

How do I engage youth in social programs?

Free EBOOK



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Youth Marketing Alchemy – Turning Lead into Gold

It's an unusually warm Spring morning and a crowd of students gathers across from the reservoir in Hackney.

Saturday 9am.

Most of their peers would be sound asleep or perhaps even returning home from a night out in London.

Striped jerseys, hoodies and the uniform destroyed-look jeans were of the order. Meticulously manicured swept haircuts, chiseled goatee beards, jewelry and the constant backdrop of ringtones. These weren't the squares that sacrifice a social life for better grades, but your average outgoing youth who had been given something to care about.

18-year-old Kelly arrived well before the appointed hour. Various members of the tribe trickled in slowly as heads turned in anticipation of new arrivals, awaiting their instruction for the off.

It's difficult to imagine something compelling enough to motivate 20 students to sacrifice a weekend and endure the pains of an early morning start for.

Here were 20 students giving up a precious Saturday morning to volunteer for work normally reserved as punishment for reforming criminals. Yes, you read that right – students volunteering to do the dirty work. This is Orange Rockcorps

– one of the most effective youth marketing strategies to date and it’s a strategy we can learn from both in the commercial and public sector.

Too often we spice up the boring, the mundane and the irrelevant by throwing large sums of cash at the problem. Window dressing will make boring content and boring non-profits interesting for a short while, but what you’re offering is still lead, it’s still of little long term value.

How, therefore, can we turn this lead into gold? How do we make it compelling?

Well, firstly – if you’re scratching your head about engaging youth in social programs you’re probably also thinking “how do I make this project cool?” How on earth, for example, could cleaning out swampland in a London suburb, learning CPR techniques in Oregon, helping young women educate each other about domestic violence in Malaysia or working with ex-gang members in the hardened townships of Cape Town be anything apart from graft for young people?

Perhaps we could employ a local celebrity to jazz it up, run a competition, become friends with them on Facebook, give away prizes, funk the message up on a high-viz ad campaign to mollify the general dreadfulness associated with any kind of work that impinges on a morning lie-in after a heavy night out?

Such as the characteristic reactions to the problem of engaging youth in social programs encouraged by advertising and media agencies alike – why? Because it’s what they’ve always done, it’s what makes them a lot of money and it’s – to put it bluntly – lazy.

I’ll show you through example how brands and public sector organizations have engaged youth in social programs by *first* making that program relevant. The sweeteners you employ – prizes, celebrities, competitions, getting on Facebook, mobile etc have their place but they aren’t your main strategic consideration.

In this EBook I’ll show you how it’s done by referring to case study evidence presented on the mobileYouth site and on Upstart Radio (mobileYouth’s youth marketing radio channel – you can listen online on mobileYouth.org). If you’re interested in learning more from the case studies presented here – I’d advise you start your research by checking out episodes 7,8 & 9.

1) Focus on the message not the media

I’ve seen it countless times and I haven’t seen it for the last time. A non-profit gets sold on the witchcraft of the creative agency who wows them with the advertising pitch. They come to you with convincing youth insights (which are merely pre-pitch “dips” rather than anything consistent) and tell you how this ad campaign will drive awareness by getting you onto Facebook, local TV and so on.

What they forget to tell you is that awareness means absolutely zip – yes, that’s right – nothing, nada. When was the last time you bought a Cadillac? Which is

one of the most respected and fastest growing youth brands in the US? Monster – a brand *you* have probably never heard of. Exactly, what's awareness worth?

You see, modern youth marketers need to be focusing their energies *not* on the choice of the medium but on how to build dialogue with youth. If your agency is telling you that the answer is specific to a medium – it's Facebook, it's twitter etc, you need to get yourself an agency that understands youth because they're more interested in winning awards for their clever creative work rather than winning customers and attention for your message.

And that's exactly what it's about – attention is your biggest cost when dealing with youth.

That's all very well, you may add, but what if my agency is dealing with an issue that isn't fun, fresh and funky like a Monster Energy Drinks or a Nike? How do I engage them? I'm assuming that the easy (and lazy) answer involves throwing a lot of money at the problem. If youth aren't engaged with your cause then what could be more effective than paying a chunk of cash to hire a celebrity who they trust to tell them about it?

In fact, the answer to this question is lots of things. This was the challenge presented to Bret Bernhoft of Insyght Consulting in Oregon USA when approached by the Red Cross. Sure, there's lots of ways you could get Gen Y volunteering for the Red Cross and I'd bet a lot of them involved spending cash to win their attention in the short term. Very few, however are sustainable.

Bret, however, nailed the issue: "If you can find the story, the narrative that makes that brand or non profit relevant to young people you've done your whole job – and choices about social media etc are secondary".

Find the relevance; focus on the message before you consider the medium.

