

The Internet Generation Conundrum

Yes, you *can* reach an audience that is too savvy to click a banner ad.

Born with a mouse in their hands and weaned on mobile phones, IM and Facebook profiles, the Internet generation hates me.

My carefully crafted collateral, commercials, even my websites are dismissed by this audience as blatant and futile attempts to deceive them. They think I'm selling something that's not as good as I say it is. They believe I am a liar.

Guess what? They're right.

But let me back up a bit. Hi. I'm Steve. I'm a marketer. And the Internet generation hates me.

But that's just part of the game, and I came to win. Composed of young Gen Y'ers and Gen Z'ers – anyone born after 1982 – I call them the Internet generation, or the iGeneration. Many of the iGen'ers think that if I had the time to produce fancy collateral and polished Web pages, then I must have also had time to inject lies and falsehoods into those vehicles to

trick them into considering or purchasing my product.

As a marketer, it is my job to consider all of this when I create programs designed to reach a specific audience, even one as skeptical as the iGen'ers. This audience invented online social commentary and word-of-mouth marketing without even thinking about it. They turn first to their friends to learn about a product's value; they observe what other people are using before they jump in; and many enjoy discovering new things and sharing their finds with their friends. Shiny new things are a form of fashion – hard to discover but fun and easy to spread, even scoop. That process of discovery is something modern marketers must tap. Or be vilified and die.

So the iGen'ers don't believe our fancy ads in magazines. They don't believe the advertising we place on TV or radio – though they *will* pay attention to

a humorous or self-effacing commercial, even reposting it on YouTube if it hits the right note. And many refuse to click on our banner ads or fill out Web forms for fear of being targeted for additional marketing. So how do we reach them?

DON'T REACH. EMBRACE.

First and foremost, remember that the Internet generation prefers to do its own primary research, first asking friends and family what they are using, then turning to Google to see what other people think. I offer these words to market by: Products don't sell. *People do.*

Apple has figured this out. Look carefully at Apple's iPod television commercials, billboards or posters. You'll see lots of happy, young people dancing in silhouette against a colorful and ever-changing background. Throughout the commercial, those distinctive iPod white headphones flow in sync to the silhouette's energetic movements. What you don't see is a focus on the iPod's product features – how to select a song or change the volume, for instance. And that's because Apple isn't selling you an MP3 player. It's inviting viewers to experience the Apple lifestyle and become part of the iPod community. The implicit message is this: Use any other MP3 player, and you'll hear good music, but use an iPod and you'll feel good. You'll be part of the club. That silhouette is *you*. (FYI, the silhouette is an old real estate marketing trick: Get the

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intended buyers to imagine themselves in the space. That's why you remove all your personal belongings when you show your house – and bake cookies – making it easier for them to imagine their stuff in your home.)

Apple's engineers did not design those white iPod earbuds. They are a pure Apple marketing trick designed to make the visible part of the product stand out. But the earbuds accomplish something much more important: They act as a status symbol. They were a way for Apple's early adopters to reference-sell while also making them feel part of an exclusive club. For \$79 – the price of an iPod shuffle – you, too, can join the club. And new members gladly don those white earbuds and continue to flaunt the iPod lifestyle to the few who remain on the outside. The cycle continues until the club is no longer exclusive and the iPod becomes part of our everyday vocabulary, which, by the way, happened in less than three years.

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GIVE THEM A MEGAPHONE

So let's say you don't have a product like Apple's iPod, where you can combine great design with great marketing so effectively that you entice iGen'ers to unwittingly become part of your go-to-market plan. Or, worse yet, what if your customers are not happy with something you did before or are upset that your product did not live up to your promises in the past? How can you overcome such a real, emotional deficit?

The best thing you can do is to create a community where your existing and potential customers can vent or view oth-

ers' frustrations in the open. Create a space where any member can join the discussion, witness your real efforts to improve and see firsthand how you treat your customers. Add a simple feature to your website to encourage conversations. Create a forum.

