Original Article

Rising to the challenge: A model of contest performance

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ABSTRACT Contests are a ubiquitous form of promotion widely adopted by financial services advertisers, yet, paradoxically, academic research on them is conspicuous in its absence. This work addresses this gap by developing a model of contest engagement and performance. Using motivation theory, factors that drive participant engagement are modeled, and engagement's effect on experience and marketing success of the contest specified. Measures of contest performance, in-contest engagement and post-contest enduring interest are included. From the model, propositions are developed. Overall, the model provides financial service marketers with a theory-based foundation for designing and operating successful contests.

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OVERVIEW

Contests are an increasingly high-profile component of the financial services promotional mix. In 2010, they accounted for approximately 14 per cent¹ of the US\$7.4 billion spent in financial services advertising.² In financial services, contests are used to drive diverse marketing outcomes. For example, American General & United States Life's '10 for \$1000' contest focused on increasing direct sales, ING's 'Run for Something Better' student essay contest sought to increase consumer engagement with the ING brand, and the Inter-American Development Bank's 'Technologies for Financial Inclusion' contest drove open innovation in emerging market financial services.³ The increasing prevalence of online strategies for financial services marketing,⁴ combined with the growing prominence of game mechanics⁵ in all things Web and social media,⁶ suggests that contest's role in the financial services promotional mix is likely to increase.

As a promotional form, contests are not without their challenges. They are expensive in terms of prizes, operational costs and managerial oversight; they tend to be logistically complex; and they are conceptually challenging in that they are designed *a priori* to produce more losers than winners. It is perhaps not surprising then that, given these complexities, contests are poorly understood. What is surprising, however, is that despite their prevalence and importance, contests are little researched, a point that has not gone unnoticed.⁷ We seek to address this gap by introducing a theoretical model of contest engagement and performance upon which researchers can build and through which practitioners can gain actionable insights into the design and operation of effective contests.

In our model, we observe that an individual's pre-contest and in-contest engagement yields immediate marketing benefits in the form of sales and enduring post-contest benefits in the form of product interest. Contest performance, and thus

marketing success, is therefore directly related to engagement. To explain how contest engagement leads to marketing outcomes, and therefore add more explanatory power to our model, we develop a framework for contest engagement based on motivation theory.⁸ Combined, the framework for engagement and the model of contest engagement and performance provide the theoretical basis needed to begin understanding what makes for a successful contest from a marketing perspective.

We organize the remainder of the article as follows. We begin by presenting an overview of contests and the contest literature. Thus established, we extend the Ward and Hill⁷ model of promotional game participation to encompass contest engagements and outcomes to build our comprehensive model of contest engagement and performance. We next present an overview of the motivation theory literature and use this to build a theoretical base for our framework of contest engagement and for testable propositions. The final section suggests mechanisms through which the model can be validated, discusses implications for practice and proposes future research directions.

CONSUMER CONTESTS

Sales promotions are an important component of marketing whose objectives include increased consumer exposure, engagement and increased sales. Outcomes include short-term (increased sales) and long-term (increased brand/product equity) goals.⁹ Sales promotions take on a variety of forms, including but not limited to contests, games, sweepstakes, lotteries, premiums and gifts, sampling, coupons, and rebates. Sales promotions can be focused on the consumer, the trade or the sales-force. It is estimated that, in 2008, consumer promotions accounted for 37 per cent of the \$45.8 billion in planned marketing expenditures in the United States. Competitions – contests, sweepstakes and games – account for

approximately \$1.85 billion, approximately 14 per cent, of all promotional expenditures.^{1,10}

Competitions take one of two basic forms: games of chance and contests. It is this latter type of competition, contests, that this research focuses on. A contest is a form of promotion wherein a contestant utilizes skills to compete for a prize based on an established set of rules. The winner of a contest is selected by judging the quality of their entry against all other entries.^{11,12} Contests can take on a single-stage or multi-stage design. In a single-stage design, a contestant enters, competes and wins or loses in a single contest round. In multi-stage design, contestants compete in a series of tiered rounds before reaching a final round where a winner is decided.