The Red Cross is a good example, featured in Upstart Radio episode 7. Here's a cause that isn't funky, that doesn't have the attention of youth. How do you get that message across?

In Bret's case it was about finding the message that resonated with youth. Here's a cause that focuses on health, lifestyle and wellbeing. Here's a cause without which we'd be in a much worse place. Here's a cause that has saved lives. For a number of youth, that message resonates and the challenge lies in identifying how to build a narrative around youth through which this message runs as a social fabric.

Insyght did this successfully through addressing the key issues that youth face on a daily basis and this is where you have to remove yourself from a product-centric approach. Rather than impress the message upon youth, think about what their daily challenges are and how you can organize that message into some form of context to address those challenges. Insyght helped the Red Cross offer CPR training for young singles – great idea? Sure there are plenty of options

to meet young singles out there but few in a non-dating environment and here's an opportunity to show you have a social conscience and care. Why is the Church a dominant force in many communities? – not necessarily because of the message – but because of the community and social interaction it offers.

Getting youth involved means finding a message from your own story that resonates and then building a context around that message for them to interact with one another.

2) Create context not content

Marketing guru Seth Godin asks – are you selling your product or are you connecting your customers? Great brands know that it's the latter than offers long-term sustainability.

When Procter & Gamble wanted to sell Tampax to 13 year old girls it could have so easily flexed its advertising and marketing muscle to win some knock down media buys and get the brand noticed as so many brands have been doing for the last 50 years.

The decisions that followed would have focused on the nature of the *content* for the marketing – the ad agency's "big idea". The big idea is usually humorous, involves a celebrity of some sort and wants to be "viral". What better than an animal playing a musical instrument on YouTube?

None of this however outlasts the advertising dollars you're willing to invest in the content. Once you're ad dollars stop, so does all that good will. Youth will easily find the next thing to engage their senses in.

So how can non-profits do it with a limited budget?

The answer lies in *context* rather than *content*. Creating marketing content is of little value without a context in which youth can interact with you. So, if you're managing a social program, you need to consider the context in which, as Godin says, you are enabling youth to connect with one another.

The Red Cross example highlights how context can be created effectively through lateral thinking.

Orange Rockcorps teaches us that you can sell content that was previously viewed as a suitable punishment for youth offending teams as a fun, social weekend for young people *if*, and it's a big *if*, you sell it as a context. How can this program help me belong? How can this program make me feel significant?

There are many connections your social program can make, you only need to look at the issue laterally rather than through the lens of "how can I make this content cool?" Youth want opportunities to network, to connect with each other and there are countless within the content you already have. Volunteers want to meet other volunteers – focus on how you can promote that not your

organization. Youth volunteered for Red Cross and RockCorps because they wanted to meet likeminded people who shared similar social values *not* because they had a burning desire to do social good. Sometimes you need to realize that even if social programs, youth are asking the question “what’s in it for me?”

But, before we get cynical about the motives behind volunteerism just remember that it’s the actions rather than motivations by which everybody will be measured – there is a big difference between somebody “meaning well” and somebody “doing well”.

3) Sell your message to your champions – those already sold on what you have to say – not the wider market

Perhaps one of the biggest changes that can occur in youth marketing for social programs is the profound realization that we waste 90% of our energies trying to sell to, convert, reach and engage the unreachable. In your target market – whether that be 16-18 year old males or 20 something ethnic females – 90% of your potential audience don’t get it, won’t get it and their world view will never change. **Don’t waste your energies selling to the unsold.**

Find the 10% that are already sold on your message and invest your energies in them.

When Marlon Parker sought to create an outreach program for the Cape Peninsula University of Technology of South Africa he found that the quickest and most effective way of engaging youth in social issues such as substance abuse and drug education was to direct all their energies at that 10%. They worked with ex-drug addicts, ex gang members and reformed users who needed what his program had to offer – the tools to change their role in society from being a dependent to an educator.

By supporting this 10%, mentoring them and empowering them to make a difference not only was the social program able to create genuine relevance through delivering an authentic message based on those who’d already been there, done that but also he connected with the passionistas – those who really needed the program to help them get ahead in life.

It’s the same story with Bernard Hor’s work in Malaysia through Project Gossip. Here’s a social program dealing with the less fun, fresh and funky social issues of the day that may be traditionally hard to engage youth in – domestic violence against women. How do you get young girls involved? Like many non-profits before him, Bernard was presented with multiple options to invest heavily in high-viz campaigns to make youth aware of the program’s existence.

But, Bernard decided the correct path was one that leverage those who had a vested interest in the social program working and rather than wasting energies in going out to find these youth, they simply created social tools that attracted the 10% to them. You see, the 10% are out there looking for this stuff, you just need to make these tools easy to access and use.

