THE USER GENERATED CONTENT REPORT

by Paul Smithson
User Generated Content

A special report into the growing phenomenon that is changing the way we publish and consume media on-line

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1 Introduction to User Generated Content?

These days, it seems that everyone is talking about the importance of user generated content (UGC) and the many ways that user generated content is changing the face of the Internet.

A significant number of the Web’s most popular websites are largely fueled by user generated content. From YouTube to Twitter to Facebook to Wikipedia to Amazon, the list of sites using UGC reads like a who’s who list of the Internet’s biggest players. But what is UGC, and more importantly, why is it so important?

The phrase user generated content is used to describe any materials that are published on a website by the site’s users. User generated content is sometimes referred to as content generated media (CGM) or user-created content (UCC), but for the purpose of this report, we will use the three-letter acronym UGC.

User generated content differs from traditional content on a website in that traditional website materials are created by a professional affiliated with the site. User generated content is unique because it is created by the site’s users.

The nature of the way content is being created on the Web is shifting from the tradition of posting pre-packaged and professionally prepared materials to a trend in which consumers are encouraged to guide and direct the conversation.

From product recommendations and rants to opinions, discussions, and debates, users are now largely dominating Internet dialogue. When you surf the Web, examples of UGC abound. Articles on Wikipedia, “Tweets” from your favorite celebrity, product reviews on Amazon.com, Facebook profiles, and You-Tube videos are all forms of user generated content. User generated content can refer to any type of material posted on a site by a non-administrative user.
The most common examples of UGC include:

- Message board and forum posts
- Blogs
- Blog comments
- Business feedback and review sites
- Reader comments on articles and news stories
- Wikis
- Question and answer site responses
- Product reviews
- Status messages
- “Tweets”
- Article comments
- Quiz/survey responses posted on public sites or forums
- Videos
- Pictures
- Slideshows
- Music files
- Podcasts
- Social networking profiles

While UGC is created by visitors, the content is controlled by the site’s owners once posted. Almost all UGC is at least somewhat monitored by web masters, in order to minimize instances of SPAM, liability issues such as copyright infringement, and offensive or irrelevant content. Monitoring may be conducted live (comments and
content are reviewed by a human before being posted) or through a community reporting system in which users “flag” suspect materials.

User generated content is the fastest growing segment of the Internet. Consider these statistics, which demonstrate the popularity of user generated content among Internet users:

- YouTube, a site which relies on users to generate 100% of its content, is now the Web’s second largest search engine (Google is #1).
- Wikipedia now boasts more than 13 million user-created and edited articles – and more than 150 new pages are added every hour.
- There are more than 200,000,000 blogs – and more growing each day.
- More than half of all bloggers post new content or engage in “microblogging” through sites such as Facebook and Twitter every day.

The popularity of UGC has skyrocketed in the last few years because UGC benefits both users and website owners.

For websites, UGC represents free content. In a world where the term *content is king* is used so frequently, anything that can generate ‘free’ content has got to be something worth taking very seriously. Not only can user generated content be completely free, but it can also be incredibly effective for attracting traffic and retaining visitors as many forms of UGC are known to have almost addictive qualities that keep visitors coming back for more.

For users, UGC is a way to engage and interact with websites in ways that were previously undreamt of. It can range from virtual communities that they can become part of, through to a place when they can get a platform to showcase their music, photography, artwork or writing. It can be a place where they can find unbiased
information and data about products, services and trends from ‘real’ people, rather than
the normal packaged hype coming from the PR departments of corporate America.

1.1 History of UGC

The phrase “user generated content” first came into use in Internet circles in 2005; however, UGC existed long before Web gurus gave the concept a name.

User generated content has evolved over the years, both online and off. Beginning with “offline” public bulletin boards where people could post notices, advertisements, and notes, letters to the editor, and radio call-in lines, users have always demonstrated an interest in participating in public conversations.

In the early days of the Internet, sites like CompuServe, Geocities, Angelfire, Tripod, and Yahoo!Profiles began providing Internet users with a way to share information about themselves and topics they were passionate about, but most of the UGC on sites consisted of comments and conversations in chat rooms, discussion boards, and forums.

By the time the so-called Web 2.0 rolled around, websites that relied entirely on user generated content began popping up. Some of these sites, such as YouTube and Facebook, went on to revolutionize the way people used the Internet.

Today, user generated content comes in a wide variety of forms ranging from comments on news posts through to video sharing, product reviews, photo sharing, comments on blog posts, and social networking.

1.2 UGC Growth

User generated content has experienced a dramatic surge in popularity over the last several years. According to recent figures more than 82 million people in the U.S engaged in some form of Internet content creation at least once per month in 2008.
Experts at eMarketer, an Internet firm that publishes research, statistics and analysis of Web trends, expects that number of 82 million to climb to 115 million or higher by 2013.

These ‘content creators’ are engaging in a number of forms of UGC. While some of these users contributed UGC simply by commenting on a link or post, a significant number were actively engaged in more substantial content creation such as video-sharing. According to eMarketer, in 2008:

- 11 million Internet users engaged in a virtual world or online game
- 15 million Internet users uploaded video files
- 21 million Internet users posted blog entries
- 71 million Internet users posted profiles or other content on social networks

The table that follows (from eMarketer.com) depicts current trends in user generated content by activity type, with projected numbers for future years.
1.3 The 5 Key-Factors behind the boom in UGC?

So what has caused this tremendous boom in UGC?

There isn’t just one single reason for the growth of UGC, but several reasons or technologies, that have come together at roughly the same time to create a quantum shift in the way that people communicate online. These reasons or technologies include:

Key Factor #1 - Faster Internet connections

When slow, dial-up modems connected people to the Web, uploading large multimedia files such as videos, pictures, and music clips was a slow and tedious process. Today, an increasing number of Internet users connect via broadband or other high-speed connections, making the uploading of large files a breeze.
Key Factor #2 - Increase in Online Population

The cost of connecting to the Internet has decreased in price dramatically, opening Web access to a much larger audience. This, coupled with a massively improved availability of Internet access, has caused the online population to grow beyond all expectations, year-on-year, ever since the early to mid 1990s. Even the smallest niche topic can now attract a sufficiently large audience to make on-going user-generated dialogs and contributions a reality and not just a pipe dream.

Key Factor #3 - More advanced tools for content creation

A significant proportion of UGC is not written content, but multimedia files such as video, images, and audio clips. Before digital cameras, camcorders, and multimedia-enabled mobile phones became available at a price point the masses could afford, few people had the ability to easily create and share these types of files.

Key Factor #4 - Improved applications for posting content

Until recently someone seeking to share their thoughts or ideas on the Web had to create an entire website to showcase their work. Now, social media sites, review sites, messageboards, blogs and the like allow anyone to have a voice with just a few clicks of the mouse.

Key Factor #5 - Revenue opportunities

As pay per click and banner advertising came into vogue, so did the opportunities for Internet users to earn an income by posting content and attracting traffic. This naturally spurred interest in the concept of creating and publishing content online and this in turn provided additional stimulus for UGC.
1.4 The Scale of UGC can vary

Web sites rely on UGC to varying extents. Some sites are completely reliant on UGC for content, whilst for other sites UGC is only there to supplement their existing content or to add increased functionality to the site.

One Hundred Per Cent UGC

The list below provides some examples of sites that rely completely, or almost completely, on user generated content. For these sites UGC is so important that without it the site would wither and die in weeks or even days.

- Wikipedia
- Ratemyface
- Facebook
- Web Forums
- Twitter
- Yahoo! Questions
- eHow
- LiveJournal
- YouTube
- EBay
- Craigslist / Freeads
- Dating sites
- Job sites
Not Exclusively UGC

Below are some examples of sites that have a mixture of publisher generated content and user generated content.

- CNN
- Amazon
- IMDB (Internet Movie Database)
- Blurb (sells physical printed products that are created by users)
- Allmusic.com

1.5 But is it a Legitimate Trend or all Hype and Hot Air?

One of the biggest questions posed concerning the use of UGC is whether this is a trend to take seriously or a fleeting craze that will disappear with time.

If you are running a business, particularly an online business, should you be wondering if you will look back in a few years time and wonder what all the fuss was about, or will UGC’s importance have continued to grow exponentially and left you way behind and completely out of touch.

The reality is that UGC is not a passing trend or fad. The emergence of UGC represents a permanent shift in the landscape not just of the Internet, but of the business in general. Gone are the days when a company could release a turkey of a product and manage to keep it quiet. Now, that turkey can be world-famous within hours all because of the power of UGC.

Research released by eMarketer further demonstrates that the user generated content phenomenon will only continue to grow in popularity. According to the firm;
• More than 150 million Internet users in the U.S. will view and use UGC by 2013, an increase of more than 30% from 2008
• A whopping 114 million Internet users are expected to engage actively in content creations by 2013, representing more than half of all U.S. Internet users

1.6 Is UGC Age-Specific or Embraced Universally?

Some businesses are under the misguided impression that UGC is only embraced by teens and young adults, and not representative of the interests of the entire Web community. However, as the table from eMarketer included below illustrates, UGC is utilized by people of all ages.

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US Internet Users Who Are Increasingly Creating Their Own User-Generated Content, by Age
February - March 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Millennials (13-24)</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation X (25-41)</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomers (42-60)</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matures (61-75)</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Respondents</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: eMarketer
1.7 Real Time Search and the Future of UGC

The advent of real time search is another trend contributing to the growth of user generated content.

More than two-thirds of Internet users rely on search engines to find information on the Web, but until now, user generated content has been more of an afterthought in web search results. This is all likely to change with the advent of real-time searches that would post up-to-the-minute results of discussions happening right now on sites like Twitter and Facebook, rather than simply listing existing websites according to page rank and relevancy.

Search engine leaders such as Google and Bing have only recently begun examining the potential for real-time search results, but specialty search engines such as OneRiot have been offering such results for some time. As the search giants continue to develop and include UGC material in search results, the importance of UGC will continue to gain momentum.

1.8 UGC and the Future of the Web

Even though content is the foundation of any website, most sites are not in the primary business of content creation. Content is often considered an afterthought, rather than the purpose for a site's existence. Nevertheless, to gain attention online among Internet users who want to participate and engage as they consume information, websites must learn to create or generate content that is both useful and interactive. The consumer must be given the tools and the ability to socialize and share their opinions.

