



Posted on Mon, Jan. 18, 2010

Creativity from the crowd

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Special to The Star

Perhaps the most talked-about commercial during last year's Super Bowl broadcast was one for Doritos that was created by two Indiana brothers for less than \$2,000. This year, more than 4,000 people competed for an opportunity to have their ad selected for the game.

It's a textbook example of the relatively new concept of crowd sourcing. Simply put, crowd sourcing is applying the creativity and expertise of a large group of people to a specific problem or opportunity.

It can be a godsend to small businesses that need fast, free advice, said Buck Sommerkamp of Lee's Summit, who develops multimedia content, including audio, video, Web sites and printed materials.

"Crowd sourcing is a way of drawing upon the expertise of your circle of influence, whether it's people you work with or those you know socially," he said. "I have a number of followers on Twitter and friends on Facebook. Some are best friends, and some I may have met at a conference a year ago, but I know all of them to some degree and can draw upon their expertise."

For example, Sommerkamp occasionally runs across a technical challenge in a particular software program. Instead of taking the time to read through the user's manual or contact technical support, he turns to his online community.

"It's a matter of spraying the question out into the air and hoping somebody catches a whiff," he said. "In almost every case, somebody can identify with the issue at hand and provide a good solution."

Chris Routh, owner and CEO of Freshly Branded LLC in Overland Park, has built an online business on a crowd sourcing model. His Web site matches businesses needing services, such as design or copywriting, with creative talent worldwide.

"Crowd sourcing is an open call to anyone who is interested," he said. "If a business needs a logo, for example, they can post a project description on our Web site. Designers from China and France may compete for the business and submit designs. The business can review the submissions, select the one it likes best and pay only for the one it chooses."

Freshly Branded grew out of a previous business that Routh owned. He found that clients were asking for logo designs without knowing exactly what they wanted.

"We normally charged clients \$1,000 to come up with three to five different design alternatives," Routh said. "We were looking for ways to outsource that business and came across a crowd sourcing company. We paid them \$400, and they got 220 submissions. Thirty of those were really good. We ended up showing 10 of them to our client, and they were really happy. It cost them less, and we also made money."

He said crowd sourcing is a pretty new concept in Kansas City.

“Companies such as Garmin and Sprint are using it, but it’s better known on the East Coast or West Coast,” he said. “Most of the people using my Web site are from the coasts.”

Getting started is as simple as e-mailing a question to a group of peers, Sommerkamp said.

“You can pose a question to your circle of influence and pick their brains,” he said. “For example, I have seen people come up with three concepts for a logo or tagline. They post them online and ask people to comment. Crowd sourcing is a quick way to get a random sampling of opinions, and I find that most people are happy to help.”

It would be hard to think of a business that couldn’t benefit from crowd sourcing at some point, Sommerkamp said. His only caveat is to be careful about sharing proprietary information that could benefit a competitor.

“I see it as a more of a practical-application type of tool to use when you already have made a decision to do something, not when it’s still a secret,” he said.

Crowd sourcing also can be an excellent way for a business to get feedback.

“When Dunkin’ Donuts came to Kansas City, they set up a Twitter account,” Sommerkamp said. “They aren’t seeking advice on how to run their business but are looking for ideas and suggestions.”

Sommerkamp recommends www.mystarbucksidea.com as an example of how to solicit customer feedback. He also suggests www.uservoice.com as a good way to get started in crowd sourcing. Businesses can find creative talent at www.freshlybranded.com.

As crowd sourcing begins to grow, the possibilities are limited only by the imagination.

“What crowd sourcing does is give you a committee to work with — without having to call a meeting,” Sommerkamp said.

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