

Campaigns only come in short bursts, but still get the Web buzzing

Twitter delivers creative way for ad agencies to play

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SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

While Twitter itself is still struggling to find a profitable business plan, Japanese ad agencies have quickly embraced the micro-blogging service to create innovative campaigns.

This year, Japanese clothing chain Uniqlo has been at the forefront of creating Twitter-based microsites for which they received international media attention.

In one of the simplest ones, Flash veteran Yugo Nakamura developed the UTweet microsite (www.uniqlo.com/utweet) where, after entering their Twitter ID, the user's profile icon gets mashed up with their own tweets as a red-and-white graphic visualization. Visuals are then spliced into a film of various hipster models wearing the company's new clothing line. UTweet is only one of several Uniqlo apps that has proven to be popular.

ELM's campaign for Sharp's new LED bulb series (<http://mirai-sharp.jp>) is another campaign getting Twitter users buzzing. A user can choose from a range of fanciful dwellings and place their selection on a map. The more followers they have, the bigger the pagoda, tree house or skyscraper they can get. It's another clever idea that makes use of Twitter accounts and demonstrates the willingness of Japanese advertisement campaigns to experiment with the social-networking service.

However, why are there so many more clever ad campaigns originating from Japan than from the West?

During the last 12 months, Twitter has taken off tremendously in Japan. By June, Internet research company Video Research Interactive counted 6.25 million registered Twitter users in Japan, 16.3 percent of the total number of people spending time online in the country. This compares with 9.8 percent in the United States according to media researcher Nielsen Online. Twitter itself has said that every day 8 million tweets are sent from Japan, which amounts to about 12 percent of tweets worldwide. During the World Cup, Japan set the world record for most tweets per second — 3,283 during the Japan-Denmark game.

"It was foreseeable that Twitter became the first true 2.0 project in Japan," observes Oliver Reichenstein, CEO of Tokyo-based design agency Information Architects. "In Japan, users often eagerly embrace technical novelties — but are also quick to discard them."

Reichenstein points out some parallels between the recent Twitter boom and the now-aging Japanese blogosphere that

thrived before being invaded by corporations with bland marketing blogs. With Twitter, however, Japanese firms are supporting more creative approaches.

"Instead of being critical about it as in the West, they are speedily adapting. The result doesn't have to make sense all the time," says Reichenstein.

Indeed, it doesn't have to make sense all the time to customers. Another recent Uniqlo campaign drew in some Twitter users who had no idea what they were in for. Within three days, more than 130,000 users had signed up for Lucky Line, where their Twitter avatars could stand in a virtual waiting line — some not even knowing what would be in store for them.

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(In the end the company raffled off discount coupons and T-shirts, says the Dentsu agency who played with the idea of a line to generate buzz.)

"How do we find a good shop on the street? It's easy," explains Yasuharu Sasaki, creative director at Dentsu. "A good restaurant is always crowded. A good museum has a long waiting line. People draw more people. However, on the Internet it's not intuitive. I wanted to visualize how a Web site or a digital campaign is popular. So I thought that the waiting line could be a symbol of the Uniqlo sale."

For this particular campaign, Twitter proved to be ideal.

"I love its speed, uncertainty and flatness. A cool idea can spread around the world within a day," Sasaki says.

Although the campaign generated some short-lived hype and increased the company's brand awareness, there were some minor problems. When a password for a URL site with a text file containing the cached user names in the line leaked, people initially believed that also their Twitter passwords had also leaked. This turned out not to be the case, but still it was a close call for Uniqlo, which is part

of an industry that hasn't yet had to worry about privacy issues like the social-networking industry has.

Another campaign pushed the concept of using a virtual flock of Twitter followers almost to the point of silliness. KDDI's IS Parade (<http://isparade.jp>) calls itself a "parade generator." Enter your Twitter ID and your profile icon sits on top of a little marching character. It keeps marching while your followers dance and stroll behind you, thus generating a cheerful crowd (some even show up as dogs). The campaign was developed by ad agency Hakuhodo Inc. together with Kensuke Sembo of Tokyo-based AAAAAAAA & Co. (<http://aaaaaaa.jp/>). Sembo is creative director and part of the artist group exonemo.