Incorporating user generated content into a site gives consumers a voice and allows them to share their opinions vertically (e.g. with suppliers, producers, publishers and resellers) and horizontally (e.g. with their peers, fellow users, fellow readers, etc).
Companies and website publishers, large and small, who take the time to learn the skills necessary to make effective use of UGC will gain a massive competitive edge over those who choose to ignore the power of UGC. They will be able to quickly harness the power of this game-changing technology and make it work in their favor, not just in the short term, but over the years and decades ahead.
2 Seventeen Examples of UGC Sites

In this chapter, we will take a look at some real-life examples of websites and services that are already using UGC in effective or original ways.

As you’ll see, user generated content can take on many forms, and serve many different functions. Some of these forms may well spark off ideas as to how you can use UGC on your own web site. If so, don’t forget to make a note so you can give it more than just thought when the time is right.

In these seventeen examples we cover everything from giant global ecommerce brands through to a handful of lesser known web sites. For some of these sites UGC is the lifeblood that keeps the site alive, whereas for others it is simply part of the overall content mix.

Amazon

As one of the first sites to give users the ability to rate and review products, Internet retail giant Amazon is considered a pioneer in user generated content.

Today, Amazon has extended its use of UGC beyond just ratings and reviews by providing consumers with an ever-expanding selection of interactive tools and services that allows users to “tag” products according to keyword for easy sorting, publish custom user profiles, create “wish lists” of products they want to share with friends and family, and conversations about different products abound in Amazon’s many discussion boards and forums.

Other functionality allows authors to blog about their work through the Amazon Connect program, with entries posted alongside the product listing, and recently, Amazon introduced tools for video reviews, where users can upload video clips sharing their opinions right on the product page.
Amazon takes its consumer reviews very seriously. So much so that through the new “Vine” program, a select number of trusted reviewers are even being paid to review new products featured on the site.

YouTube

Another website responsible for taking user generated content mainstream is YouTube, the incredibly popular video-sharing website that has dominated the Web since its conception. The site has millions of user-submitted videos, ranging from home video clips and grainy cell phone videos to user-produced movies, music videos, commercials and short films.

According to a representative of YouTube, more than 10 hours of new video clips are uploaded to the site every minute – approximately 57,000 full-length videos worth of footage each week.

In addition to uploading and watching videos, YouTube users can also comment on, rate, or review videos and create lists of “favorite” clips to share with friends.

Wikipedia

Wikipedia is the largest and most successful example of a “wiki,” which is a type of software that enables users to add, edit, and update Web content using only their preferred Internet browser.

Wikipedia now boasts more than 14 million user-created and edited articles – and more than 150 new pages are added every hour. Anyone can add a new article to
Wikipedia, and all material is edited and evaluated for accuracy by a community of moderators. Although the accuracy of Wikipedia entries are sometimes called into question because the entries are created and edited by the community, some experts have suggested that Wikipedia is more accurate than many traditional encyclopedias because it is constantly being updated and revised to reflect the most recent information available.

Despite being the biggest and most well-known example of the software, Wikipedia is by no means the only wiki on the Web. Other popular Wikis include:

- **LyricWiki** – a massive wiki listing of over 700,000 album lyrics.
- **Congresspedia** – a user-edited “citizen’s encyclopedia on Congress, started by the Center for Media and Democracy
- **WikiAnswers** – popular general knowledge questions and answers wiki
- **SourceWatch** – another wiki from the Center for Media and Democracy, this site serves as a directory of people, topics, and groups influencing the debate in Washington
- **Debatepedia** – a wiki of popular debates and arguments
- **Rochester Wiki** – an entire Wiki dedicated to the news, sites, and trends in Rochester, New York

**Blogs**

Short for “Web log,” the blog is one of the earliest forms of user generated content. Blog content is entirely created by the user. The content can be original thoughts and ideas, a review of someone else’s work, or a commentary on current events and issues.

Blog authors may post written content, video files, pictures, music clips, or graphic designs to share with readers. The comments posted on blog entries by its readers are
another form of user generated content. Recently, video blog posts, known as “vlogs” have been gaining momentum.

The popularity of blogs has resulted in a second cottage industry: a variety of human-edited “blog-watch” sites rank and track activity in the blogosphere, creating another form of user generated content. The most popular blog sites include Blogger, BlogSpot, TypePad and WordPress.

**Squidoo**

Squidoo was founded on the belief that everyone is an expert about something. As the site’s tagline states, “Someone, somewhere, wants to know what you want to think.”

The site allows users to create *lenses* about their area of expertise, where they can share helpful facts, information, links, and resources relating to a specific topic.

Visitors to the lens can then vote and comment on the author’s work, creating a dialogue between the expert and his or her readers. Lenses on Squidoo can even be monetized – the lens creator earns a portion of the advertising revenue generated by the page. Similar sites include eHow and Hubpages.

**Facebook**

As one of the first social networks to attract a large following, Facebook has become the face of social media. The site is dependent exclusively on its users for content. Users can create profiles to share personal information, update friends with status messages, join groups, upload photos and videos, complete surveys and quizzes, play community-based games such as Farmville and Mafia Wars, and post comments on their friends’ profiles, posts and uploads. Similar sites include MySpace, LinkedIn, Bebo, Friends Reunited, Classmates.com, and Friendster.
Trip Advisor

TripAdvisor is a popular travel review site in which users can post hotel reviews, photos, and travel advice. The site allows users to participate in polls and surveys, features photos uploaded by travelers, and allows users to post reviews of hotels, air carriers, and tourist hotspots.

The true strength of TripAdvisor is not in its own content, but in the reviews that users submit. The vast majority of traffic comes from people who are visiting to find out what other people have to say, and so the success of the site is very much dependent on user generated content.

Second Life

No discussion of user generated content would be complete without mention of virtual worlds such as Second Life. In this online community, Residents engage with other players through customized avatars. Users can socialize, engage in activities, trade or sell property, possessions, and services, travel, date, or find a job.

Second Life takes user generated content creation to a new level. Residents can create art exhibits, perform live music and theater shows, or even publish a virtual book. This virtual world is even having an impact on the business world. Second Life users can establish virtual offices for events, conferences, or training. Companies can even invent and test new products and services in the virtual world.

CNN iReport

CNN’s online UGC news service, iReport, puts the reporting in the hands of its viewers. Users can write (or record) about trends and topics in their area and upload their work directly to CNN.com. They can also discuss the stories dominating the headlines through user comments, polls, and forums on the site.
Review Sites

Review sites such as epinions.com allow users to share their experiences with specific products and services. From rave reviews to rants, review sites give consumers the opportunity to post whatever it is they’re thinking about a product.

Those reviews can then in turn be used by consumers considering a specific product as a means of obtaining an objective opinion.

Article Directories

On article directories, web marketers can upload original articles, which are then posted on the directory where they can be chosen for publication on another website. Depending on the directory, users may be able to comment on articles or vote for their favorites.

Article authors can promote their website in the article using links in the text or bio box, and can create profiles where readers can learn more about their business and/or experience. Popular article directories include Buzzle, eZineArticles, and GoArticles.

Dating Sites

Much like social networking sites, dating sites rely almost exclusively on their consumers for content. Dating sites typically offer a high degree of interaction between users. Users upload pictures and profiles, and in many cases, complete questionnaires, which are then used to match them with “compatible” prospective dating partners.

Social Bookmarking

Social bookmarking takes the concept of website “bookmarks” or “favorites” to a whole new level. Rather than storing websites as bookmarks on an Internet browser, the bookmarks are stored on a
website where their owner can choose to share them with other people.

In addition to serving as a bookmark sharing system, most social bookmarking sites give users the opportunity to vote on content. Users can submit news stories, blogs, or websites they like to the site, where the stories are then featured and voted on by other users. Stories that receive a high number of votes, “diggs,” or “likes” are given increased exposure, such as being featured on the front page of the site. Popular social bookmarking sites include Digg, Del.icio.us, and StumbleUpon.

**Photo Sharing Sites**

Before YouTube hit it big, photo sharing was all the rage. Photo sharing websites such as Flickr, Photobucket, and even Facebook allow users to upload pictures, where they can organize and share the images with friends, family, or even the entire web. Many photo sharing sites have a high degree of interactivity, such as enabling users to comment on or “like” other people’s photos.

**Resume Reviews**

On resume review sites, users can upload their resume to be peer-edited by the community. Readers can comment on or critique uploaded resumes, offering tips and advice for the job seeker to improve their application materials. Some resume review sites even offer users the ability to vote on the best resume, or rank resumes according to quality.

**Question and Answer Communities**

On sites like Yahoo! Answers and Wiki Answers, users can post questions about any topic imaginable, where they will then be answered by other community members. On
Yahoo! Answers, the user who submits the question is permitted to select a “Best Answer” for their favorite response.

Other users can vote on their favorite answer, and if no “best” answer is selected, choose their favorite response. Users earn points by asking and answering questions in the community. Extra points are assigned when an answer is selected as the best.

**Specialty Sites**

In addition to the sites posted above, a number of websites are thriving using solely user generated content. From *Texts from Last Night*, a site where people can post drunken text messages, to *People of Wal-Mart*, a collection of user-submitted images of Wal-Mart shoppers, specialty UGC sites often go viral and take off seemingly overnight due to their incredible popularity.
3 Benefits of UGC

Incorporating user generated content with existing Web content can benefit a company in a number of respects. User generated content allows for the creation of new, original content that websites so desperately need to climb the search engine rankings. UGC can help convince consumers of a product’s merit, by exposing them to real reviews from satisfied customers.

Adding UGC elements to a site can also help businesses fine-tune their marketing strategies and obtain vital feedback from consumers about their products and services. UGC also gives companies a forum to address any consumer issues or objectives presented. Finally, user generated content encourages customers to stay longer and come back to a site, because it engages them by allowing them to take ownership over the site.

The advantages of UGC do not apply only to websites and businesses – the consumers creating the content also stand to benefit from the use of UGC. In this chapter, we’ll explore the benefits of UGC from both sides, so that websites can make an educated decision regarding incorporating this type of content.

3.1 Fourteen Benefits of User Generated Content to Web Site Owners

Free Content

As stated previously, nearly two thirds of Internet users rely on search engines to find information on the Web. Therefore, most websites continuously aim to improve their rankings in the organic search results on the Search Engine Results Page (SERP).
One of the most effective means of improving a site’s ranking is by posting original, valuable content on a regular basis. The search engine spiders “crawl” websites on a regular basis, in order to gather information which is then input in a complex algorithm to determine the appropriate “page rank” for a specific site. The search engines evaluate several main factors on a site:

- The frequency with which new content is posted
- The originality of the content
- The keyword density of the content.
- The content density of the site – how much relevant content exists on how many pages

User generated content offers advantages in each of these areas, which can help improve a site’s page rank in the search engines. The creation of worthwhile content costs time and money – content is a significant investment on any site. For this reason, content created by consumers is highly valuable. Allowing site users to add content to a site means that new material is being added, without any financial or time expenditure from the site owner. The search engines don’t care who created the content – they only care that it exists.