Marketers' goals for contests may be *external* to the contest, increasing product, service or brand awareness for example, or they may be *internal* to a contest, such as directly increasing product adoption or sales. More commonly, their goals are a combination of the two.^{12,13} Achieving these outcomes can be particularly challenging. A participant's contest experience determines a contest's outcomes, yet, throughout a contest, a preponderance of contestants leave before the contest completes, either because they drop out or because they are not successful in their bid to move on. The challenge for marketers then is to maximize a contestant's pre-contest and in-contest engagement experiences to ensure that all contestants, regardless of whether they choose to participate or not, and if they do, regardless of when they depart the contest, engage in the contest in such a way so as to accrue positive internal and external effects.

Of the scant literature on marketing competitions, most is published in trade journals, the popular press or is authored by promotional consultants.^{12,14,15} Although these works provide practical advice, they do not address theoretical issues of contest

architecture or design such as consumer behavior or performance optimization. Existing academic research in promotions has examined coupons,¹⁶ e-coupons,¹⁷ loyalty programs,¹⁸ channel promotion,¹⁹ sales promotions²⁰ and rebates.²¹ Economists have examined contests from several angles, including contest design,^{11,22} contest success functions,^{23,24} prize structures^{25,26} and contestant effort.²⁷ In computer science, a small subfield of research on programming contests has resulted in research into competitor strategies and contest operations.²⁸ Thorngate *et al*²⁹ offer a detailed volume on judging merit-based competitions.

Ward and Hill⁷ offer a conceptual model of consumer engagement in promotional games, a category in which they include contests. Their model leverages behavior and motivation theories to explain how and why consumers choose to participate in contests and why they respond to promotions the way they do. Owing to the model's primary focus on games, it falls short when applied to contests in two ways: first, the Ward and Hill model fails to present a substantive measure of contest performance. Second, the model's assumption of a simple, game-based interaction abstracts contest engagement to the singular concept of 'process of play'. This is insufficient for our purposes as the process of contest engagement is complex and leads to immediate internal and enduring external outcomes.

Following the lead of current research into sales promotion effectiveness,^{20,30} we introduce two measures of contest performance: *in-contest engagement* and *post-contest product interest*. Achieving in-contest outcomes such as deeper product engagement requires an understanding of the factors that influence human behavior. Predominant among these are the motivations that provide not only the impetus to take action, but, if correctly nurtured, the stimulus for continued engagement. Achieving positive post-contest outcomes necessitates the development of enduring post-engagement

Figure 1: Model of contest engagement and performance.

product interest, which as we will show is directly related to in-contest engagement.

Building on Ward and Hill's⁷ staged model of the promotion life cycle, we introduce our model of contest engagement and performance (Figure 1) presented from the marketer's perspective. In this model, contestants progress through each of the three stages – attract, engage and outcomes. The attract stage leads potential contestants to either a decision to participate or not. It is important to note that within the non-participatory group, some level of motivational impact is nonetheless accrued. Those who decide to participate move on to the engage stage where motivation factors and engagement experience combine to affect and contribute to post-contest product interest. Pre-contest and in-contest engagement also leads to internal (sales/engagement) outcomes. In the outcomes stage, the net impact of the engagement yields (or does not yield) enduring benefits for the contest holder in the form of enduring interest, which is directly related to external outcomes. To better understand contest engagement we turn next to motivation theory.

MOTIVATION THEORY

Motivation is 'the (conscious or unconscious) stimulus for action towards a desired goal, especially as resulting from psychological or

social factors; the factors giving purpose or direction to human or animal behaviour'.³¹ Motivation is a determinant of behavior that represents a manifold phenomenon in which varying levels and orientations determine outcomes. The orientation of motivation refers to both the type (intrinsic, extrinsic or amotivational) and the circumstances from which it arises.³²

Activities that are intrinsically motivated are undertaken because they are interesting, enjoyable or satisfying. The act of doing them is the reward. Activities that are extrinsically motivated are undertaken to achieve rewards that are separate and distinct from the activity itself.³³ Amotivational activities are those that are not valued by the individual, or which leave the individual feeling helpless, incompetent or unable to achieve the target goal.^{32,34}

