



A Slingshot Consumer Experience Whitepaper

Options and strategies for a safe site and positive experience

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Whitepaper Quick Glance

- Social Networking and Consumer Generated (Authentic) media are the hot topics in marketing circles around the world.
- While critics have warned for some time that fickle internet users, especially teens and young adults would eventually lose interest in the social network concept, exactly the opposite has happened.
- When designing brand sites that allow user submitted content, an upfront decision needs to be made about the best way to ensure positive, quality input.
- These decisions should not be taken lightly – they will effect user participation, concept growth, and overall concept success.
- Content Moderation is a process of reviewing content either before it goes live on your site (pre-moderation) or after it goes live (post-moderation).
- While pre-moderation might seem like the safest option for your brand, it must be taken with serious consideration in terms of the site concept and goals.
- When making the decisions between pre-moderation and post-moderation, there are a number of issues to consider - an open mind is a must.
- In general, the best practice is to start with a post-moderation concept and determine if there are needs not being met through that approach.



Introduction

In the last few years, Web based interactive tools have matured to the point where uploading content to a Web site becomes incredibly fast and simple. When you combine that fact with a consumer mindset that expects to interact with brands rather than be spoken to by them, you have an incredible opportunity to engage and interact with consumers like never before. More and more brand marketing Web sites are launching based on the idea of allowing consumers to add their own “Authentic Media” (also known as “User Generated Content”) as part of a larger concept. Just a few examples of this are:

- **Diet Rite: Zero Boundaries**
www.dietrite.com
- **USA Networks: Show Us Your Character**
www.showusyourcharacter.com
- **Jones Soda: Your photo on a label**
www.jonessoda.com/gallery
- **Converse Gallery**
<http://www.conversegallery.com/>
- **What is Pure (Maybelline)**
<http://whatispure.com>

These sites allow site users to upload content they’ve created themselves. This engagement creates a much deeper engagement to a brand campaign (and the brand overall) than typical marketing campaigns. These concepts let users take “ownership” of the brand and create it within their own minds; they help start an interaction and conversation between users and brands that help both groups better understand each other. Brands can clearly and quickly see what is on the minds of their consumers through the questions they post, the stories they tell, and the images they upload.

The brand is still driving the brand forward based on a specific concept of what they believe the brand should be, but they’re allowing users to shape that concept.



But with any opportunity comes a potential dark side. The fears of a brand implementing an Authentic Media concept are common and expected:

- *“What if someone says something bad about our brand?”*
- *“What if someone posts porn?”*
- *What if the content is not inline with our brand values?*
- *What if the media writes a negative news story about our site?*

These are highly relevant questions and the answers will be addressed through your Site Moderation Strategy. This strategy will help you define what types of content you will accept, where to draw the line, and how to successfully find the balance between site growth and safety for both the brand and the users.

Online Environment

In order to understand the role of moderation in user-driven sites and the effect that it has on content, growth, and behavior, we must first understand the current online environment and the users involved in the culture. We should understand what drives users to participate, contribute, and generate content so that we can select the most appropriate means to administer and moderate that environment. We will then discuss how marketing efforts and brands can provide these types of meaningful experiences and spaces for users.

The recent rise in technology availability has created an online environment rich in content – photos, artwork, music, profiles, games, fan sites- you name it people are creating it. Sites like Wikipedia, Blogger, Facebook, Flickr, 43Things, eBay, Digg, YouTube, TagWorld, and countless others are allowing Internet users to connect with each other for everything from buying cars to sharing photos with family.

Younger Internet users (18-34) are participating in social connection web sites by the millions. MySpace alone has 66 million users and is preparing to pass Yahoo!, as the



No. 1 most visited site on the Web. In under a year, Facebook.com has accumulated 6 million users and is continuing to grow rapidly. Xanga, a site that allows users to create their own blog (aka Web journals), touts 6.4 million users.

And the youth aren't the only group of growing internet users. Seniors (55+) are the fastest growing demographic group on the net; business people of all ages are using sites like LinkedIn to connect with other business professionals; hobbyists of all ages and all subjects are using the internet to connect in ways previously unimagined.

These web sites create social systems that are as real to users as their physical social systems, and more often than not complement those physical social systems. As the director of brand planning from well known brand agency Young & Rubicon remarks, "We must realize that the virtual world is no longer virtual, it's real".