Another benefit of user generated content is that it often helps websites achieve high page rank for *long-tail* keywords. Most sites have target keywords that they optimize for, based on the results of extensive keyword research. However, this keyword research often neglects the long-tail keyword phrases that search engine users are actually entering in queries. User generated content often contains these long-tail keyword phrases, which can help a website appear for more terms in the search engine results.

Finally, content created by users is often highly relevant, topical, popular, and in-demand. After all, the people creating the content are the same ones who are
consuming it. By allowing users to contribute to the conversation, websites can gain in both search engine ranking and desirability to users.

**Automated Content**

With a UGC section featured prominently on your site you could well find that your visitors will post their thoughts day in, day out without much intervention from you as the site owner/operator.

This ‘hands-free’ content is invaluable, as it leaves you free to focus on other areas of content for your site – leaving the UGC community to build out specific page content themes.

Obviously, the volume of UGC activity on a site will depend on the topic or niche in which the site operates and how the UGC element of the site is implemented. On some sites UGC comes flooding in as soon as the feature is implemented on the site, whereas on others a concerted effort over a lengthy period of times needs to be made by the website owner to get the ball rolling.

**Market Research**

The ability to conduct market research is another important benefit of user generated content. Users posting content on a website have an opinion – and whether that opinion is positive or negative, savvy websites can use the information to their advantage. Customers will reveal their level of satisfaction with current products or services, and may express interest in new products for the future. If appropriate you can post polls, surveys, and questionnaires to get the conversation started without expending thousands of dollars on a market research campaign.
The ability to connect directly with customers to obtain their reactions and insights is invaluable to marketers. Understanding a customer’s perception of your products is critical to developing a sales pitch and new product research and development. User generated content gives websites the tools and resources they need to develop the best pitch and the best products possible.

**Social Proof**

Social proof defines the phenomenon wherein people’s actions during certain social settings and decisions are shaped and guided by the opinions and actions of others, because they believe that other people have more (and better) information than they do.

For example, imagine that a couple was looking for a new restaurant to try in their town. While browsing the Web listings for restaurants in the area, they click on a restaurant’s page and find that a famous athlete has endorsed the establishment. The couple is now more likely to decide to eat there because the well known athlete’s opinion carries great weight with them.

A website can utilize social proof through user generated content both internally and externally. Testimonials on your own website are a form of internal social proof, while reviews on a blog, newspaper, or review site serves as external social proof. Both internal and external social proof are important to guiding a prospective customer’s actions and or decisions.

Return for a moment to the couple looking for a restaurant. While the athlete’s endorsement served as internal social proof, the couple may decide to check out what others are saying about the establishment outside of its website. Upon checking Yelp, a restaurant review site, and discovering overwhelmingly negative comments from unsatisfied customers, the couple decides to go elsewhere. Clearly, it’s important for a
website to be able to provide social proof internally and externally, which can be accomplished through the use of UGC.

**Issue Addressing**

Many times, customers turn to the Web to air their issues with a particular company, product, or service in the form of user generated content. If a site incorporates and encourages user generated content, the issues may be posted directly on the site where they can be addressed directly. Other times, the issue may be posted or discussed on another website, blog, review site, or social network. In either case, websites would be wise to monitor all comments regarding the company, product, or service, so that they can proactively handle issues as they arise.

While positive comments are easy to read and handle, what about the negative ones? Some websites are fearful of user generated content because they worry that the negative comments will affect future customer’s opinion of the company.

There are several important things to understand about negative comments in user generated materials. First, the negative comments actually give the UGC credibility. Visitors know that no company would willingly post unflattering comments about themselves, so that makes the positive reviews appear that much more likely to be true. Second, negative comments present companies with an opportunity to demonstrate how much they value their customers.

When the negative comments are addressed directly by the company, everyone will see the response too. If negative issues come up in the form of UGC, the best thing to do is to acknowledge the comment and take immediate action to resolve the issue with the
customer until he or she feels satisfied. Without UGC, the company would never have been able to resolve the issue, and the customer would have remained dissatisfied permanently!

**Objection Handling**

Another benefit of user generated content is that it empowers websites to address customer’s objections. Whereas without UGC a company would struggle to even identify customer’s objections to a product, UGC makes it easy to spot and address these objections. If someone on the Web is making a negative statement about a product or services based on inaccurate or incorrect information, there’s an easy way to set the record straight.

**Increased Doorways into Site**

Harnessing UGC does more than provide free content, easy market research and a forum for addressing issues with customers – UGC also results in increased traffic to a site. Whenever an Internet user brings up your site in the form of UGC on the Web, he or she is likely to include a link to your page. The incredible thing about social networks is that when one person links to a page, everyone in that person’s network also sees a link. Then the people in that network may link to the material again, repeating the cycle and allowing the link to spread like wildfire.
User generated content is capable of creating more doorways to a site than the best link building campaign in the world. The added links also give a site more credibility with the search engines, which results in higher page rank for competitive keywords and even more traffic!

**List Building**

There’s an old sales theory that states prospects require at least seven ‘touches’ before they’ll become a paying customer. If a person visits a site and leaves without providing some form of contact information, the site owner has no way to continue the relationship and deliver the additional touches needed to make a sale.

The easiest solution to this problem is to develop a mailing list for an e-mail marketing campaign. Capturing visitor’s details and then using that contact information to stay in touch almost always leads to increased return traffic and higher sales volume.

User generated content is a great way to start developing a valuable e-mail list or expand upon an existing list. One of the easiest ways to use UGC to collect e-mail addresses is to simply require visitors to register before they can post UGC on your site.

**New Topics for Content**

They say two brains are better than one – imagine the brain power created by thousands of visitors! Coming up with new topics to write about can be a challenge to web masters. Websites require new information constantly – and writers need topics about which to write in order to keep up with the demand.

Incorporating user generated content into a site yields a gold mine of fodder for new content. Users will share their likes,
dislikes, questions, opinions, and ideas, all of which can be used as the basis for written content for the site.

**Increased Likelihood of Bookmarking**

When users have a voice in the conversation, they are more likely to add it to their bookmarks or favorites so that they can return again later. By allowing users to post content on a site you will naturally attract more bookmarks, both traditional bookmarks on users’ web browsers and online bookmarks on sites like Digg, Del.icio.us, and StumbleUpon. With social bookmarks, sometimes called tags, the bookmarked site will be shared with the entire community, thereby attracting even more views, votes and bookmarks. Internet sites that generate a large number of social tags can attract an influx of viral traffic from the sharing of bookmarks.

**Greater “Stickiness”**

Stickiness is a term used to describe a site’s ability to capture and hold a visitor’s attention. Stickiness can be measured in both the short- and long-term. Short term stickiness refers to how long the average visitor stays on a webpage – the higher the number, the better. Long term stickiness refers to the percentage of people who return to a site after the initial visit.

When a site incorporates user generated content, people are more likely to stay on the page, and more likely to return in the future. UGC has an addictive quality that keeps users coming back for more. Websites that provide opportunities for users to become
actively engaged will be rewarded with increased stickiness in both the short and long term.

**Link Magnet**

With more, sticky content on a web site, and with more people signposting and bookmarking that content, content can begin to serve as a ‘link magnet’ – attracting inbound links from all over the Internet, from people who are recommending your content to others. This not only brings the obvious benefit of direct traffic – from these inbound links – it also serves to boost the authority of your web site content in the eyes of the major search engines. This again can lead to additional traffic.

**Higher Advertising Revenue**

As discussed above, sites with UGC tend to have higher short-term and long-term stickiness. This means that people are not only staying on the site for longer, but they’re also returning at a greater frequency. When people stay on a site for longer, they’re more likely to visit multiple pages within the site, and they’ll be exposed to ads for a longer period of time. All these increased page views result in higher advertising profits for the site owner.

**Enhanced Expertise and Authority**

Sites that utilize user generated content are more likely to become an authority site within their niche market. Consumers trust the opinions of other consumers more than they trust what corporations tell them to believe. Therefore, if a website attracts a lot of feedback from consumers in the form of UGC, other
consumers will be inclined to trust the information on the site. A site that successfully attracts and incorporates UGC can become the “go-to” site in their field simply because other visitors have given them so many votes of confidence in the form of UGC activity.

3.2 Ten Benefits of UGC to Site Visitors

Above we covered fourteen benefits for the owner of a web site that makes good use of user generated content, but what’s in it for visitors to such a site. Fortunately, the users generating the content also benefit from the process. Here’s how:

**Giving Visitors a Voice**

In the past, media was a one-way street. Publishers and producers created the content and users consumed it, without any means of providing instant feedback.

People had very few ways of sharing or distributing their thoughts or work with a wide audience without going through a traditional media channel such as newspaper, radio, television, or books – and that exposure usually came with a price tag. Today, user generated content allows anyone, anywhere, to share their thoughts or creations with the world without spending a penny.

Visitors can share their praise or criticism, start a debate, comment on what their friends are doing, share videos and pictures, or debut their latest musical efforts with a simple click of the mouse.
A Platform to be “Discovered”

As UGC surged in popularity, media and business had to adjust their strategies to content creation. Giving “amateurs” a real platform to share their work resulted in a tidal wave of new products, sounds, celebrities, and trends.

One of the most popular UGC legends is that of an English college student who created a commercial for Apple’s iTouch and posted it on YouTube where it was then discovered by the company’s advertising executives and made into a professional advertisement in the studio.

No longer do aspiring musicians have to sign a record deal to share their music. Today, artists can gain exposure and attract followers without ever stepping foot in an agent’s office or a recording studio.

Some record companies are known to monitor the activity of bands and artists on sites like MySpace music. When a group or individual gains a certain number of “fans,” the record company may look to sign them to a contract.

A Sense of Community

User generated content allows people to connect and interact with others based on common interests, beliefs, or values. UGC has enabled Internet users to start a conversation on the Web and share their opinions and interests with the world. This sense of community is comforting to visitors, and can make them feel as if they belong.

