

Getting The Target To Talk Back

by Steve Smith

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IT'S HARD TO GET MOBILE marketers to disclose raw numbers. With all the talk about hundreds of millions of handsets out there waiting for advertisers to target, the actual response rates on some mobile campaigns can be disarmingly low. "Managing expectations" is still one of the watchwords of the industry. So when youth-oriented operator Boost Mobile and mobile community provider AirG say they garnered 1.5 million contest entries off of a mobile campaign for car customizer West Coast Customs, I had to take the bait. Apparently the client was taken by surprise by this one. "They didn't think it would be this big," says Fred Ghahramani, director of AirG. Those 1.5 million entries came in almost entirely via the phone in a 90-day span. Keep in mind that Boost Mobile is an MVNO form Sprint Nextel aimed at the youth market. It only has 3.8 million customers. The campaign hit every entrant into the AirG's Boost Hookt mobile community with takeover call to action ads. There was also support in-store, and on the West Coast's and Boost's MySpace pages, as well as nationwide radio. But the entries, 98% of them, came via the phone.

Part of the secret sauce for this campaign was careful media planning and targeting on the front end. "We don't think this would have worked on another network," says Ghahramani. "The offer doesn't resonate with the demographic or the user. But with Boost Hookt you got urban youth who care about pimping out their cars."

In fact, the winner of the pimped-out car at the center of this contest was a young Jersey man who was a gas station attendant and one of ten kids in his family. A \$40,000 tricked-out car was exactly the lure he would have wanted. The contest, the delivery vehicle, and the offer apparently hit their target dead-on.

The funny thing about this winner is, he also fits the profile of mobile community members that Ghahramani described to me months ago when I first discussed with him AirG's wild popularity on networks like Boost and Sprint. To me, the chat rooms and IM exchanges in these room seem fleeting and random, but for many others it is the perfect sort of mobile socializing. The majority of AirG community member do not own their own PC or share one with someone else. Passing along "whassups" in mobile chat rooms that are arranged by region or topic is a kind of break-time entertainment for folks like this contest winner who are busy at service jobs that afford them little time to themselves. They also work as viral marketers for the community by urging their friends to join so they can be included in their chat circles. "The average friend in our system has seven friends on his hot list, so they get others into the system," says Ghahramani.

And the amount of sheer activity that goes on in a mobile community can be an awesome driver of both reach and frequency. It is like a rapid of people and interactivity sweeping by, that can flood your expectations in an instant if you know how to dip in. AirG does surveys of its community, and recently netted 10,000 users in 22 minutes. But Ghahramani says it is not about the sheer tonnage so much as the targeting and value of the offer to that particular audience. He has seen promotions like the West Coast Customs campaign not register this dramatically. "The thing we learned is, it's not just about the ad," he says.

Getting 1.5 million entries off of a niche audience on a small carrier in 90 days is a good indication of how powerful the medium can be when marketers really hit their relevancy target. On mobile, media planning could be king. Aligning just the right offer with just the right target via just the right content may become the mobile marketer's delicate dark art. Which is to say that mobile requires all the same disciplines that make all forms of digital marketing work... only more so.

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