In these environments users work in collaboration with the site moderators to create organic, ever changing communities. Each of these communities, like offline communities, has its own unique culture. Like any culture its members are what define it and they seek to evolve it over time. Users of a social system require the production staff running the site to facilitate their experience, not hinder it. The success of MySpace is attributed largely to the fact that it lets users define the culture, and that MySpace admins respond quickly and directly to community feature requests. On the other hand, a lack of freedom and culture, as well as a slow response time from the development team is what some experts say has led to the significant downturn of Friendster. MySpace gives users the freedom to manipulate the system to their liking (i.e. it listens), while Friendster upholds strict policies for profile and information sharing. According to Danah Boyd, social media researcher from Yahoo! Research,

"Users jumped on MySpace, created all sorts of culture and profiles complete with massive amounts of media, and helped figure out how to hack the system to make their profiles more expressive. MySpace didn't stop them! As a result, the cultural enthusiasm was nurtured and it grew and grew and grew."

Online communities - whether blogs, photo shares, or social sites - are like nation-states. There is a master behind the architecture, a master who controls the walls of the system. People know this and they trust that the creators have people's best intentions in mind.



They also feel confident that the architect(s) are “one of them;” that they’ll listen and respond to citizen desires. In order to invest time and energy into creating an identity in the system they must believe it is worth it, that there is a higher calling that everyone involved has agreed to.

In the online community world, site admins and moderators should work in tandem with users. Users must feel confident that there is a strong commitment to their needs and desires. Therefore, moderators need to be deeply embedded, involved, integrated, and responsive to the culture.

Moderation Overview

In any user driven site, there is always a need for a certain level of “higher authority” moderation. A lack of guidance results in anarchy. The key is to design that “higher authority” in a way that helps grow rather than restrict the community culture.

Moderation is the method of implementing this “higher authority,” and can be handled in a variety of ways. In a good cultural/social design the moderation acts more like a mentor than a policeman. Moderators (also referred to as site admins) as well as moderation overall is not meant to restrict or censor but to push a community forward and to keep them on a positive path. The site creators and the site users work together to define what “pushing forward” and “positive path” really mean for them. Out of this ongoing definition of process comes the shared culture.

Brand sites that include or are based on user content submissions have to be careful when choosing their Moderation Strategy to ensure that the project meets both users *and* brand expectations. The overall strategy for how a site is moderated sets the tone and direction for the entire project.

Types of Moderation

There are two basic types of moderation processes:

Pre-Moderation: User content appears on the site only after an official representative has approved it. (Typically used for brand/corporate sites, and some blogs)



Post-Moderation: Content is immediately posted to the site, followed by reviews from both site users and brand employees. (Typically used for user-driven-sites)

Both systems have a number of pros and cons:

Pre-Moderation Benefits:

100% Approval

Pre-moderating allows the site administrators to police appropriate and inappropriate and/or deprecating content before allowing it to be posted to the site.

Selective Publishing Policy

Allows the brand/webmaster to ensure that only content in line with their goals is approved for the site, giving the brand the ability to say: "We only want this kind of content."

When used effectively, pre-moderation isn't about censoring non-supportive opinions and feedback, it's about ensuring that the site stays positive in the terms of how the site owners view "positive." Pre-moderation allows brands to filter out hate speech, spam, pornographic references, and other questionable user submissions.

Pre-Moderation weaknesses:

"Glorified Brand Site" Perception

Perception is reality, and since a vast majority of the Authentic Media sites that use pre-moderation are brand sites, consumers perceive pre-moderation to be the domain of corporations.

This highly connected consumer base may actively reject it if they feel it's too "corporate." Some might even actively campaign to turn others away from the site. Pre-moderation screams to your users "I don't trust you!"

That said, certain types of blogs tend to work well with pre-moderation. The conversation on a blog is by definition, controlled by a single person who has reign over the content associated with that conversation. It's not uncommon to see pre-moderation on blog user comments, but the key is to ensure that you're not censoring what you don't like. Instead the pre-moderation focus



should be on ensuring the overall mission of the site and the overall culture being developed is maintained.

But in sites where there's a two-way, dynamic interaction, pre-moderation poses significant issues.

Time is Not on Our Side

Immediacy - Pre-moderation dramatically effects collaboration by removing the real-time nature that collaborators expect and demand. The immediacy that people want when they press the submit button is fundamental to all online communities and most sites based around user-generated-content. Considering that most brand call centers only operate during normal business hours (8a-5p), there can easily be a span of 15 hours or more where content is not being moderated (approved/rejected) at all. Therefore, content posted mid-evening will likely not go live until the next morning. Web users of all ages are increasing expecting instant reactions to their online actions.

Instant Trends - Collaborative concepts (concepts that spread like wildfire, very broad and very quick), are nearly impossible since content can take nearly a day to appear to other users. This group relies heavily on cultural capital which is gained by being the first-to-know. Any lag in timing is a lag in cultural capital to these users.