Support Community

At times, UGC can take on the form of a support community for people facing a difficult issue or
problem. For example, a wiki known as WikiCancer enables cancer patients and survivors to interact and share their feelings, fears, hopes, and advice. Another site known as CaringBridge allows people facing serious illness and disease to create a blog where they can share updates with friends and families and connect with others in similar situations.

Social Proof and Market Research

As discussed previously, consumers have a higher degree of trust in other consumers than they do in corporate America. Internet users considering making a purchase would rather read objective evaluations from other consumers than simply reviewing what the company says about a product in its advertising campaigns. User generated content gives consumers unprecedented tools for finding and sharing information about business, products, and services from real people.

Added Functionality

Until recently websites were largely static, meaning that the content on the site stayed the same regardless of who was visiting it. Sites offered little to no customization or interactivity – visitors could read content, but there was little else to do on most web pages.

Today, sites are dynamic and ever-changing, based on who is visiting, where they are from, and who their friends are. Visitors can comment on content, upload or share pictures
and videos, vote on questions and polls that matter to them, and share their work with others. They now have a say in how the site looks, and how they will be using it.

**Ability to ask questions**

When a customer asks a question relating to your site, your product or your service you have a wonderful opportunity to not only give that customer the information they need, but to demonstrate to this customer (and other would-be customers) your dedication to delivering a great service, and promptly.

Taking these opportunities will definitely pay back over time and, as the numbers of questions and answers in your UGC system grows over time, you will be providing all new visitors with a wealth of useful information upon which to base their buying decisions.

**Answer potential objections**

As well as answering general questions, there is a specific opportunity to handle what might be termed as potential 'sales objections' - that is, things which stand between a new visitor landing on your page and them becoming a paying customer.

For example if, over time, you identify that the major objection to buying your product (that your visitors have) relates to the price then you would do well to leverage your UGC system in addressing this issue.

Perhaps run a survey or poll, get customers' testimonials relating to price, add some videos showing the value of your product and have people rate and/or comment on these videos.

These objection-handlers will doubtless erode potential objections of new visitors to your site, since all will see and consider the points raised by them (even if only subconsciously).
Topical, relevant, timely content

There is a commonly-held perception (and a justified one at that) that UGC is a far more open, dynamic form of content than the sanitised corporate copy found on many web pages. The characteristics of UGC: instant posts, interaction and freedom of speech all lend a unique air to this form of content and this can certainly lead to more 'topical' content than the one-way diatribes of a site-owner.

Remember this: Although you simply couldn't commit to editing your site 24 hours a day, 365 days a year with topical content... collectively your site's visitors can and will do just that.

Well-rounded, balanced viewpoints

The power of collective thought. What do you think has more appeal to visitors - your opinion alone, or the collective wisdom of thousands of others who, just like them, have an interest in the topic at hand?

By adding UGC to your site's content, no matter what the topic, you open the doors to collective thinking and opinion which (although not always be what you were expecting) will always generate a more rounded take on the topics being discussed.
4 Uses For UGC

Businesses considering adding user generated content to their sites have many options to explore when determining how UGC can be used to supplement and improve their existing content.

The type of UGC – reviews, forums, commenting, or social networking – that works best for one business may not be appropriate for another and so care needs to be taken before implementing a UGC strategy.

There is certainly no magic formula for incorporating UGC. Site owners must simply take the time necessary to research and examine what type of UGC is best suited for their consumers and that fits in with their overall online marketing strategy.

In this chapter, we’ll explore various ways in which UGC can be utilized by websites today. Hopefully, they will provide you with some food for thought as to how you can incorporate UGC. The ideas range from the obvious to the obscure, and from the original to the outright crazy, so there’s definitely something for everyone and every type of site.

User-Provided Product Reviews

One of the most common applications of UGC is product reviews.

Visitors have strong opinions about products and services and they have demonstrated that they want to share those opinions with their fellow consumers. Incorporating product reviews into a site not only gives consumers a voice, but it also tends to improve a site’s conversion rates.
According to eMarketer, more than half of online retailers in the U.K., Europe, and U.S. reported increased conversion rates after incorporating a user-generated review or rating system on their site. More than 75% of respondents also reported increased traffic, while 42% also cited increased average order figures.

Comments on Articles/Editorials

Another popular use for UGC is enabling comments on articles and editorial content within websites. Sites with comment capabilities often find that users engage in spirited debates in the comments section, leading to higher page views and considerably more return visits from customers.

Rating/Like Features

Rating features are a hit on social sites such as Facebook, where users can “like” their friends’ content, and on Digg, where users “digg” stories or links they found valuable.

Adding a voting, rating, or thumbs up/down feature to content enables visitors to easily share their opinion – and the results can be used to improve future content.

Product Support

Whether through a virtual chat system, a live Q and A program, or a dedicated forum, websites can harness the power of UGC to offer product support. An advantage of allowing users to provide product support is less work and calls for the company’s customer support system!
Suggestions Box

Dedicating an area of a website to user comments, such as a “Suggestions Box,” can yield incredible feedback from site visitors. Websites can then use the information to improve their products and services accordingly.

Rate-my-product

A great tool for increasing conversions is a ‘product rating’ system. Not unlike using UGC rating systems to ‘score’ content, visitors can use a product rating system to rate your products and services, right on your web page. In this way you present a powerful form of social proof - shared opinion - about your offering.

When a new visitor lands on your product page and sees positive rating after positive rating, they will inevitably be more inclined to buy that product than were there no comment/ratings at all.

Photo comments

Having suggested allowing your visitors to add their comments about your written content, what about for photos? Adding commenting functionality to photographs gives an added 'reason' for the addition of another form of content to your web page. It makes what would have been a passive 'slideshow' into a potential hot-bed of discussion.

It's intriguing to think that simply by choosing the 'right sort of images' you can provoke your visitors to generate the 'right sort of content' relating to your niche (and your keyword theme).

They say a picture speaks a thousand words... well, perhaps in this scenario they'll generate 1000 words.
Surveys, quizzes, and polls

Surveys, quizzes and polls are great ‘texture’ (also known as ‘content density’) for your web site. They can break up the page and, at the same time, draw visitors in - particularly due to their simple, interactive nature.

We're all naturally inquisitive and so if we see an intriguing question in a poll (relating to the web site topic at hand) along with a promise to show what everyone else has voted an awful lot of visitors simply won't be able to resist viewing the results.

These forms of UGC also breed a 'sense of voice' as visitors feel they're having their say about the subject matter, in submitting their votes and/or answers.

Video/Photo albums

For an appropriate type of site photo albums can be an attractive multimedia content addition. Travel sites and sites to do with creative disciplines such as cooking, painting, craftwork and so on, all lend themselves beautifully to the implementation of a photo upload UGC system.

Visitors to your site who participate in these kinds of activities (so long as they relate directly to your site's content theme, of course) will be only too happy to show off their holiday snaps, their wonderful cake decoration, their needlepoint skills etc.

This kind of visitor interaction promotes a very strong sense of community, particularly if you tie in some kind of commenting functionality too, so visitors can comment on others' photographs, perhaps complimenting them on their workmanship or asking questions about the holiday destination in the photo uploaded.
Rate my song: Audio uploads from unsigned bands

Pretty much anything can be rated - be it your content, your product, other people’s products, videos, photos and/or audio. Just as with Photos discussed above, setting up a ratings feature for audio uploads adds a whole new dimension to this type of content.

Ratings not only potentially ‘explain’ a whole section of audio added to a site, they can stimulate more people to submit their own audio too - we all like getting positive feedback and so the prospect of having their audio rated favourably is far more likely to get people sending you material than a simple, flat request.

Forums and discussion boards

Forums are one of the most common and (traffic permitting) most successful forms of UGC interaction and community on the Web today.

While they’re not really worth setting up until you have a reasonable level of traffic to your site (nothing looks worse than a forum with only a couple of seed posts from you, six months ago) and even then you'll probably need to work hard to get the forum established initially - perhaps by sending mails, redirecting visitors to other, related forums and certainly being very active in the forum yourself, starting plenty of lively and interesting discussions.

There are some great tools available for setting up forums, such as the free 'PHPBB' script, used by hundreds of thousands of sites currently.

CV postings

If you have a recruitment business, or if you are trying to attract employers within a certain niche to your site, then a CV posting service might be something you would want to consider setting up.
There are plenty of scripts available (some free) that enable candidate and/or job postings on your site, and so long as your content is updated regularly this form of UGC can give a compelling reason for candidates and companies to come back to your site time and time again.

**Personal ads (for dating)**

Like CV postings above, this is something of a specialist application of UGC, since it typically relates only to those sites whose service revolves around match-making couples looking for love. This said, it might also be considered for sites who are looking to match, say, consultants and companies - maybe with a little 'modification' the scripts available for posting dating ads could be made appropriate for other match-making services such as this.

**Live comments on sporting events**

Making commenting 'timely' can add a whole new dimension to your UGC. If you have a fan-site or pages whose content relates to timely events (such as the Ryder Cup, the Superbowl, or perhaps a major political event) you could offer a real-time commenting system (which allows comments to be displayed immediately, with no manual validation) as a feature, to get your visitors involved.

**Soliciting testimonials**

Testimonials are perhaps the most commonly-used forms of social proof employed by Internet marketers online today - they indicate to prospective customers not only that others bought the product they are considering, but that these customers also thought the product was a good investment.

Asking your customers for a testimonial, perhaps in a follow-up e-mail some time after they purchased your product, is a pretty standard approach to gathering this type of UGC. Don't feel you have to limit yourself to textual testimonials here, either - video and
audio testimonials are said to give far greater 'credibility' to the customer's vote of confidence in your product or service than written testimonials. These different types of content also add great texture to your overall content offering, too.

Please note: there are a couple of things you'll need to consider when soliciting testimonials and these are covered off in Chapter 6: Legal Issues, later in this report.

**Raising topics that need addressing**

Whether it's your customers raising issues they need addressing, or you yourself raising issues you feel your customers ought to be aware of, UGC gives you a great platform for both.

Using UGC (be it video, audio, text or images) you can clearly present information that, while perhaps not part of the core content offering, is important to prospective customers.

For example, flagging up your product's guarantee period in the comments below your product review is a great way to give a gentle reminder to visitors that they can buy with confidence.

**Sharing expertise - e.g. How-to videos and articles**

How-to videos and/or written content are hugely popular forms of UGC today, and convey great value to people to whom they are relevant. The quality of some of this content is very high indeed. It's relevant to your own site's offering you should certainly consider including some - even if (at the outset) this form of UGC is embedded from another site (such as EHow.com).