Around 2003, I became responsible for product marketing at Avid Technology, Inc., just as the company ran into a huge problem. Ongoing product delays and lingering quality issues were threatening sales of its core revenue engine, the Avid Media Composer video- and film-editing system. Years of product issues and

executive perspective

unscrupulous pricing practices were enticing many longtime customers to abandon Avid for the first viable, competitive solution: Apple's cheaper Final Cut Pro. Previous market research had misled Avid's management; customer surveys seemed to say, "Love the product, hate the company." Consequently, little was done to improve the company's relationship with its users. But now, those users were starting to hate the product too.

The most upset users turned to the only outlet for their frustration, the decade-old Avid listserv (Email list) known as the Avid-

L. Here, Avid's most loyal and most vocal customers vented their spleen against Avid's management. Concerned that potential customers would be frightened away by this online soap opera, Avid's gut reaction was simply to shut down the Avid-L. Avid expected that this would put an end to the flames of discontent. But their self-preservation instinct was dead wrong.

Around the same time, I was also given responsibility for getting new users into the Avid fold. We informally called this target group the "future professionals," and our goal was to reach beyond existing custom-

ers we already knew and who already knew us. I realized we would need happy, vocal customers to spread our messages and help generate lift among other new prospects. We called it "the megaphone effect." If vocal customers told the world how happy they were with our product or, even better, how delighted they were with the company, future customers would believe their words much more than ours. In short, even noncustomers would tell their friends good things about Avid, and our reputation would be improved.



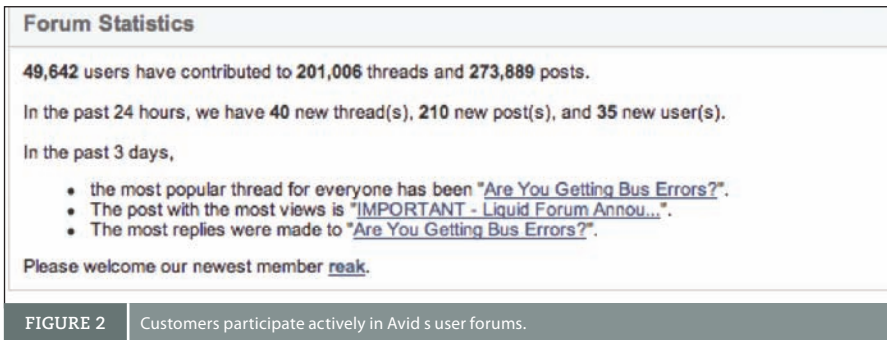
So instead of shutting down the one place where our customers' voices could be heard, I hired a "customer advocate" from a former competitor. Known famously online by just her first name, Marianna, she rebuilt that single Avid-L forum into more than 70 discussion threads focused on specific segments of Avid's user base (see Figure 1). Furthermore, she invited the most vocal participants to moderate these forums (for free) and she encouraged them (and all users) to express their issues online. If customers could not achieve satisfaction using Avid's existing channels, Marianna committed to doggedly champion their issues to internal company stakeholders. She shared her office, mobile and sometimes even her own home phone numbers in the online forums.

Simultaneously, we built the Avid user groups from a sleepy handful to more than 65 active worldwide groups. We organized annual user receptions for more than 2,000 customers and shared new product news with them before the opening day of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) conference, a key event for our customer base. We even introduced customers to our CEO so that personal connections could be made and grievances aired.

The end result of all these efforts was that previously disgruntled customers, who were preventing new users from consider-