The Project Gossip example is a good one; here's one 19 year old student who took it on herself to get heavily involved in the program from contributing to the print material to MC-ing the event. The support and experience she received from working proactively in the program encouraged her to set up her own social programs – from Youth Jam 09 to later establishing her own youth marketing company.

If Bernard had invested his time democratically across the 100% market, this 19 year old would have received only 1/10th of the attention, 1/10th of the support and 1/10th of the motivation. Now she's empowered, she's out there engaging the remaining 90% far better than we could ever aspire to do.

Identify the passionistas, give them the tools and the rest will fall into place.

4) Create opportunities for co-creation

Once you have youth involved now what? Most campaigns fall short because engagement is merely driven by the need to fulfill short term marketing metrics; I need to get X activations, I need an X% increase in brand equity and so on.

What youth really want however is to be part of it, part of the wider narrative you are creating about them, not your brand. How can your social program leverage this peer group's expansive creativity? Let's not forget it was Mark Zuckerberg, a 21-year-old Harvard graduate that came up with the idea for this thing called Facebook. It was Sean Fanning who crafted the code for Napster – a peer-to-peer file-sharing agent that taught youth music could be free and redefined the way a whole generation consumed it. It was also Bill Gates who dropped out of college to form a small upstart outfit called Microsoft.

All were students, all have contributed irrevocably to the progress of our lives in media and technology. Not one brand was able to harness that creativity because not one brand had a relationship with Mark, Sean or Bill during these formative years when they needed help, they needed a leg up in the world of business.

Project Gossip's example is a good one of how, given the right tools, youth can quite competently co-create along with you. You just need a corporate culture that responds meaningfully to these developments.

Where is your department of great ideas? I'm sure you're scratching your head. It's not your CEO or Chair, it's out there – young people and you just need to give them the tools to interact with your social program to make this happen. This could be a social community such as a Ning, an event where youth get direct access to your community leaders or a channel such as a video blog for your mentors to feed up the creative energies of your youth community back into the product development and project management mix. The opportunities are endless held back only by imagination.

Smart agencies will realize this. If you're serving the public sector, your work currently revolves around stop/start campaigns lacking in any real continuity or sustainability. What you need is that "second bite of the cherry" and here you have ample opportunity. By creating a channel for co-creation you can feed back product development ideas into the non-profit and scale up your engagement from purely campaign execution to a cyclical integration into the project management and product development process.

5) Create capacity to allow you to back off and put youth in control

When you invest your time and energy into advertising campaigns your results may come home but how are you harnessing the energies? If youth respond favorably to a marketing message how are you maintaining the momentum of this interest beyond having to book yet another round of advertising with your agency?

You need to create a permission asset – an event, community or program that becomes youth's natural "next steps" in the call to action. When you engage the passionistas you want to harness their energies through this asset.

Cape Peninsula University of Technology's approach to building an asset was to get the passionistas training the remaining 90% of the market. The asset was contained within the training scheme itself.

Orange Rockcorp's event itself was the asset – it not only create considerable Earned Media but it also laid the foundations for future interactions – when Rockcorps wanted to engage youth in 2010, it was a lot easier because they had the existing community and event to draw from.

In the Malaysian example, the social program invested in youth to engage in their own programs. An investment as small as 500 Ringgit could get a young person started in his or her own initiative and, under her own volition the program message would be carried to the wider market.

These are simple steps; simple in that they answer the simple question asked by the youth you wish to engage "What's in it for me?" Too often we complicate the issue, we adopt media-specific content solutions when the answer lies in identifying and simplifying the context. Too often we see our proposition as lead that needs dressing up as gold, rather than having the patience to find the gold buried right beneath our feet.

Yet simplicity is often the most difficult thing to achieve because the organizational demands require that we keep ourselves busy, we shroud our efforts in the nonsensical self-talk of the industry and, ultimately, listen to the voices. Of course you won't get fired for doing it as you always have done but as Bret Bernhoft says of the Red Cross project, as much as it's the duty of the youth marketer to identify the relevance of the program to young people's wider world view, it's also the non-profit's duty to change the society they serve. It's no longer

appropriate or effective to serve youth by simply blasting them with advertising messages. Yes, it's safe and a low risk policy in marketing terms but being safe, when talking to youth, is the riskiest thing you can be. If you want to resonate you're going to have to resonate with their values and youth don't identify with faceless organizations that have neither the time nor creativity to engage them in a dialogue.

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Mentioned in this EBook:

<http://www.SummerSands.com> + <http://www.ProjectGossip.com>

<http://www.insyghtconsulting.com> + <http://www.redcross.org>

<http://www.cput.ac.za/> (Cape Peninsula University of Technology)

<http://www.OrangeRockcorps.co.uk>

For more information on youth marketing check out

<http://www.mobileYouth.org>