If you have a high concentration of visitors who are knowledgeable about your niche (perhaps you publish an online journal about microbiology, for example) you may want to consider inviting your visitors to submit some specialist pieces of content. This is a
real win-win arrangement, as they benefit from exposure as an 'authority' on their subject matter, while you get great quality content in return.

**Other UGC Application Ideas**

Clearly there are a wealth of possible uses to which UGC can be put and the number of possible uses grows on an almost daily basis.

It’s easy to dismiss UGC as a fad or assume it is not appropriate for your site or for the niche in which you operate, but that can be a myopic way of looking at things. Instead, try to do some bluesky thinking as to how UGC could be incorporated into your business. Don’t just think in terms of how you can increase revenues from UGC, but consider ways in which it might benefit your customers, prospective customers and visitors to your web site.

When Amazon first added the ability for people to leave reviews about books on Amazon.com it is safe to say that they had no idea that this one feature would become such a massive differentiator between Amazon and the competition, and that the reviews themselves would become one of the biggest magnets for new customers and returning visitors.

Of the top twenty sites on the web according to Alexa, an amazing fifty percent of them are pure user generated content sites (YouTube, Facebook, Wikipedia, etc) and a further twenty percent is made up of part user generated content. So, before ruling out UGC for your web site go back through this chapter with an open mind and see if there is a way that you could at least dip your toe in the water.
5 Potential UGC Pitfalls to Consider

While UGC offers incredible benefits to site owners there are some pitfalls that it is best to be aware of before you get started. By being aware of these potential problems you can put in place a plan to deal with them and ensure that they never become anything more than a minor irritant.

In the first part of the chapter we’ll take a look at thirteen UGC related problems. Some of these are almost certain to raise their ugly head at some point, whereas others are experienced less frequently. The good news is that none of the problems are insurmountable as you’ll see in the second part of this chapter.

5.1 Thirteen Pitfalls and Problems

Abusive Language
Just as in the real world, not everyone on the Web is polite and respectful. Many times, user generated content capabilities will attract bad apples who use abusive, profane, or otherwise offensive language.

Spam Attacks
When website visitors are permitted to openly comment on a site, some unscrupulous individuals and companies may use the commenting feature as a means to post SPAM messages. It’s not uncommon to find unrelated advertisements, usually for scammy-sounding products and services, intermingled with legitimate comments on a site that uses UGC.

Dilution of Keyword Themes
Sites that are keyword optimized for competitive terms in the search engines spend a great deal of time ensuring that keywords are used in the appropriate place and at the appropriate density in content. Allowing users to comment on or otherwise contribute content can result in the dilution of these keyword themes, although UGC may also enable a site to appear for long-tail keyword results it was not optimizing for in the search engines.

**Loss of Focus**

While UGC can contribute to and add value to the discussion, in some cases, UGC will result in a lack of focus on a webpage. User opinions and comments can quickly railroad from one topic to another, resulting in a story about kittens becoming a dramatic debate over foreign relations policy changes in the U.S. Although such a massive diversion is rare it does happen and so it is something you should watch out for.

**Visitors Opinions Can Be Unexpected**

Not every visitor to a webpage is going to have something nice to say. The visitor’s opinions can vary widely, ranging from positive to negative to just plain out there. In terms of negative content, keep in mind that even bad comments serve a positive purpose. Displaying negative feedback shows users that the reviews are real, and that the opinions can be trusted.

Let’s face it: even the best products in the world are unsatisfactory to somebody. It’s only natural for a few negative comments to appear within UGC.
Inaccurate or Untrue Content

One of the biggest charges against user generated content is that it fuels the spread of inaccurate or untrue information on the Web. Just because someone types something and posts it on a website doesn’t make it true, yet people have a tendency to believe anything that they read in print. The simple reality of the matter is that user generated content cannot be taken as truth without being vetted and verified for accuracy.

Quality of Content

A significant part of UGCs appeal is due to the fact that it is written by ‘average’ people and not professionals. This fact, however, is a double edged sword. In many cases, amateur writers and content creators lack the skills of their professional counterparts; therefore, the content produced may not be of the same quality level.

Bad Content Can Reflect Poorly on You and Your Site

Because user generated content is not professionally written the quality can range from borderline-illiterate to Pulitzer Prize winning. Alas, the former is far more likely than the latter, as you are sure to find out. If left unchecked, this can lead to visitors forming a poor impression of the site and the publisher of the site. This is unfair, but it happens. If you feel that your UGC contributors might fall more into the ‘borderline illiterate’ camp than the ‘Pulitzer Prize Winning’ camp then this is definitely something you need to keep an eye out for.

Visitors May Have Ulterior Motives

When a site is opened up to visitor content, anyone can contribute, including competitors who may seek to sabotage a site through nasty comments and reviews. There are also some people who get a perverse pleasure from spreading inaccurate,
misleading, hateful, or otherwise offensive material. The world is full of odd people and you should expect the occasional one to visit your site every now and again.

**Potential for Duplicate Content and Copy Copyright Infringement**

Google and the other main search engines look down upon duplicate content that is plagiarized or taken directly from other websites. When a site opens up its doors and allows the public to create content, there are no guarantees that those users will not borrow, steal, or otherwise use content that already exists.

In fact, for certain media types (video being the major culprit), a fairly significant portion of all UGC relates to existing content.

When posting UGC people frequently quote lines from their favorite poem, movie, book, or song or borrow a few lines of text from another site to make a point. This is rarely a major problem and is unlikely to constitute an infringement of anyone’s copyright as long as the quoted text is only a few words or sentences and not several pages.

Where it can become a problem is when people are recording content directly from the TV and then posting it onto a UGC video site. Everyone knows that you can’t just walk into your local multiplex with a camcorder on your shoulder and record the latest blockbuster, but that doesn’t stop some people from doing exactly that.

Although duplicate content and content that infringes on copyright can be an issue it isn’t, in most cases, something to become overly concerned about. If you follow the advice later in this chapter you should be amply covered for such eventualities.

**Flame Wars and Internet Mobs**

Permitting users to post messages and comment on websites sometimes leads to “flame wars” between various users, in which nasty, heated messages are exchanged on a public forum. Similarly, UGC has also led to the formation of Internet “mobs” that
harass people on the Web. Some of these mobs have been known to publicly post contact information for the victims, causing the harassment to seep into the real world.

Now that you’re getting worried about what you might be letting yourself in for let me put your mind at rest. Flame wars and Internet mobs are not particularly common. Yes, people may get a little bit over excited if the debate gets heated, but that can be great news for your site as that kind of discussion can generate heaps of new traffic and many return visits.

The only time you need to worry is when things get out of hand and those instances can be managed by following the advice later in this chapter.

**Management Time**

UGC features on a website can require a significant investment of time to manage and administer. Websites must be aware of the time UGC monitoring can involve so that they are adequately prepared to manage the content. It’s also worth remembering that once you have set your UGC system running (and the genie is out of the bottle) it can sometimes be difficult to wind the comments back in…

**5.2 Solutions**

If the pitfalls described above have left you disheartened, don’t despair. Every potentially negative issue with UGC has an accompanying solution that addresses the problem.

**Moderation is Key**

The first and most important solution to potential issues with user generated content lies in content moderation. While some believe that moderating UGC defeats the purpose of allowing visitors to create content, effective use of UGC requires moderation to prevent abuse, liability, and other issues.
UGC can be moderated in one of three ways: before posting, after posting, or by the website community.

- In pre-posting moderation, all content submitted by visitors is held before publication until it has been reviewed by a site administrator. Once the content receives the stamp of approval, it is published live on the site.

- Site owners can also choose to moderate UGC after it has already been posted and published live. Websites that use this type of moderating strategy will typically post content live immediately and later have an administrator review the user generated content for relevancy and accuracy.

- Finally, some sites (most notably Wikipedia and Craigslist), rely on their users to moderate user generated content. In this moderating strategy, the community polices content by reporting or “flagging” content they deem questionable or inappropriate. A site administrator then reviews all flagged materials and removes it as necessary.

Language Filters

To avoid profane language in user generated content, websites can implement a language filter that screens content for words that they want to keep off of their webpage. A language filter is a simple and easy way to limit profanity and offensive language within UGC.

Easy Communication with Site Administrators

Another solution to common UGC pitfalls is to make it easy for visitors to contact site administrators. Give visitors clear information about how to contact an administrator with any questions or concerns about inappropriate or offensive content so that it can be removed immediately.
Assign Usernames and Passwords

A great way to limit issues with UGC is to require all visitors who wish to engage in content creation to register and create a user name and password. Sites should not allow people to post anonymous comments, but rather hold people accountable for what they are posting on the page. Assigning usernames and passwords makes it easy to eliminate problem visitors if they continuously violate the community’s rules.

Keyword Prioritization of Comments

If keyword dilution is a concern for a site, there are several plug-ins available which allow site administrators to prioritize keyword-rich comments and bump them up to the top of the comment list.

Captcha Codes

If you plan to accept submissions of any kind then it’s a good idea to use Captcha functionality (if available in your chosen UGC system). Captcha codes are visual representations of random words that require a human to ‘decipher’ them. These words must be correctly identified in a form, as part of the user’s submission. This is perfect for preventing automated spam attacks.

Terms of Service Agreement

At the end of the next chapter you’ll find some advice on how to go about writing a terms of service agreement for your web site. Do read this as it is very important.

A terms of service agreement can prevent a lot of trouble. It can stop people posting in appropriate content in the first place. It can give you a perfectly valid reason for removing offensive content without having to go into details as to why you’ve removed it. It can give you the right to ban a user for breaking the rules of the service agreement, and it can give you a document to point to if anyone questions your judgement regarding any UGC related issues.
Be Ruthless

Finally, remember that you are the site owner and as such you have ultimate control. If you feel someone’s behavior has overstepped the bounds of acceptability on your site then feel free to veto them. If you’re new to UGC it is easy to become overly concerned with allowing free speech. This can result in it taking too long to nip something in the bud. Rather than allow a situation to get out of hand it is far better to just delete the offending content and eliminate the risk early-on. Yes, this may offend the original poster, or the people who are ‘having a go’, but if you feel it is in the best interests of your site visitors, yourself or your company, then it is best not hesitate for too long.

The reality is that there are some crazy people out there and some of these people do not deserve to have a voice or be heard. As you gain in experience you will learn to spot these people quickly and do whatever is necessary to keep them quiet, but to start with you may give them too much credence. Fortunately, the good news, is that these crazy people are not the norm. In fact, they’re in a very small minority and so you definitely shouldn’t worry about them unduly. Just keep an eye out for them and make sure to deal with them quickly and decisively if you come across one.

