

Publisher O'Reilly Rallies its 50 Most Influential Fans to Spread the Buzz Online

CASE STUDY 06/14/2001

CHALLENGE: After a year of solid networking, last August Simone Paddock, Online Evangelist for technical book publisher O'Reilly, had contacts with almost anyone who counted in the community -- including influential writers, book reviewers, forum moderators, webloggers and related-site webmasters. Now she had to turn those connections into cash.

At this stage, most marketers would have automatically launched an affiliate program like Amazon's. But Paddock passionately felt this was the wrong direction. She says, "A typical affiliate program is mostly based on the exchange of click-rate traffic vs. micro payments. Not only would such a model have completely missed the point of what I was trying to do, but I didn't want to be pressed into a conventional and widely-known format.

"I wanted something that would truly benefit both O'Reilly and the Evangelists in equal ways, as well as serve the technical community at large through a wider dissemination of worthwhile information. I needed it to be unique, useful, versatile, and engaging, but most of all make a positive impact."

CAMPAIGN: Paddock had already been working one-on-one with her contacts to encourage grassroots online promotions -- such as getting influential book reviewers to mention O'Reilly books. She says, "I noticed though that my efforts needed more structure, my contacts lacked a sense of community around O'Reilly."

O'Reilly already operated a popular User Group Program (see link below) so Paddock was well aware of the value of community in online buzz creation. After two months of research and careful thought, Paddock launched a new community for her most influential connections: The O'Reilly Evangelist Program.

Membership in the Program is by invitation-only, which gives it an exclusive feel and shields it from abuse. Membership benefits include free samples of the latest O'Reilly books, 25% discount on O'Reilly events and a weekly email newsletter featuring news briefs. (In fact the newsletter is so well produced that we invite all ContentBiz readers to check it out as an example of Best Practices in promotional newsletter writing. See below for a link to a sample copy.)

In exchange, members are asked to add sample-chapter links to their own sites and/or email newsletters; write book reviews; join the conversation when online discussion groups mention O'Reilly; run contests for promotional O'Reilly tchotchkes; and send O'Reilly lots of useful feedback about what the community's needs are. How did Paddock get all these great ideas for online guerilla marketing? By asking her Evangelists for them!

RESULTS: More than 50 influential journalists, web site producers, book reviewers and discussion group moderators have enthusiastically joined O'Reilly's Evangelist Program so far. Paddock says their favorite benefit is "most definitely the free books." The weekly newsletter also turned out to be one of the most valued perks because it's both informative and entertaining.

Specific book and event ticket sales resulting from the Program are hard to measure. However, Paddock says, "Most Evangelists tell me how grateful their friends and peers are for recommending O'Reilly books that have helped them resolve specific technical problems." In addition, Paddock says, "Certain sites have a huge readership, and getting a review posted there due to an Evangelist's effort can make quite a difference in the sales of that particular book."

Last, but not least, Paddock has gained invaluable insights into the likes and dislikes of O'Reilly's marketplace as a whole because Evangelists reflect the voice of the greater community. For example, she recently surveyed her Evangelists in order to "crystallize a clear picture of the importance of usenet to our customers, the rules that were expected to be observed when posting, and found that despite the extremely high spam&flame/content ratio, newsgroups still remained a valuable resource for people with very specific information needs."

So, although running the Program takes about 75% of her time these days, Paddock feels the investment has been well worth it.

LINKS: Want to see a sample of Paddock's Evangelist Newsletter? We've posted a recent issue on our site just for you to check out and steal ideas from:
<http://www.contentbiz.com/sample.cfm?contentID=1715>

Here's a link to O'Reilly's Evangelist Program Web page. Paddock wanted us to be sure to give O'Reilly's Creative Director Edie Freeman credit for inventing the wonderful "Telescope Guy" logo and Designer Laura Schmier credit for the site's easy-to-read, pleasant look.
<http://evangelists.oreilly.com>

O'Reilly's User Group Program <http://ug.oreilly.com>

ContentBiz Case Study on How the Princeton University Press Does Guerrilla Marketing Online: <http://www.contentbiz.com/sample.cfm?contentID=1383>