"The purpose was to intuitively and emotionally show people's connections that you wouldn't usually notice," says Sembo. "The parade has an unexplainable appeal to it. It's not about the individuals who are part of it; it's the fact that you can see all of the individuals collectively getting into it."

IS Parade was recently awarded a Bronze Cyber Lion at the annual Cannes Lions International Advertisement Festival. With more than 6.5 million users, the Web-based campaign went viral and served as publicity for KDDI's new IS smart phone (though the extent of the advertising was a discreet link at the bottom of the screen).

Technical implementation of the IS Parade into a Flash app was done by Tomohiko Koyama, aka Saqoosha, CTO and Flash developer at Katamari Inc. in Osaka. An implementation into Japanese social-networking site Mixi has been online since last month.

In general, the Twitter implementation into social-networking sites such as Mixi, Facebook and MySpace is crucial for many Japanese campaigns. The Mixi connection was thus essential for the extremely popular song generator "iida calling" (<http://iida.jp/calling/>). Now running in its 3.0 version, the initial interactive campaign for KDDI's iida smart-phone brand used a caller's voice to generate a song online. With the latest update, a user has to type in one sentence using the Japanese haiku measure. It is then generated into a voice file and transformed into a musical track that can be spread over Twitter or downloaded as a ring tone.

"During the product development (stage) we already came up with the idea to present several branded services from the entertainment field," explains Qanta Shimizu, planner and technical director at the IMG SRC, Inc. Web agency based in Tokyo. "The iida calling app series were



The real thing: Customers wait in line outside a Uniqlo store in Tokyo's Shinjuku district last year. A promotional campaign for Uniqlo took the idea of a line and used it to advertise to Twitter users. BLOOMBERG

conceived to promote the brand further through a social platform.

"A tweet with 140 characters forces a user to limit their daily tweets; a Japanese haiku has the same structure as a tweet. There is a reason for the phrase, 'The beautiful format is conceived through its limitation.'"

Campaigns don't have to always be so technically advanced — an update of the Flash player can be sufficient to play with a Twitter integration. Freelance Web designer Masaki Ono, who goes by his online name "sipo," was inspired by the many tech demos posted on Flash community platform wonderfl (<http://wonderfl.net/>) where users can simply paste in an ActionScript, a small program written in scripting language, and let the site compile and run it for an instant result. From there, he developed his own Flash viral, DotWar (<http://dw.sipo.jp/>), that could have easily been part of a campaign. Typing in your Twitter ID into an app dissolves your profile icon into the army of tiny soldiers that starts strategically fighting a pixel army derived from the avatar of a follower of your choice. Users can't predict the outcome.

"The number of your Twitter followers or your content has no effect on your victory or defeat," says Ono. "Rather the dots and the color location within the profile icon become the tactical formation of the soldiers, serving as the decisive factors. So, anybody has a chance to defeat anyone, even (U.S.) President (Barack) Obama."

It was crucial that DotWar be a two-player game, notes Ono, because if it were only a one-player game it wouldn't be spread across the Net as well. However, like most apps, it primarily serves as a form of momentary gratification, thus running the risk of being used once and then being forgotten.

Despite the impermanence, DotWar is still a sign of how individual programmers in Japan, not just large ad agencies, can embrace Twitter and create innovative campaigns of their own. This is why Twitter appeals to developers; although they use it frequently, nobody has been able to really define what it is capable of yet, concludes Kensuke Sembo, creative director of the aforementioned IS Parade. "These kinds of chaotic situations are the most exciting."

Samsung hits smart-phone market with its devices

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In technology, there's a lot to be said for being everywhere. Just ask Google, which has managed to grab 13 percent of the smart-phone market in a year and spawn a flood of increasingly polished devices by giving away its Android operating system.

Now South Korea's Samsung is trying the ubiquity game too. Its new line of Android phones, called Galaxy S, is showing up under different names on all four of the major U.S. carriers — Sprint Nextel, ATT, T-Mobile and Verizon Wireless — as well as the smaller U.S. Cellular and Cellular South networks.

I've had the chance to use three of them, the ATT Captivate, Sprint Epic 4G and T-Mobile Vibrant, and found them to be reasonable alternatives to the sexier, and sometimes pricier, iPhones and Droids.