Five Tips for UGC success

- Scan all UGC on your site at least once a day, no matter what type of moderation system being used. Assign several trusted community members as moderators to keep an eye on the content.

- Determine whether UGC is appropriate for your market/website. UGC is great for some industries, but less effective in others. Research what other sites in your industry are doing to determine what’s working and what’s not. Consider testing UGC on a small scale (such as enabling a simple thumbs up/down rating system on articles or hosting a contest) before launching a massive site-wide UGC campaign.
• Develop a ratings system for users, by which other users can rate their content and provide feedback. Those users with negative or low scores should be banned from the community.

• Give your visitors time to adjust. Your site visitors may not begin generating content immediately, and a portion of them will never engage in content creation at all. Once visitors start contributing UGC, it will have a snowball effect and more visitors will begin participating.

• As the site owner you have a great opportunity - and very real responsibility - to stimulate discussion amongst your site's community. This stimulation or 'seeding' of the discussion is crucial not only to keep the community alive, but also so that the topics being discussed are of some content value to you. If the discussion starts to drift off-topic, then you'll unwittingly be diluting the keyword theme of your page content - so, in those circumstances a timely interjection might be appropriate - or even a new topic started to get things back on track.
6 Legal Issues

User generated content raises several legal issues that must be addressed and considered before adding UGC capabilities to any site. As in the real world, people have a tendency to make inappropriate comments or remarks, which at times violates the legal rights of others. The most common legal issues relating to UGC include:

- Defamatory comments
- Publication of private information
- Harassment
- Discrimination
- Illegal advertising
- Pornography

Although UGC is not created by anyone affiliated with a specific website or business, those affected negatively by the content can name the website that published the information as a defendant due to “contributory negligence.” One bad apple in the community can cause enormous liability problems, which could cost a fortune to fight in court. Any site considering adding UGC features should be well versed in the legal issues surrounding UGC in order to minimize their risk and exposure.

6.1 Liability Issues

Copyright Infringement

One of the most commonly addressed liability issues with UGC refers to intellectual property infringement, more specifically copyright violations. A great deal of UGC uses copyright protected materials. Visitors post movie clips, quotes, and excerpts from their favorite books, poems, movies, and songs. A good deal of this borrowing is protected by
the Fair Use Doctrine, which allows people to use portions of copyrighted material without permission in certain circumstances (for parody, satire, or criticism) or for specific purposes (such as in a teaching setting).

There are three main forms of copyright violations: direct infringement, contributory infringement, and vicarious infringement.

**Direct infringement** is the actual act of copying the work. Websites are rarely held liable for direct infringement when the content in question was posted by a user, although they can be held liable if the copyrighted materials are viewed or downloaded by other users.

**Contributory infringement** refers to a person who knows of an act of infringement and participates in the act. Contributory infringement applies to site owners primarily if they’ve been notified of the infringement. Once a site is informed that an infringement is occurred, failure to remove the copyrighted material is considered participation in the infringement.

**Vicarious infringement** describes a situation in which an individual has the means and authority to control the actions of the person committing the infringement and earns profits as a result of the infringement. Because websites have the ability to block users from using the site, they can be held liable for vicarious copyright infringement.

**Trademark Infringements**

Another form of intellectual property infringement that is often called into question regarding UGC is trademark law. Trademark laws prohibit individuals from using another person’s trademark in any form that dilutes the trademark value or could create confusion about who the product or service is being offered by. Like copyright infringements, websites can be found liable for direct, contributory, or vicarious infringements of another person’s trademark.
Defamation

Defamation occurs when a person’s name or reputation is falsely slandered. Examples of defamation abound on the Web, yet the Communications Decency Act of 1996 states that “no provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as a publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider.” The CDA was created to ensure that Internet service providers and websites were not forced to unduly monitor their customer’s activities to limit liability. Courts have generally interpreted this clause of the act as protection for websites against any defamatory comments posted by site users, although the Act is not a complete guard against liability.

6.2 Limiting Liability

Websites not automatically exempt from liability due to the Communications Decency Act of 1996. When considering legal cases, the court system uses a three-part test to assess whether a website is protected by the Act. The court will examine:

1. Whether the site is a provider or user of an interactive computer service

2. Whether the site is a publisher or speaker of the content in question

3. Whether the content in question was provided by another person or the site (was the content user generated or posted by the site?)

To secure maximum protection from the CDA, websites should follow these guidelines to limit liability for their visitors’ conduct:

- Do not modify, edit, or otherwise change content created by users prior to publication. If the site engages in pre-posting moderation, questionable comments should be deleted or posted as is. If a website makes any changes to the content, they can be determined to be equally liable for the material in court.
• Create a system in which users have an easy way to contact site administrators and notify them of questionable materials. Allow users to “flag” or otherwise report any content that violates the site’s terms of use.

• In the case of social media, give individual users the ability to delete any content posted by another user on their personal profile or page.

• Implement a comprehensive Terms of Use policy that clearly defines the user as liable and responsible for all content and materials they post on the site. If any changes are made to the Terms of Use policy, users should be compelled to review and accept all changes before they post further UGC on the site.

6.3 User Generated Content and the FTC

In late 2009, the United States Federal Trade Commission released new guidelines regarding advertising, endorsements and testimonials on the Web and some of this had implications on UGC.

Advertisements

Any advertisement or marketing material that depicts a customer who has had an atypical experience with the product must clearly state what results consumers can usually expect to achieve. Simply stating “results not typical” is no longer sufficient – the normal results must be clearly defined.

Endorsements and Testimonials

The updated regulations pertain to any endorsement by a consumer, expert, celebrity, business, or organization, and require the business receiving the endorsement to clearly state the connection between the endorser and the business.

Any form of “material connection” between the endorser and the business, such as a payment, free product, or other reimbursement, must be disclosed within the ad. For
example, a blogger who is paid in cash or receives another form of “in-kind” compensation to endorse a product must clearly state in the blog post that they are being paid to discuss the product. Similarly, if a business refers to the results of a study whose research was paid for by the business in an ad or marketing campaign, the business must disclose that they paid for the research.

6.4 UGC in Europe

In the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association has created new guidelines for the use of user-generated content in the media. The new guidelines discuss how best to use user-generated content, address the many legal issues surrounding UGC, and describe specific recommendations for incorporating UGC in media presentations.

According to the CBA, “The promotion of UGC and the use of UGC are vital for helping the media to fulfill its democratic functions in society. By providing not only a space for the public to express themselves, but also the skills and capacity to take part in public debate, broadcasters can ensure that citizens’ right to freedom of expression is realized.”

6.5 Terms of Use Agreement

Any website that utilizes user generated content should have a detailed Terms of Service Agreement or Terms of Use in place to protect themselves against potential problems.

The Terms of Service agreement should include:

- A reminder to users that they must be courteous and respectful at all times
- How the user generated content will be utilized on (and off) the site
- Who owns the copyright to user generated content posted on the site
• Guidelines to appropriate and accepted language (no profanity, discriminatory, hateful, or offensive language will be permitted)
• A statement prohibiting the use of copyrighted or trademarked material
• A statement clarifying that user generated content represents the opinions of the user, not the website
• Guidelines on the use of URLs and HTML in user generated content
• The proper procedure for reporting inappropriate or offensive content
• A statement prohibiting SPAM
• A statement prohibiting users from engaging in flame wars
• A statement requiring all facts cited in UGC to include the source of the information

The Terms of Service agreement should also include a privacy policy. The privacy policy should describe how the site will use any personal information collected from users. For example, privacy policies commonly state that any and all information provided will be used exclusively by the website and not shared with any other organization.

**Tips for an Effective Terms of Service Agreement and Privacy Policy**

Use easy-to-understand language to ensure visitors comprehend the terms of the policy.

• Post the policies in an easy to find place on your website
• Consider calling your guidelines “etiquette” rather than rules or regulations
• Uphold your policy and abide by your word regarding visitor’s privacy
• Keep the policies updated as necessary. If you revise the policy, make certain to have users sign any changes to the policy before continuing to contribute content.
7 Conclusion

If you've read this report from cover to cover you will not only have given yourself an excellent grasp of how crucial user generated content is, and how it's set to play an essential part in the future of the Internet, but you should also have some embryonic ideas about how you can incorporate UCG into your own online strategy.

Let's quickly recap over some of the key points we've covered.

UGC isn't a passing trend or overnight fad like off-line sensations such as ‘hula hoops’ or ‘tamagotchis’, this valuable source of online content & interaction has already been with us for decades and looks set to continue flourishing over the years ahead.

We can trace the origins of UGC, as we now know them, back to the bulletin boards of the 1980s and we can track its growth and development from the early services, such as Compuserve and Geocities, right through to the present day UGC giants including YouTube and Twitter.

You will no doubt have noted, having read Chapter 1, that the trends for UGC all point firmly to continued, perhaps even spectacular growth during the years ahead. Prominent research house, eMarketer predicts growth of user-generated content on all fronts; from video-sharing through to commenting on blogs, and user posts on social networks, too.

The reason for this exponential growth can be explained by four major driving forces; improved access to the Internet (both in terms of numbers and speed of connection), more advanced tools for content creation, improved applications for posting content, and revenue-generating opportunities. The latter is of course a key driver since the more revenues that may be generated through implementing and maintaining a successful UGC strategy, the more proactive publishers will be in encouraging user contributions.
In Chapter 3 we reviewed fourteen key benefits of UGC for Web site publishers and a further ten benefits for site visitors. It is abundantly clear from these benefits that user generated content, when used properly, can be win-win for both site owner and site visitor. At the very simplest level, UGC provides site owners with a steady stream of fresh content and, from the visitor’s perspective, it changes the dynamics from a one-way, passive experience into a dynamic, two-way conversation in which their voice can be heard, loud and clear.

In Chapter 4 we considered six major uses for UCG along with over a dozen other ideas for incorporating UCG into your online strategy. While not all of these ideas may be appropriate for everyone’s site, with a little pragmatic thinking you will quickly identify those applications of UGC that best meet the needs and wants of your visitors.

Chapter 5 covered a dozen pitfalls to watch out for - challenges to be aware of - when adding UGC to your site. Keeping an eye on these potential issues will ensure that your UGC strategy implementation is a success right from the start. The second part of this chapter laid out some simple solutions and techniques to help you navigate around these issues. It is important that you familiarize yourself with these pitfalls, and their respective solutions, as you will doubtless avoid unnecessary headaches further on down the line.