Forums	Last Post	Threads	Posts
Avid Xpress Pro - PC	Re: Run PC version of XPre... by Kriston VanNatten Today, 2:54 AM	12,895	78,514
Avid Xpress Pro - Mac	Re: "Media Offline" - I m... by Kriston VanNatten Today, 2:58 AM	4,180	24,334
Avid Xpress Studio - PC Avid Xpress Pro Avid 3D Avid FX Avid DVD by Sonic Avid Pro Tools LE	Re: Encoding for Avid DVD... by wincolt Today, 1:44 AM	1,407	7,527
Avid Liquid Chrome HD	Re: Options by smvans3 Today, 2:29 AM	368	2,144
Avid Xpress DV - PC	Re: How is best to fix cu... by Sam White Yesterday, 8:04 PM	1,191	5,394
Avid Xpress DV - Mac	Re: CLIPS WON'T KEEP U... by glicch 10-26-2007 6:21 AM	246	1,224
Avid DS Nitris	Re: Nitris 720p 59.94 cap... by dou1136 Yesterday, 11:58 PM	407	1,550
Avid Symphony Nitris	Re: Exporting animated ma... by DMCL Yesterday, 6:33 PM	613	3,266
Avid Media Composer - PC	Re: Easy to use converter... by Kevin Klimak Today, 2:17 AM	3,726	22,344
Avid Media Composer - Mac	Re: Auxiliary timecode an... by carlone Today, 1:33 AM	2,036	12,321
Xpress / Media Composer / Symphony (Meridian)	Re: Images in rolling tit... by Neil J Yesterday, 1:19 PM	745	3,660
Avid Unity / Workgroups / Local Storage	Re: Ethernet Clients Loos... by jlsctago Yesterday, 3:57 PM	590	2,937
Avid Interplay	Re: Check in all open bin... by Macrodas 10-30-2007 6:05 PM	14	85

FIGURE 1 Avid's forums provide a rich source of product information and a way of boosting customer satisfaction.



after searching online for content made specifically for the video iPod. YouTube was littered with amateur (mostly bad) video or professional (mostly illegal) video clips. However, there was a paucity of content made expressly for this medium that had high production values, stickiness and a built-in need to share with friends.

Tim Street, the creator and producer of French Maid TV, offered a unique solution: five-minute videos starring sexy French maids demonstrating a solution to a technical problem; for example, "how to register a domain name" or "how to perform CPR." A Hollywood producer by trade,

ing our products, turned into happy and vocal advocates for the company. And despite nagging product issues, the company recorded record unit and revenue growth during a market downturn.

REACH THEM WHERE THEY LIVE

I mentioned before that many iGen'ers are too savvy to click a banner ad, or they are apt to dismiss your website as a pack of lies. So what can you do to get them to pay attention to your marketing messages? The answer is obvious: If you can't get them to come to you, then you need to go to them.

Late in 2006, I accepted a challenge to become vice president of marketing to convert a failing enterprise software firm into a consumer company and launch a free social-sharing product called Tubes. Tubes lets users share any type of digital content over the Internet, and it is more versatile than the myriad simple file-sharing and backup solutions available on the Web. Yet Tubes' usefulness was part of our problem: The product did so many different things for so many types of users that it was hard to communicate a simple value proposition.

To gain traction, we needed to occupy a particular, existing shelf in our target audience's mind and solve a single, specific issue that was problematic to our target group. And we needed a marketing vehicle that would reach our audience where they lived and help them spread the word for us. We decided to use YouTube as the delivery mechanism to keep costs down while leveraging the viral features of the popular platform.

I was familiar with a unique form of advertising I dubbed "Trojan-horse infotizing" (entertainment that sucks you in before

Their self-preservation instinct was dead wrong.

you realize it is a commercial), and I hired a new type of marketing firm, French Maid TV, to produce a viral video. I had come to know French Maid TV

Street hired real actresses, and he filmed and edited the French Maid TV clips with the high production values of network sitcoms. The viewers, mostly males between