If you're a sucker for a vivid screen like I am, you'll immediately be attracted to the Galaxy S phones. The 4-inch display uses a technology called Super AMOLED that makes colors really pop. While T-Mobile takes advantage of the screen's size and capabilities by preloading the movie "Avatar" onto the Vibrant, I'll also admit to spending an inordinate amount of time simply admiring the icons on the Captivate's desktop.

Even if it lacks the resolution of Apple's touted Retina display on the iPhone 4, the Galaxy S's screen is beautiful, and is the device's strongest selling point.

Not to say there's much wrong with what's under the hood either. The new phones all use a 1-gigahertz processor



Samsung's spread: A Samsung employee explains the functions of the Galaxy S smart phone at the company's headquarters in Seoul last month. BLOOMBERG

that feels brisk and responsive, and the three I tried all come with a 16-gigabyte microSD card you can replace with an even larger one. And of course, the battery is replaceable, unlike on an iPhone.

The Captivate and Vibrant are similar, though not identical. Both are slim and rounded at the corners, reminiscent of the previous-generation iPhone Apple design that was replaced by the controversial new iPhone 4. The differences are largely cosmetic: One's camera lens is set in a square enclosure, the other's circular — that sort of thing. Both vibrate the screen to produce tactile feedback when you hit a button or a key on the virtual keyboard, and are able to blend information from popular social-networking sites to keep you up to date on your friends' activities and photos in one place.

The Epic 4G, the Sprint version of the Galaxy S that goes on sale Aug. 31, is quite different. For one thing, it features a slide-out keyboard that makes it a good deal bulkier than the Captivate and Vibrant. For another, it is the second phone capable of connecting to the new

WiMax network that Sprint and its partner ClearWire Corp. are rolling out in the United States.

This so-called fourth-generation network provides considerably faster downloads than 3G networks, but only if you live in an area the network has reached, and are willing to put up with the extra drain it imposes on battery life.

A fairer comparison might be to HTC's EVO, Sprint's only other 4G phone. Although the EVO's screen is much larger, I prefer the Epic's, plus the more compact size makes it easier to handle. More important, my crude battery test suggests the Epic is likely to be better at handling the drain imposed by 4G. On the other hand, at \$249 on a two-year contract, the Epic is \$50 more expensive.

Both ATT and T-Mobile are offering their Galaxy S phones for \$199 on a two-year contract. That's comparable to the 16-gigabyte iPhone, which runs on the ATT network, or Motorola Inc.'s Droid X and Droid 2 and HTC's Droid Incredible, the flagships of the moment for Verizon, and \$100 less than the top-of-the-line iPhone.

Iranian video game hero Garshasp seeks fans abroad

Francois Becker
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AFP-JUI

A rash Jafari is a rare bird at Gamescom, Europe's biggest video-games fair. He is an Iranian creator hoping to make a splash with his Persian warrior Garshasp at an event dominated by Americans, Japanese and Europeans.

With his checkered shirt, beard and pony tail, it was only his nationality that set Jafari apart from other exhibitors at the industry show that ran from Aug. 19-22 in the German city of Cologne.

Jafari's story began on a college campus, at the Sharif University of Technology in Tehran.

With a basketball teammate who had also studied in California, he founded a company that developed professional software.

Because of their love of video games, the pair invested profits from that company into creating Garshasp, an adaptation of the U.S. video game "Gods of War," that has a Persian warrior as its star.

In a dark, medieval universe that resembles many video games on the market, Garshasp must battle a series of bloody monsters and is armed with an array of bladed weapons. "The game has to be fun" said Jafari, who acknowledged that he had collaborated with Iranian rating's authorities to get the game launched.

"As with the music, there are red lines," he said. His hero fights only monsters for example because it is forbidden to kill other human beings, even if they not real.

Another video-game producer, Amir Salmazadeh, who sells educational content for very young players, skirted the Islamic veil issue by using only children or animals in his work. In Iran, the ESRA commission works



Power up: Visitors to Gamescom try out the latest video games. AFP-JUI

with psychologists and sociologists to rate video games according to their "conformity with the Iranian and Islamic cultures."

Its logos, which closely resemble those of U.S. counterpart ESRB, authorize the most benign games for those at least 3 years old, and the most sensitive for those who are at least 25 years old and married. "Porn and drugs are forbidden," as is alcohol, unless associated with an evil entity, said Behrouz Minaei, managing director of the Iran National Foundation of Computer Games.