Loss of Competitive Advantage

In order for a social interaction Web site to be successful, it needs to operate under the same ground rules as the sites (i.e. Xanga, Facebook, Flickr) that the target users are interacting on. No other community site (those non-corporate) on the Web approves content before it goes live. Additionally, one of the biggest competitive advantages of a social collaboration/interaction concept is the real, honest interaction between users. Delays of even a few minutes in the display of these interactions can effectively stop collaboration.

Big-Brother Effect

Pre-moderating content can and likely will give users the impression that the brand is choosing only the content they like. When teens and young adults know that an "authority figure" is deciding what is acceptable and relevant, the "cool factor" drops immediately. Users want to feel like the brand is listening to them and more importantly, that the brand gets it – gets them.



Of course, there are (rare) times when this “Big Brother Effect” is seen as a positive. In a blog context where there are a very small number of primary content authors, this effect helps ensure that the site focus and tone is maintained. This tone and focus is typically why visitors are there in the first place. That said, these positive instances are rare and should be carefully considered.

Post-Moderation benefits:

Flourishing Environment

Post-Moderation allows content to be uploaded and live instantly, which enables the site to grow as fast as users can participate. It allows the site to be a living, breathing space.

User Owned and Operated

The organic nature is what lets users invest themselves in the space and eventually become passionate about it while feeling like they have ownership in it. If users feel responsible and passionate for an environment they have worked to develop, they will be more likely to take care of it and help manage it. Also, it allows users to feel like they have the initial say in what they deem to be relevant to their culture without having to go through the corporation first.

Don't Blame the Site...Blame the User

In the event that offensive or irrelevant content makes it onto the site, users are more likely to blame that user for their actions because they understand that the site administrators allow them that freedom and are therefore not responsible. Users will assume that the moderator will reprimand that user for their actions and they may initiate a dialogue with the moderator, notifying them of the offender, in an attempt to help maintain site culture. From a legal standpoint, corporations are less liable because they didn't approve the content that was deemed offensive.

Post -Moderation weaknesses:

Dubious Content

Allowing content be go live immediately does leave the chance for inappropriate and/or offensive material to be published. Whether it is removed a minute after it goes live or a week, the chances are that at least some users will see it.



Of course, while it can be considered a weakness in the minds of many brand representatives, the reality is that this type of activity can lead to a positive overall situation. Post-moderation tells users from the beginning that you trust them, that you believe people are basically good. When your users see that you're taking an active role in maintaining the site, the relationship between you and them can be deepened because they see that you're as interested in keeping things upbeat and positive as they are.

At the same time, the people who would post dubious content lose interest and move on when they see that their content is being removed nearly as fast as they can post it.

The Truth Hurts

As with the potential for dubious content, there is also a chance that users will post negative thoughts/feeling about or associated with the brand. While nobody likes to hear negative things about themselves or their projects, this is the reality of a two-way relationship. When you start a conversation and open yourself up to consumers, they're not always going to tell you what you want to hear.

But this is where vast opportunity lies. Imagine the consumer connection that's formed when you take a negative comment and turn it into a conversation starter where you are able to explain your side of things. Imagine consumers getting a better picture of what your brand's position on the particular issue is. These are the things that forge true consumer connection.

Less Overall Control

The freedom to upload content from users means that they get to define the environment and the culture within it. They get to dictate how it evolves and what about it is relevant and valuable. They will also morph it to fit their needs, which may affect the overall structure of the site.

This means you're not in control of what the site is, or how it grows. But that's what makes projects like these so effective! The mantra is: "Control through participation, not control through directive".



Developing your Moderation Strategy

Since each Web site, and each marketing project is different from the one that came before, it's important to design a customized strategy specific to your site. In order to do that, there are several key questions to address.

What is the overall goal of the project?

The most important question to ask is: "What do I want to achieve with this project, and what kind of project is this?"

Not surprisingly, different projects have different goals. A blog from a single expert user has different goals and is fundamentally a different type of project than a large photo gallery site that accepts photo submissions from users. If your goal is to create a project that is driven entirely by users, with you following along, your approach would be different from trying to promote a new product in a highly specific way.

Pre-moderation tells users that you aren't necessarily inclined to trust them and further, has the burden of having users believe, at least until you repeatedly prove them wrong, that you will censor non-supportive content. These are not inconsequential elements of overall project success, so be sure to consider all of the angles here.

Always start with the assumption of post-moderation. As the project concept evolves, you will see that that position is well founded or that you have enough red flags to move to pre-moderation. Pre-moderation is an easy starting point, but isn't always the right one.

As you work on the project concept design, write down your pro/con list for each type of moderation. Before you step up to the authoritative, possible success restriction of pre-moderation, ask yourself if you can address your list of post-moderation issues with a better concept design overall instead of going to pre-moderation.

Where are your limits?

