



Mar 25, 2009

Case Study #CS1648:

[How to Build a Subscriber List Inexpensively Using Blogs, Contests](#)

SUMMARY: Don't want to spend a fortune to build an email list? You don't have to. We interviewed a marketer who multiplied his subscribers list 20 times by involving popular bloggers in his low-cost campaign.

Find out how you too could expand a marketing file by holding one contest for bloggers, and another for their readers. Includes results and creative samples.

CHALLENGE

Patric Welch, Owner, Noobie, needed a bigger marketing file. The technology education site had a list of well-qualified email newsletter subscribers, but it did not have enough names. Welch wanted his email promotions to have more impact, and for that he needed a larger list.

His team decided to target a specific demographic through well-established blogs. Welch created one contest that required entrants to share their email addresses, and another to encourage bloggers to write about the former one. In October 2008, Welch's team ran a private contest for bloggers and a public one for their readers.

CAMPAIGN

Step #1: Target an audience

Welch felt that moms could use more technology advice, especially in the digital camera market, he says. He dug into the "Mommy Blogger" phenomenon to find that audience. Many mothers and mothers-to-be candidly share their experiences and opinions online. Some mommy blogs, such as dooce, get well over 100,000 unique visitors a month, according to Compete.

Step #2: Set prizes and rules of contest

- o Wii for readers

Welch set the hard-to-find Nintendo Wii as the grand prize for the blogs' readers. The campaign ran from October to December 12, giving the winner the option to give the Wii as a holiday gift to a loved one.

"At the time, the Wii was the hottest commodity going, and to get your hands on one involved waiting in line at a store for an hour before it opened," he says.

Readers submitted their full names and email addresses for a chance to win. They could also receive additional entries (and a better chance of winning) by referring five friends to enter the contest. After December 12, the winner was picked at random.

- o iPods for bloggers

Note: This portion of the contest was not publicized. The blogs' readers were unaware of it.

The bloggers could win one of two prizes: an iPod Nano or an iPod Shuffle -- both very popular consumer gadgets. The Nano was awarded to the blogger who generated the most signups for the contest. The Shuffle was awarded to the blogger responsible for registering the winner of the Wii.

"I thought to myself, 'If someone blazes out ahead, the others are going to give up, so I included the Shuffle as another prize,'" Welch says.

As the campaign got under way, Welch realized the possibility that one blogger could win both prizes. He decided to change the rules to prevent that from happening. "No one was upset by it. They all understood," he says.

Step #3: Set up landing page and auto emails

Welch's team created a contest landing page (see creative samples below). The page included:

- Explanation of contest and rules
- Picture of the Wii
- 3 text boxes for first name, last name and email address
- Terms, conditions and "agree" checkbox
- 5 textboxes to refer friends via email

Those who entered the contest were added to Noobie's marketing file. The referred friends were not added to the file unless they visited the site and registered for the contest.

o Auto-email referrals

Welch's team wrote a script to email the referrals automatically. The email quickly explained the contest and provided a link to the landing page.

"What was nice about the script is that it had the name of the person who had originated the entry. So it said 'your friend, John Smith, says you might be interested in this.'"

Step #4: Set up coded links and a tracking page

Welch's team created coded links to identify each source of traffic to the landing page. This way, they could see which sources were driving the most registrations. Sources included:

- Blogs (each blog link coded separately)
- Referrals
- Emails to Noobie's newsletter subscribers
- Social networks
- Google AdWords
- Link from homepage

o Drive competition

Welch wanted the bloggers – the main drivers of the campaign – to compete with one another for the iPod Nano. He created a page that listed the blogs by their number of registrations in descending order. The blogs' names were coded, so that they would not be known to one another.

This page was updated regularly. Welch would email the bloggers once a week with an update on their

rankings and a link to the stats page. “The purpose behind this was that when somebody sitting comfortably at 500 signups in first place gets passed at 520, it gives them a little nudge to get back and promote it a little better and get back in first place again,” he says.

Step #5: Find and message bloggers

With the architecture in place, Welch started researching and reaching out to “mommy bloggers.” He found them through basic Web searches. When he found a blog he liked, he looked at its “blog roll,” or links section, to find similar sites. “This is where the hours of work piled up,” he says.

o Determine site size

Welch looked at the sites’ number of RSS subscribers (if publicized) and the freshness of its content. Having 500 RSS subscribers was enough, as long as the blog’s content was fresh, he says. He decided not to reach out to stale blogs, even if their numbers were higher.

