



Contact

THE BUZZ

BY TIM WELLS & JINAL SHAH

The Interactive Imperative



By giving kids the ability to cultivate their voice and a platform to display their talents, a new wave of media is giving birth to a generation that will demand innovative ideas.

WHEN THERE ARE LITERALLY HUNDREDS OF WEB SITES offering the same news, contests, prizes, and promotions, what really differentiates them from one another? *Seventeen* magazine's decision to offer profiles of its editors on MySpace, the Weblogs created by *Shop Etc.* and *Jane* magazine, and Condé Nast's plans for a user-generated teen Web site — such moves are unsurprising, even inevitable. But simply going digital and making the people who produce the magazines more personable doesn't necessarily guarantee a greater level of reader engagement.

When *ElleGirl* decided to fold its print vehicle and run as a digital magazine, we thought that the decision may have been a bit premature. Readers like to touch and feel the pages of a magazine, and then recreate that experience online. The print experience triggers the need for the online experience. It also creates the opportunity for sharing with friends. While a two-way exchange is a mandatory evolution to ensure survival, digital components alone do not create an interactive interface. A structured balance enlisting a creative use of various online and offline outlets is the key to creating an interactive exchange between editors and readers.

Last spring, five editors with diverse backgrounds published the first issue of *Is Not Magazine*, a simple one-page, billboard-like sheet that appeared in the form of wild postings in Melbourne, Australia. The effort not only saved a few trees, but it challenged readers. Produced, printed, and "distributed" Down Under, the tiny magazine, or news-zine, pushed the boundaries of what the publishing world deems a magazine, a newspaper, or newsletter. *Is Not Magazine* erased existing myths of what a magazine is or should be.

Instead of simply posting content on its Web site, the magazine invites readers to participate in unusual ways. Readers can click on images of pieces that interest them from their camera phone and save for viewing later, or they can send, via text message, a 160-character Flash-enabled story, or write whatever they want

on the posting itself. *Is Not Magazine* understands that interactivity is not limited to having an online identity. Readers' short attention spans and the plethora of media choices have outpaced the lure of the digital age. Creativity and innovation are defining interactivity — and they are signaling the next big marketing idea.

The dynamic shift toward user-generated content and more active consumer engagement will only gain prominence in the future. While YouTube and Facebook offer users the ability to post their films and friend networks, respectively, Uth TV, a combination of both formats, has taken interactivity to a higher level. The site Uthtv.com is an online channel that invites users to both network and create communities and upload their movies and short films.

But the site has gone farther and provided users with a platform to be recognized for their work. A peer voting

system brings the best work forward; selected users have the chance to turn their work into full-fledged productions and potentially paid work. In fact, two of the youth-produced shows have been nominated for Emmy Awards this year. Who knew such a concept could work?

Another impressive venture is the site *impnow.com*, which has integrated interactivity with the glamour of reality TV. The site lures youth by promising to serve as a launching pad for their entertainment careers. It's "American Idol" meets "Survivor," played out in an online environment similar to MySpace. The thrill of networking with the potential for an incentive represents interactivity at the highest levels in both of these cases.

Still nascent, these are examples of online media opportunities that challenge the boundaries of traditional media and represent authentic interaction with users.

With 83 percent of youth online at any given time, according to Yankelovich Youth Monitor 2005, kids no longer trade phone numbers. Instead, they ask, "Are you on MySpace or Facebook?" By giving kids the ability to cultivate their voice and a platform to display their talents or their 15 minutes of fame, this new wave of media is giving birth to an entire generation of users that will demand innovative ideas. Publishers that don't get this risk irrelevance, or worse: Consumers who just won't respond and who definitely won't interact. **M**

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