Once a moderation type has been chosen, the real decisions begin. A significant part of an Authentic Media program is determining and documenting core standards for what type of content will be accepted. While you will not be able to document how to handle every situation



(there will be far too many), you will need to determine your general acceptance level. How far are you willing to let your community guide the discussion?

- Are you willing to hear negative things about your brand?
- If a piece of content isn't flat out negative (porn, hate speech), appropriate and interesting to the target, but isn't comfortable to you, do you take it down?
- Are you ready to discuss issues that are brought to light by your consumers? Have you prepared an effective and appropriate communication channel?

Make sure you think through as many of these (and other) questions as you can *in advance of launch*. It's always easier to make decisions off the cuff if you have a solid base to operate from.

Have you planned your resources?

Whether the choice is made to go with pre- or post-moderation, there will need to be at least one person (often more) to actually do the moderation. The cost of this extra staff member needs to be included in the project budget.

Planning for moderation is often summed up with one question: "How long am I comfortable with a dubious piece of content existing on the Web site before it's removed?"

If the acceptable timeframe is 20 minutes, more full-time moderators are needed than if your timeframe is 48 hours.

Have you prepared your response?

None of us like to think about worst case scenarios, but as anyone in the public relations field can attest - it's better to be prepared. The worst response in a crisis is "I don't know".

Thinking through and writing down the worst case scenarios plan is crucial. Those scenarios should include a fully developed a well thought out answer/response to each of those scenarios. Anyone on staff who might speak to the press should be very familiar with these responses.

The likelihood of any of these worst case scenarios happening is very low. Don't let the fear overtake project opportunity. The best response for these worst case scenarios is solid preparation.



What, specifically, draws you to one type of moderation or the other?

From a brand perspective, pre-moderation is often the “safest” starting point for the decision makers because of the perception of reduced risk. But the reality is that the risk is shifted from content uploads to project success. If the project is best suited for post-moderation, based on consumer needs/interests and the choice is made to go to pre-moderation there is a good chance that the project will not meet expectations. What’s the bigger risk?

As you think through these questions, be sure to make notes of your answers. Share these answers with your agency or consultants so they can help you see your true concerns and overall mindset.

Besides moderation, what else are you doing?

Don’t forget the other facets of protecting the safety and upbeat spirit of the Authentic Media project. With clear rules, smart project design, user participation in the safety of the site, and fully realized social design, moderation isn’t the only thing protecting and growing the project.

Final Thoughts

Authentic Media projects are creating massive amounts of consumer connection, word-of-mouth buzz, and press attention. The future of marketing truly lies in creating more direct engagement with consumers.

There’s no question that brands need to plan and act smart in order to ensure that Authentic Media projects meet their goals. But don’t let fear stand in the way of project success. It’s easy to get caught up in worst case scenarios, with a bulk of the project planning being focused on what do to in those few worst cases rather than the plentiful best cases. There will always be a few bad apples in any group, and your users understand that. The task is not trying to eliminate something that can’t ever be fully removed, it’s developing a system that makes the bad apples lose interest and move on.

The last piece of consideration is perhaps the most significant: **Stay the course.**



Social systems and social interaction is rarely final from the beginning. Think about two people who have just started dating; their first date was likely many times more uncomfortable than their second date.

Authentic Media projects should absolutely be well planned before launch, but until real people start really using your project, you won't know what truly engages and excites them. Listen to the feedback they give you. Be prepared to tweak the project throughout it's lifespan to continually excite users.

Sure, sometimes projects are not designed correctly and really do need to be canceled. Just make sure to give the social system time to find its feet before you pull the plug.

And don't forget to have fun! Engaging with your consumer base on terms that interest and excite them is an amazing adventure. Enjoy it!



Additional Resources

Slingshot, L.L.C.

<http://www.davidandgoliath.com>

Customer Interaction Blogs

Community Guy

<http://www.communityguy.com>

Church of the Customer

<http://www.churchofthecustomer.com>

Seth Godin

<http://sethgodin.typepad.com>

Guy Kawasaki

<http://blog.guykawasaki.com/>

Customers on Fire

<http://www.customersonfire.com/>

About the Author

Jake McKee is an evangelist for online and offline consumer interaction. He has been working with online communities since the early days of the Internet, and has a rich background in Web development, community management, business strategy, and product development.

Jake is the Director of Consumer Experience Strategy at [Slingshot](#), a Dallas-based marketing agency. Previously, Jake was the Global Community Relations Specialist for the [LEGO Company](#), where he worked to build a deep relationship with the adult LEGO hobbyists and change the perception of those hobbyists within the company.

Being an evangelist, Jake can't seem to get enough consumer interaction discussion during the work day and blogs on the subject regularly at www.communityguy.com.