"We are working for better quality in video games," he said.

Iran has 35 design studios, a fledgling industry of which the government sometimes has "a negative point of view," Minaei added.

"We are here to find investors. Our games, based on Iranian history, are unique," he added.

The Iranians are present for the second year at Gamescom, which bills itself as Europe's biggest trade fair for interactive games and entertainment, and have presented their work at a fair in Dubai.

The report of the Web's death is an exaggeration

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The Web is dead. Long live the Internet" was the headline for an article by Chris Anderson and Michael Wolff in the latest issue of Wired magazine. "Over the past few years," burred Anderson-Wolff, "one of the most important shifts in the digital world has been the move from the wide-open Web to semi-closed platforms that use the Internet for transport but not the browser for display."

"It's driven primarily by the rise of the iPhone model of mobile computing, and it's a world Google can't crawl, one where HTML doesn't rule. And it's the world that consumers are increasingly choosing, not because they're rejecting the idea of the Web but because these dedicated platforms often just work better or fit better into their lives (the screen comes to them, they don't have to go to the screen). The fact that it's easier for companies to make money on these platforms only cements the trend. Producers and consumers agree: The Web is not the culmination of the digital revolution."

The keystone of this striking argument is the kind of scary graph much beloved of glossy magazines. It purports to show the proportion of U.S. Internet traffic taken up by various Internet applications (Web, e-mail, file-sharing, video, file transfers, etc.) over the period 1990-2010. And lo! — the proportion taken up by the Web peaks in about 2001 and appears to be in decline ever since. QED?

Not quite. First of all there is the strange distinction made in the graph between the Web and "video." This is puzzling because much if not most online video travels via the Web: that's why the address of YouTube is www.youtube.com; or that of the BBC iPlayer is www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer. At this point, as P.G. Wodehouse might observe, a distinct aroma of rodent assails even the least sensitive nose.

No sooner had the Anderson-Wolff thesis hit the Net than numerate skeptics began to dissect it. Over at culture blog BoingBoing, for example, Rob Beschizza decided to have a closer look. What aroused his suspicions was that the Wired graph didn't take into account the increase in Web traffic over the 10 years in question. "The use of proportion of the total as the vertical axis instead of the actual total," he wrote, "is an interesting editorial choice."

For "interesting" read "misleading." Between 1995 and 2006, the total amount of Web traffic went from about 10 terabytes a month to 1,000,000 terabytes (or 1 exabyte). Beschizza pointed out that, according to Cisco (the source Wired used for its projections), total Internet traffic rose from about 1 exabyte to 7 exabytes between 2005 and 2010. Beschizza then plots these numbers on his own graph, with predictable results: Web traffic continues to increase, and video- and file-sharing (a significant proportion of which is embedded in the Web) increases even faster. It looks, in fact, very much like exponential growth. If this is death, then let's have more of it.

It's possible, of course, that the Anderson-Wolff scare story was the product of an innocent mistake. But let us, for a moment, refuse them the benefit of the doubt. The core of their argument is that the popularity of apps (as on iPhone and Android phones) signals the death knell of the Web. "The marketplace has spoken," they write.

"When it comes to the applications that run on top of the Net, people are starting to choose quality of service. We want TweetDeck to organize our Twitter feeds because it's more convenient than the Twitter Web page. The Google Maps mobile app on our phone works better in the car than the Google Maps Web site on our laptop. And we'd rather lean back to read books with our Kindle or iPad app than lean forward to peer at our desktop browser."

That's the message. Now, who is the messenger? Answer: Condé Nast, the publishing conglomerate that owns Wired — as well as the New Yorker, GQ and Vanity Fair.

The Web has posed a serious threat to their business model (as it has to almost all print publishers) because they have thus far failed to find a way to get people to pay serious money for online content. The arrival of iPhone (and, later, iPad) apps was the first good news that magazine conglomerates had received in a decade. Why? Because, in contrast to the Wild West Web, apps are tightly controlled (by Apple) and consumers willingly pay for them. As a result, print publishers have fallen on the apps idea like ravening wolves. It enables them to exert tight control over the content, prevent sharing and earn revenue. It represents, in short, the glorious online future.

Oh, by the way, Wired has a sumptuous iPad app. Only \$4.99 a pop.