You can also look at a blog’s monthly Web traffic and Technorati rank to get a better idea of its readership and authority (see links below).

o Send everything in one email

Welch identified about 200 blogs to pitch. Rather than sparking an on-going dialogue with each, he sent everything a blogger would need in one email. This included:

- o Description of the contest**
- o Coded link to the landing page**
- o Link to the stats page**
- o Link to an image that could be used as an ad**

“I started out by sending the ad as a JPEG attachment. Then I thought to myself, ‘that’s another reason for someone to think I’m sending a virus or something and not bother,’” he says.

Welch looked for contact information for the bloggers on their websites. When all else failed, he submitted to their “contact us” forms. His email was a friendly soft-sell, he says, suggesting that the bloggers write about the contest, or post the ad on their site.

o Be prepared to answer questions

The most common questions Welch received about the contest and their answers:

1. Q: I have four blogs. Can I write about this on all of them?

A: Absolutely.

2. Q: I only do exclusive contests where one of my readers is guaranteed to win. Is that possible to arrange?

A: No.

3. Q: When this post rolls off my page, can I write about it again?

A: Sure.

The rest of the questions were mainly clarifications about how long the contest would run and other minor details, he says.

Step #6: Promote elsewhere

Welch also mentioned the contest in:

- Noobie's weekly email
- His Twitter feed
- Noobie Facebook group
- Smaller Indiana: a local online social network

He did not push hard in these areas for several reasons. First, his target audience was not in these channels. Second, most of the people in these channels already knew Noobie and its email newsletter. Last, he considered promoting to his email list "self defeating," but did mention the contest as a courtesy to Noobie's audience.

He also promoted the contest through Google AdWords, but shut off the campaign after a few days. "The bloggers were driving more traffic for free," he says.

Step #7: Scrub list, remind new subscribers

The contest's registration form did not prevent multiple signups. Welch's team had to scrub the list of duplicate entries before awarding the prizes, and before promoting to the list later on.

o Reminder in first email

Contest registrants were told in the terms and conditions that they would be signed up for Noobie's emails. Since he knew that most people would not read the fine print, Welch reminded the new subscribers of this fact in the first email sent to them (see creative samples).

The email's header stated: "Note: You are receiving this email because you are a subscriber to Noobie's regular mailing list or you recently signed up for one of Noobie's product giveaways."

RESULTS

"I was ecstatic about the results," Welch says. "I probably had five times the page views per month while the contest was running, compared to normally."

After the contest, the traffic settled down to about double its previous volume, he says.

In all, Welch's small email list exploded to 20 times its previous size. The blogs were by far the strongest force, driving 71.5% of the registrations. Signups from other sources:

- Referrals from friends: 12.8%
- Unknown: 10.8%
- Google AdWords 2.1%
- Emails: 1.6%
- Social networks: 1.0%
- Homepage link: 0.2%

"Unknown" represents the percentage of registrations that came through without a tracking code.

About 40 blogs, or 20% of those emailed, wrote about the contest.

o Wandering contestants

“Some people who signed up for the contest when they submitted the form, they got a thank-you page on my website. That thank-you page had three hot things I wanted them to know about Noobie, with links. So, some people stayed on the site and navigated around. And some people even went as far as to use the normal email sign-up box that I have on the footer of every page.”

Useful links related to this article:

Noobie Contest Creative Samples

<http://www.marketingsherpa.com/cs/noobiecontest/study.html>

FormSpring: Helped Noobie build landing page form and script

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

Compete

<http://compete.com/>

Technorati: Parenting blogs directory

<http://technorati.com/blogs/directory/lifestyle/parenting>

50 Best Mom Blogs

<http://www.onteenstoday.com/2008/03/18/50-best-mom-blog/>

dooce

<http://dooce.com/>

Nintendo Wii

<http://www.nintendo.com/wii>

Noobie: Friendly technology coaching and consulting

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

Comments about this Case Study

Mar 25, 2009 - Jim of Olympus says:

Didn't you find that automatically subscribing users without an active opt-in to be detrimental to list quality in the long run. From what I've read here on the Marketing Sherpa site in the past, this does not seem like a "best practice."

Mar 25, 2009 - Adam of MarketingSherpa says:

Hi Jim, Quality is certainly an issue. Welch is actually keeping the subscribers generated from this campaign separate from his original list, which he considers "better qualified." He sends infrequent announcements, such as for big promotions or a new service, to the newer list in hopes of bringing them over to the better-

qualified weekly subscribers, he says.

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Editorial HQ: MarketingSherpa LLC 499 Main St., Warren, RI 02885