

## Building Rewards Programs to Engage Your Audience Online



by Lisa Wilding-Brown on Monday, August 9, 2010

Pavlov, with his famous experiments in conditioning that led dogs to salivate without even seeing a tasty treat, might be considered the inspirational godfather of incentive marketing. He may have been the first, but he was hardly the last to notice a direct link between offering an inducement and achieving a desired result.

Airline frequent flyer programs. Gift-with-purchase offers at the cosmetic counter. The lure of a free toaster upon opening a new bank account. Even back in the “Dark Ages” of the 1950s, consumers responded to incentives and rewards — and the smart marketers knew it.

If incentive programs have been long proven to work, think about the engagement possibilities that come along with porting them to the internet. From every corner of the globe, 24/7, your customers — past, present and future — can be enticed to interact with your brand. Multiple times. You have the power to bring them back, again and again, for the rewards they want. A lot.

The market research industry is just one example of a sector that recognizes the serious power of online reward programs. Today, more than half of all market research is conducted online as individuals are signing up in droves to participate in online panels.

Why do they do it? Clearly, consumers enjoy sharing their opinions and having a voice about their favorite brands or experiences. It's part and parcel of the cultural phenomenon engendered by social media. And what brand manager wouldn't salivate at the idea of an ongoing conversation with customers who actually know and care about their products?

Yet, to keep that audience coming back for more engagement with your brand, an incentive program is the deal-clincher. You need to show you care, and that means putting your money — real or virtual — where your mouth is.

If you're not an airline with free miles to offer, don't despair. Electronically fulfilled rewards that consumers clamor to collect include Visa virtual accounts, PayPal, Amazon gift cards, MP3 downloads, and literally countless merchant gift cards representing brands around the world. Have customers across the globe? Don't worry — rewards can be issued in hundreds of currencies, too.

In these economically challenging times, altruism also abides. Consumers can choose to donate their reward to a wide variety of global charitable organizations. And they're doing it.

Without a doubt, however, the biggest sensation in online rewards is what's referred to as virtual currency. That's right: there's a virtual marketplace (a massive one) filled with virtual goods, for which virtual currency is highly coveted and sought after. Consumers are playing online games such as Farmville and Mafia Wars on social media sites like Facebook and major online gaming properties — to the tune of 230 million unique users per month, notes Farmville's publisher, Zynga.

The reward-du-jour is in-game cash, or virtual money to be used in those social games. So, if you want people to watch your movie trailer or take a survey about your brand, offer some virtual currency for their favorite online game. Think gaming is just for guys? Think again. More than half of online social gamers are women, according to games manufacturer PopCap.

There's nothing virtual about the effectiveness a world-class rewards platform can have in engaging your audience online. It's very real, and we can only imagine what Pavlov could have done with one, too.

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