In the final chapter of this report we looked into some of the legal issues relating to UGC. Depending on where you are located in the world, the type of site you run and the type of visitors you attract to your site, these legal issues may be of greater or lesser importance to your plans. As the saying goes: “Forewarned is forearmed” - it’s well worth considering the possible legal implications to ensure that you don’t fall foul of any legislation that may apply.

Before signing-off, I'd like to take this opportunity to wish you the best of luck with your user generated content efforts. When implemented properly UGC can be a hugely rewarding part of your overall online strategy and can take your online presence to an
entirely new level. The most important thing is to give it a go. For some it will transform their on-line presence from an 'also-ran' into an ‘authority site’ within their niche, whereas for other sites UGC may only have a small impact. The point to remember here is this: until you add UGC to your on-line offering you'll never truly know.

Wishing you every success with your UGC implementation,

Paul Smithson
January 2010
8 About XCommentPro

This report has been brought to you by XCommentPro – a brand new software product designed to make the process of adding all manner of UGC functionality as simple and straightforward as possible. Until now the task of adding this kind of dynamic, interactive content has been the exclusive preserve of people with strong technical skills, but now anyone can add UGC to their site using the XCommentPro Software.

Below you will find a list of some of the features available:

- Fully compatible with Dreamweaver, FrontPage, ExpressionWeb, XSitePro and ALL major web authoring packages
- Commenting system can also be manually inserted into HTML source code, if you are hand-coding your web page content
- Create unlimited commenting systems and embed them across your web pages to make them fully interactive
- Includes downloadable client software that you can install on your PC and use to quickly and easily generate commenting systems for insertion into your web pages
- Allow your web page visitors to add comments to your web page
- Add "Star Rating" functionality to your web page
- Enable "Feedback Scoring" so visitors may rate each other's comments
Users may add their name, location and website data into their posts

Give users the option to add personal avatar images to personalise all their comment postings

If you want, you can require all users posting comments/ratings to your page to register before they can post - a great way to build a targeted mailing list!

If using the registration feature, you can require a double opt-in by registrants, ensuring a 'clean' list of genuine e-mail addresses

Optionally require Captcha code entry on registration and/or individual post submissions

Set your commenting system to require verification from you, before new comments may be displayed - useful if you want to double-check posts before they go live

Quality Interface

Attractively designed interface makes using XCommentPro both a simple and enjoyable process…

From the tactile sliding-switches to neat tabbed sections, this is a piece of software you're going to really enjoy using!
Enable "Reporting" feature on your commenting, so that inflammatory/offensive posts may be reported to you by your web page visitors.

Add RSS feed functionality to your web page commenting system, so visitors may subscribe to the commenting on that page, and be kept up to date automatically on what others are contributing to the discussion.

Integrate Social Bookmarking links into your commenting system to make it easy for visitors to promote your page content using services such as Twitter, Facebook, Digg and more...

Create automatic "Tag Clouds" for your comment lists, and allow users to self-categorize their posts. A great way to display the prominent themes running thorough your comments to other visitors.

Have XCommentPro perform 'pagination' of your comments - all you need to do is set how many comments you want per-page, then let XCommentPro automatically split the full list of comments up accordingly.

---

**Your Total UGC Solution**

*The publishing details screen, shown left, stores all of your web hosting account details, so publishing your comment system is simply a matter of pressing one button.*

*Couldn’t be simpler!*
Access a powerful, password-protected administration area on-line, giving you instant access to detailed reports and statistics across ALL the commenting systems you have embedded throughout your web site.

View reports in your administration area including:

- Post-counts on individual pages
- Editable lists of comments posted to individual web pages
- Posts requiring verification before publishing
- Tag-counts across all comments
- Full details of tags being used across different commenting systems on your site
- User-counts on individual pages
- User-lists, so you can manage people who have registered with your commenting system
- Word-counts across the comments placed throughout your site
- Last 30 days' activity
- Last 12 months' activity
- Most popular day-of-week

Set your commenting system to prioritize the ordering of displayed comments by date, rating, feedback score or even the presence of your keywords.

Have XCommentPro automatically send you notification e-mails to your inbox, on events taking place such as:

- A comment being posted
- A comment requiring approval
- A comment receiving negative feedback score(s)
- A comment being submitted with a low star-rating
- A comment being reported

So you can relax, safe in the knowledge you are being kept right up-to-date, and in full control, by your commenting system.

Activate completely automated PDF reports - e-mailed to you at set intervals so you can keep tabs on how your site-wide commenting is performing from wherever you might be - even using your Blackberry or iPhone!
Set your commenting system to automatically remove comments from your web page after certain conditions (of your choosing) are met:

- After a period of time - keeping comments ‘current’
- After a set number of posts have been submitted - keeping things manageable
- After a set level of negative feedback scores - keep the quality high
- After a comment has been reported a set number of times - clearing out offensive posts for you

Control and remove offensive words in posts automatically, using fully-customizable bad word filtration.

Features in-built publishing engine which will automatically upload all of the necessary files and folders to your web hosting account, the engine for your commenting system

Fully-compatible with any web hosting account featuring PHP functionality (which

See XCommentPro In Action...

If you want to see how the commenting system works, first hand, head over to www.xcommentpro.com and check out the “Example” page.

Try submitting a comment to our example page and see how easy it will be for your site’s visitors to start contributing!

Watch our short show-reel demonstration video over at www.xcommentpro.com/video and you’ll soon see why everyone’s getting so excited about this ground-breaking new UGC software.

See XCommentPro In Action...

If you want to see how the commenting system works, first hand, head over to www.xcommentpro.com and check out the “Example” page.

Try submitting a comment to our example page and see how easy it will be for your site’s visitors to start contributing!
As you can see from the list of features above, XCommentPro offers you everything you could want and need to run an effective user-generated content system across your whole web site.

**Additional Video Bonus, when you order XCommentPro**

For a limited time, when you order your copy of XCommentPro you'll also get our series of four professionally-produced videos that perfectly compliment this report, and go into detail about what UGC is, how you can use it to generate benefits to you as a site operator… and much more besides. These videos together deliver approximately three hours of need-to-know UGC information.

**Ready to try it out for yourself?...**

To get started using the XCommentPro software, simply head over to [www.xcommentpro.com](http://www.xcommentpro.com) and get started with User Generated Content on your site.
9 Appendix

Whilst researching for this report I came across an amazing amount of statistics regarding user generated content, social media, and related topics.

Some of these facts and figures really got me thinking, others made my jaw drop, and others had me laughing at my monitor in sheer disbelief.

I’ve copied some of these facts and figures out for you below as I think it helps to illustrate the massive growth in the areas covered by this report. However, a little caution has to be advised. Just because someone puts something up on the Internet doesn’t mean it is true.

9.1 Statistics

E-Mail

- 90 trillion – The number of emails sent on the Internet in 2009.
- 247 billion – Average number of email messages per day.
- 1.4 billion – The number of email users worldwide.
- 100 million – New email users since the year before.
- 81% – The percentage of emails that were spam.
- 92% – Peak spam levels late in the year.
- 24% – Increase in spam since last year.
- 200 billion – The number of spam emails per day (assuming 81% are spam).

Websites

- 234 million – The number of websites as of December 2009.
- 47 million – Added websites in 2009.
Web servers

- -22.1% – The decline in numbers of IIS websites in 2009.
- 35.0% – The growth of Google GFE websites in 2009.

Domain names

- 81.8 million – .COM domain names at the end of 2009.
- 12.3 million – .NET domain names at the end of 2009.
- 7.8 million – .ORG domain names at the end of 2009.
- 76.3 million – The number of country code top-level domains (e.g. .CN, .UK, .DE, etc.).
- 187 million – The number of domain names across all top-level domains (October 2009).
- 8% – The increase in domain names since the year before.

Internet users

- 1.73 billion – Internet users worldwide (September 2009).
- 18% – Increase in Internet users since the previous year.
- 738,257,230 – Internet users in Asia.
- 418,029,796 – Internet users in Europe.
- 252,908,000 – Internet users in North America.
- 179,031,479 – Internet users in Latin America / Caribbean.
- 67,371,700 – Internet users in Africa.
- 57,425,046 – Internet users in the Middle East.
- 20,970,490 – Internet users in Oceania / Australia.

Social media

- 126 million – The number of blogs on the Internet (as tracked by BlogPulse).
- 84% – Percent of social network sites with more women than men.
- 27.3 million – Number of tweets on Twitter per day (November, 2009)
• 57% – Percentage of Twitter’s user base located in the United States.
• 4.25 million – People following @aplusk (Ashton Kutcher, Twitter’s most followed user).
• 350 million – People on Facebook.
• 50% – Percentage of Facebook users that log in every day.
• 500,000 – The number of active Facebook applications.

Images

• 4 billion – Photos hosted by Flickr (October 2009).
• 2.5 billion – Photos uploaded each month to Facebook.
• 30 billion – At the current rate, the number of photos uploaded to Facebook per year.
• 4,000,000,000 – The number of photos hosted on Flickr

Videos

• 1 billion – The total number of videos YouTube serves in one day.
• 12.2 billion – Videos viewed per month on YouTube in the US (November 2009).
• 924 million – Videos viewed per month on Hulu in the US (November 2009).
• 182 – The number of online videos the average Internet user watches in a month (USA).
• 82% – Percentage of Internet users that view videos online (USA).
• 39.4% – YouTube online video market share (USA).
• 81.9% – Percentage of embedded videos on blogs that are YouTube videos.

Malicious software

• 148,000 – New zombie PCs created per day (used in botnets for sending spam, etc.)
• 2.6 million – Amount of malicious code threats at the of 2009 (viruses, trojans, etc.)
• 921,143 – The number of new malicious code signatures added by Symantec in Q4 2009.

UGC Growth

Social Media has overtaken pornography as the #1 activity on the Web.
• Years to Reach 50 million Users:
  
  o **Radio (38 Years)**
  o **TV (13 Years)**
  o **Internet (4 Years)**
  o **iPod (3 Years)**
  o **Facebook added 100 million users in less than 9 months**
  o **iPhone applications hit 1 billion in 9 months**

• There are over 200,000,000 Blogs on the Web at the end of 2009.