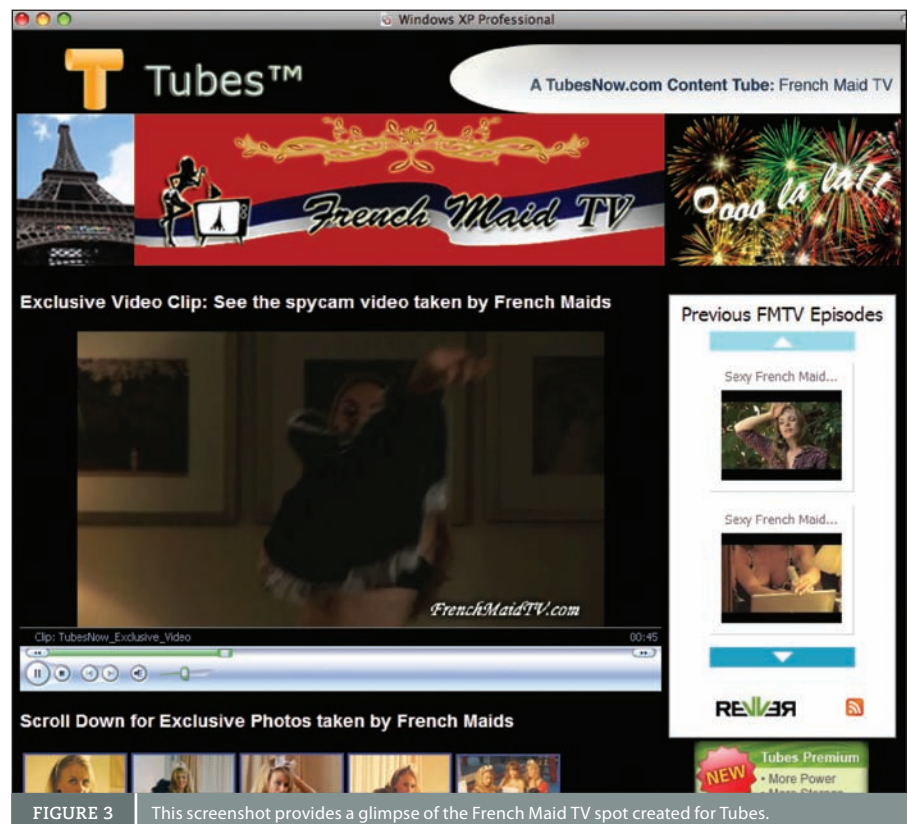



FIGURE 3 This screenshot provides a glimpse of the French Maid TV spot created for Tubes.

executive perspective



Sexy French Maid TV - How To Share Photos

The Hot, Sexy Girls of French Maid TV are at it again with a funny online detective caper. Laura's French Maid Costume, bra, panties and feather [\(more\)](#)

Tags: [Funny](#) [comedy](#) [hot](#) [sexy](#) [women](#) [girls](#) [french](#) [maid](#) [detective](#) [caper](#) [cat](#) [burglar](#) [costume](#) [bra](#) [panties](#) [underwear](#) [clothes](#) [feather](#)

Time: **06:27**

★★★★★

From: [FrenchMaidTV](#)
Views: **3,338,671**
Added: **4 months ago**

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FIGURE 4 Would you guess that this French Maid TV video listed on YouTube is actually a commercial message?

the ages of 18 and 35 (i.e., the target audience for Tubes), would subscribe to get these podcasts from the iTunes Music Store or search and share them with friends via YouTube. I banked on pent-up demand for a new episode of French Maid TV (the last episode had been released six months prior), and I knew that new iPhone users would be eager to try the built-in YouTube video player with content specifically made for the iPhone (our video was encoded in iPhone-friendly H.264 format, while most YouTube video was simply encoded in Flash format).

Our episode, entitled "How to Share Photos," debuted in June 2007, and it showcased Tubes in the context of a spy caper (see Figure 3). The sexy French maids had to recover a stolen uniform, and they needed physical proof before the sexy police would take action. So the maids went on a stakeout and used Tubes to share spycam photos and

videos of the perpetrator with the police. We literally seduced the audience into watching our decidedly PG-13 featurette before they had any idea it was a commercial for Tubes (see Figure 4). As a final viral hook, we pre-

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sented a unique URL and encouraged viewers to visit our site and sign up for a private "tube" that contained exclusive high-resolution photos and videos that the French maids collected during the caper.

By the first weekend, our viral video had been viewed over 2 million times, luring over 50,000 visitors to our site and over 30,000 new users to try Tubes and share it with their friends. No other medium could have more economically distributed our message right to the hearts of our target users and straight onto their own iPods.

IN SUMMARY

While traditional approaches are waning in effectiveness, there are ways to reach and entice the iGeneration. You can make them an intrinsic part of your go-to-market plans like Apple's white headphones. You can give their voices a platform like Avid's community forums. Or you can use their own medium and RSS feeds to reach them right within

their favorite hangouts, like Tubes' YouTube video. Whatever you do, just make sure you give them something of value and a simple way to help them spread your message. ■