all around. Keep your eyes open and let us know what you find, especially if it’s the next new pattern.

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