• **User-Generated Content Consumers 2008-2013 (% of Internet users)**

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
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<td>42.5%</td>
<td>44.8%</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Soc. Networking</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>44.2%</td>
<td>46.9%</td>
<td>49.1%</td>
<td>50.5%</td>
<td>51.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blogs</td>
<td>54.0%</td>
<td>58.0%</td>
<td>61.0%</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
<td>67.0%</td>
<td>69.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wikis</td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
<td>39.0%</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
<td>42.6%</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User-Generated Content Consumers</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
<td>66.0%</td>
<td>68.0%</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

• US user-generated content advertising revenue will reach $824 million in 2012, up from $162 million in 2007. By 2012, this total will represent 1.62% of US online advertising spending, up from 0.77% in 2007.

• US online social network advertising spending will rise from $920 million in 2007 to $2.7 billion in 2012.

**General Trends**

• By 2010 Generation Y will outnumber Baby Boomers….96% of them have joined a social network.

• 1 out of 8 couples married in the U.S. last year met via social media.
• A 2009 US Department of Education study revealed that, on average, online students outperformed those receiving face-to-face instruction.

• 1 in 6 higher education students are enrolled in some form of online curriculum.

• In 2009 Boston College stopped distributing e-mail addresses to incoming freshmen – arguably, Generation Y and Z consider e-mail passé.

• 80% of companies use LinkedIn as a primary tool to find employees.

• 54% of bloggers post content or tweet daily.

• 25% of search results for the World’s Top 20 largest brands are links to user-generated content.

• 25% of Americans surveyed said in the past month they watched a short video…on their phone.

• 24 of the 25 largest newspapers are experiencing record declines in circulation because we no longer search for the news, the news finds us.

• The level of engagement (in creating and consuming UGC) of US Internet users is deep and broad, with participation rates of up to 62% in categories like customer reviews and involvement in an ever-expanding range of online content that includes video, audio, personal profiles, avatars, photo sharing, encyclopedia entries and reviews.

• In a study of the most popular user generated content categories, nearly 42% of the sites were on subjects that were so niche that it could not be fit into any of the popular categories. Most of them (Twitter for example) are so broad/generic that they really cannot be classified into any particular category

• The most popular user generated content categories:
  
  o Entertainment : 12%
• Streaming media & Downloads : 9%
• Computer & Technology : 7%
• Pornography : 7%
• Arts : 6%
• Sports : 5%
• Education : 4%
• Religion : 4%
• Leisure : 2%
• Travel : 2%

• By 2013, nearly 155 million US Internet users will consume some form of user-created content, up from almost 116 million in 2008. (eMarketer, 2009)

• The number of user-generated content creators will reach 114.5 million in 2013, up from 82.5 million in 2008. That will translate to 51.8% of US Internet users in 2013, up from 42.8% in 2008. (eMarketer, 2009)

• Over half (51.0%) of consumers are using the Internet before making a purchase in shops, educating themselves on the best deals available. (Verdict Research, May 2009)

• Studies of communities like Yahoo, and Wiki projects by Comscore show that only 1% of a community typically contributes content to that community, the rest simply acting as consumers. However, if you look to examples like Facebook, MySpace, YouTube or Twitter, that 1% rule is completely shattered completely.

• Social networks are the most popular content creation activity—37% of US Internet users created social network profiles in 2008. The percentages of users who created videos and blogs were more moderate, ranging from 8% to 11%. Virtual worlds—which entail the creation of avatars and other online representations, often with user-generated photos, graphics and audio—were the most niche-oriented of these pursuits, with a 6% participation rate.
The Larger UGC Brands

- If Facebook were a country it would be the world’s 4th largest, between the United States and Indonesia (note that Facebook is now creeping up – recently announcing 300 million users) Some sources say China’s QZone is larger, with over 300 million using their services (Facebook’s ban in China plays into this).

- The fastest growing segment on Facebook is that of 55-65 year-old females.

- Ashton Kutcher and Ellen Degeneres (combined) have more Twitter followers than the population of Ireland, Norway, or Panama.

- The #2 largest search engine in the world is in fact YouTube.

- Wikipedia has over 13 million articles…some studies show it’s more accurate than Encyclopedia Britannica…78% of these articles are non-English.

- If you were paid a $1 for every time an article was posted on Wikipedia you would earn $156.23 per hour, or $1,368,574 per annum.

- Facebook USERS translated the site from English to Spanish via a Wiki in less than 4 weeks and cost Facebook $0.

- Hulu has grown from 63 million total streams in April 2008 to 373 million in April 2009.

- According to Jeff Bezos, 35% of book sales on Amazon are for the Kindle, when available.

- More than 85% of Twitter users send NONE. Here is how the numbers stack up:
  - 0 tweets : 85.37%
  - 1 tweet : 6.48%
  - 2 tweets : 2.80%
  - 3 tweets : 1.53%
  - 4 tweets : 0.93%
- 5 tweets: 0.62%
- 6 tweets: 0.42%
- 7 tweets: 0.31%
- 8 tweets: 0.23%
- 9 tweets: 0.18%
- 10+ tweets: 1.13%

- Monthly Visitors to larger UGC sites:
  - My Space: 68,285,849 Monthly Visitors
  - Wikipedia: 41,422,790 Monthly Visitors
  - YouTube: 23,825,526 Monthly Visitors
  - Facebook: 22,541,770 Monthly Visitors
  - Craigslist: 23,982,542 Monthly Visitors
  - flickr.com: 23,643,614 Monthly Visitors

- More than 1.5 million pieces of content (web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photos, etc.) are shared on Facebook…daily.

- Marketing share, as measured by Hitwise, among American Internet users
  - Youtube: 68.58%
  - Google Video: 3.04%
  - Hulu: 2.18%
  - MySpace TV: 1.50%
  - Apple iPod/iTunes: 1.03%
  - MetaCafe: 1.02%
  - Yahoo Video Streaming: 0.99%
  - Bing Video Search: 0.97%
  - Daily Motion: 0.87%
  - Youtube Mobile: 0.72%
• Revenue Projections for Popular Social Networks, from Borrell Associates:
  o MySpace: $550 million (26% from local advertisers)
  o Hi5: $430 million
  o Flickr: $336 million
  o Facebook: $310 million (74% from local advertisers)
  o Twitter: $288 million (potential)

• Figures released by web monitoring company ComScore show Wikipedia as the 16th most visited online property in July 2006 with 6.5 million visitors (up 253 per cent compared to the previous year).

• Users of the top social networking sites demonstrate particularly high levels of engagement, with visitors to MySpace and Bebo averaging at least five usage days, two hours of use, and 300 page views per visitor during July.

• User generated content sites, such as platforms for photo sharing, video sharing and blogging, comprised five out of the top 10 fastest growing web brands in July 2009, according to research from Nielsen/NetRatings.

• While brands such as HSBC and Associated Press topped the charts, image hosting site ImageShack ranked number four among July’s fastest growing web brands, increasing 233 per cent, from a unique audience of 2.3 million to 7.7 million.

• Heavy.com, a video sharing site, took the number five spot, increasing 213 per cent, from 965,000 to 3 million unique visitors. Photo sharing site Flickr followed at number six, growing 201 per cent from 2.1 million to 6.3 million unique visitors.

• Among the top 10 web brands overall, MySpace was the number one fastest growing, increasing 183 per cent, from 16.2 million unique visitors in July 2005 to 46 million in July 2006. Google ranked second, growing 23 per cent, from a unique audience of 76.2 million
to 94 million and eBay rounded out the top three, increasing 13 per cent, from 51.1 million to 57.8 million unique visitors.

**Regional UGC Stats**

- Russia has reportedly got the most *engaged* social media audience with visitors spending 6.6 hours and viewing 1,307 pages per visitor per month – Vkontakte.ru is Russia’s leading social network.

- The popularity of Websites that rely on user-generated content has increased dramatically in the United Kingdom, according to new statistics. MySpace and Piczo show the strongest growth in usage year-to-year, respectively up 467% to 5.2 million visitors and 393% to 4 million. Bebo is up 328% to 3.9 million, while Wikipedia saw a 181% increase.

- These sites draw more frequent visits than other non-user-generated sites in the UK Top 50, with 4.2 usage-days per month (compared to the 3.5 average). They tend to engage visitors for longer (80 minutes per visitor, compared to the 33-minute average over all), and visitors tend to view more pages per visit (217 pages per visitor, compared to 52-page average over all).

- In a recently released report (PDF) by Eurostat, the overall contribution of eCommerce among Enterprises in the European Union is revealed to be close to 12%.

- **Countries With Highest Contributions From eCommerce**
  - Ireland : 26%
  - Finland : 18%
  - Sweden : 18%
  - Czech Republic : 15%
  - Germany : 15%
  - United Kingdom : 15%
  - Hungary : 14%
France: 13%

Countries With Lowest Contribution From eCommerce

- Bulgaria: 1%
- Cyprus: 1%
- Contribution from within the same country: 73%
- Contribution from other countries inside EU: 19%
- Contribution from outside EU: 8%

Marketing/Advertising

- 34% of bloggers post opinions about products & brands.
- 78% of consumers trust peer recommendations. Only 14% trust advertisements.
- Only 18% of traditional TV campaigns generate a positive ROI.
- 90% of people that can skip TV ads, do (using Tivo/Sky+).
- The $920 million spent on social network advertising was only 4.3% of US online ad spending in 2007. Furthermore, only about 10% of the social network ad spend is against user-generated content.
- In 2006, UGC sites attracted 69 million users in the United States alone, and in 2007 generated $1 billion in advertising revenue.
- By 2011, UGC sites are projected to attract 101 million users in the U.S. and earn $4.3 billion in ad revenue.
- Nearly 45% of European Internet users say that in the past three months they have researched a product online and then bought it in a shop. (Forrester, March 2009)
• Online consumers are becoming precision shoppers. For every $1 spent online, $5.77 is influenced in store. (Macy’s CEO, 2009)

• 64% of Social Researchers (those who refer to user-generated content when shopping) research products online more than half the time, no matter where they ultimately buy the product (store, Web, catalog, etc.). (eTailing Group, June 2007)

• 90% of those surveyed say they have a better overall shopping experience when they research products online before shopping in-store. (Harris Interactive, October 2007)

• 92.5% of adults said they regularly or occasionally research products online before buying them in a store. (BIGresearch, March 2007)

• More than three-quarters of review users in nearly every category reported that the review had a significant influence on their purchase, with hotels ranking the highest (87%). (comScore/The Kelsey Group, October 2007)

• 97% of those surveyed who said they made a purchase based on an online review said they found the review to have been accurate. (comScore/The Kelsey Group, October 2007)

• Consumers who research online for digital cameras and TVs spend 10% more on in-store purchases than consumers who do not research online. (ChannelForce for Yahoo Search Marketing, July)