Individuals engaged in intrinsically motivating activities will have more positive engagement outcomes, including satisfaction,³⁵ deeper task engagement,³⁶ higher levels of creativity^{37,38} and more learning.³⁹ Additionally, research has shown that intrinsically motivated individuals will develop enduring interest and be more apt to continue engaging in the activity in the future.^{36,39–41} Deci⁴² and others^{43,44} found that extrinsic rewards could undermine intrinsic motivation. In a comprehensive meta-analysis of motivational research Deci

et al^{45,46} confirm that extrinsic motivations could result in either positive or negative outcomes.

CONTEST ENGAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

As shown in the engagement stage of our model of contest engagement and performance (Figure 1), it is the combination of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and engagement experience that determines both a participant's level of engagement and the amount of enduring interest that is accrued. To understand the mechanisms that drive

behavior and subsequent results in this model, we introduce a contest engagement framework (Figure 2).

Contest engagement begins with a decision to participate (A). If the individual does not participate, they are still impacted by the promotion and this impact accrues to the overall motivational effect of the contest (G). When an individual decides to participate, they enter the engagement stage of the contest and begin an iterative cycle of engagement and evaluation. As long as the contest experience continues to prove interesting and to provide contestants with

Figure 2: Contest engagement framework.

the correct motivational mix (B), they will continue to participate and, through this positive engagement, continue to accrue intrinsic motivation. If the contest experience is sufficiently negative (C), contestants will opt to exit the contest. At the end of a contest stage (D), contestants who meet the stage criteria must then evaluate whether they wish to participate in the next stage (E).

Those who wish to continue advance to the next stage and begin another engagement and evaluation cycle. Contestants who do not make it to the next stage and those who opt not to continue exit the contest as do those who win the contest (F). Once a participant has exited the contest, they enter the outcome stage in which the accrued effects of their contest participation will impact their enduring interest and engagement with the product, service or brand.

UNDERSTANDING CONTEST ENGAGEMENT

To understand the mechanisms underlying contest engagement, and thereby our overall measures of contest performance – contest engagement and enduring interest – we return to motivation theory and specifically to self-determination theory (SDT), which provides a theoretical basis for understanding the development of increased intrinsic motivation during contest engagement that leads to increased contest engagement and enduring interest once the contest participation is over. According to SDT,^{39,47,48} individuals engage in activities because they are of interest (intrinsically motivating) or because they are important (extrinsically motivating). In SDT, positive outcomes accrue from engagement in an activity when the motives (intrinsic and extrinsic) that drive the engagement support self-determined actions that are competence building. Self-determined actions enable individuals to have choice, control over their actions and the ability to engage in activities aligned with their self-interest.^{45,46,49}

When engagements are self-determined and competence supportive, we can expect a dichotomous result: deeper engagement and the facilitation of increased intrinsic motivation resulting in ongoing interest in the activity (framework B, D and E). When motives and goals are not linked to fulfillment of these needs, or when the impetus for an activity is counter to these basic needs (for instance, if they are controlling or thwart autonomy), the outcomes of the engagement will be diminished and ongoing intrinsic motivation will be negatively affected (framework C).^{33,47}

Marketing contests are a means by which an individual can demonstrate competence. This calls for alignment between the contestant, competitors and contest task. Looking to practice, we see that good contests provide mechanisms to tier contestants so that they are challenged at or just above their abilities with peers who appear to be at a similar proficiency level. The theory supports this practice of tiering as competence enhancing and performant. Deci,⁸ for example, found that an individual's need for competence would lead them to seek challenges that were aligned with or just above their capabilities. More generally, Liu *et al*¹¹ found that an alignment of skills had a positive effect on contest engagement, leading to increased performance.

Fitting within SDT, the self-regulation model proposed by Harackiewicz and Sansone⁵⁰ and extended by Sansone and Smith⁴¹ provides a unifying view of motivation as a component of an individual's effort to achieve goals as well as an outcome of it. If an individual is intrinsically motivated to engage in an activity, they will. If not, extrinsic rewards or other factors may get them engaged. Once engaged, activities that allow participants to feel self-determined and to demonstrate competence should foster the growth of intrinsic motivation that should facilitate ongoing engagement. This cycle of interest building and deeper engagement makes it possible for individuals

to engage in activities over a prolonged period of time in order to achieve long-term goals. Research by Sansone and Morgan⁵¹ and Sansone *et al*⁵² supports this model.

As shown in our framework, individuals go through such a cyclic engagement process within a contest stage as well as across all contest stages (framework D, E). Wolters⁵³ found that individuals use different strategies to enhance motivation, depending on their context. In contests, therefore, we expect that individuals should desire a varying mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations at each stage. Early in the contest, extrinsic motivations such as prizes, trips and awards should attract attention and prime engagement. Later in the contest, interest is built through engagement, thus intrinsic motivations should prevail. As the contest nears its end, the temporal presence of prizes looms large and a resurgence of extrinsic motives should occur.

Proposition 1: At various stages of the contest, the mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation necessary to engage participants will vary.

Individual motivational orientation

The research by Amabile *et al*⁵⁴ demonstrates that an individual's motivational orientation affects the type and mix of motivation that leads them to take action. In a similar light, Vellerand and Bissonnette⁵⁵ argue that personal motivational style can affect the desired mix of motivations that individuals will seek out, their perception of those activities and the outcomes that result. Their research found that personal motivational styles predispose individuals to engage in tasks that have motivational mixes aligned with their own orientation.

Harackiewicz and Sansone⁵⁰ argue that individual achievement orientation can have a mediating effect on the development of intrinsic motivation. Their process model holds that this effect stems from the predisposition that individuals have specific orientations such as competence valuation.

Various studies have validated this effect, Tauer and Harackiewicz,⁵⁶ for example, demonstrated the moderating effects of achievement orientation in a competitive context. We therefore expect the individual motivational orientation of contest participants to have a moderating or mediating effect on the motivational mix they expect in each contest stage.

Proposition 2: Individual differences in motivational orientation will have a moderating/mediating effect on the desired motivational mix at each contest stage.

Congruence

Virtually every activity we engage in involves striving to attain a goal. In their process model, Harackiewicz and Sansone⁵⁰ hold that external contingencies, such as evaluation, and individual differences, such as achievement orientation, will influence the goals that individuals adopt. These goals in turn influence how individuals approach an activity and the experience that they have with it. The degree of interest in an activity will be determined in part by the extent to which the environment supports or interferes with an individual's goal pursuits.⁵⁷

Self-concordant goals are those that are aligned with an individual's enduring interests and values.⁵⁸ The self-concordance model proposed by Sheldon and Elliot⁵⁸ involves a cyclic process of goal setting and goal striving. Striving for self-concordant goals, when done in a way that supports self-determination, should result in positive outcomes and increased intrinsic motivation. In contrast, striving for goals that are externally controlled (non-self-concordant, non-self-determined) is expected to result in diminished outcomes. Research confirms that pursuing self-concordant goals results in greater task engagement and higher levels of enduring interest.^{36,58} From this, one would expect that individuals will set goals that are

self-concordant, and when those goals are achieved they should see a positive impact.

Goal alignment provides a base from which sustained results can come but it is important to note that goals are not immutable. Goals can change at points in time where the context shifts.⁵⁹ This is particularly salient for multi-stage contests that provide users with the opportunity to set, achieve and then establish new goals. This should result in a repeated cycle of self-concordant goal setting, goal attainment and positive impact. The research by Sheldon and Houser-Marko⁵⁹ supports the potential benefits of cyclic self-concordant goal cycles to increased motivation and positive outcomes. As shown in our model, as individuals engage in contests, their goals are continually set and reset as the contest progresses. This shifting is a primary process through which engagement and enduring interest is built. When opportunities align with goals, congruence should be reached and an individual should have a more positive immediate and enduring interest. The maintenance and enhancement of intrinsic motivation is dependent on supportive conditions.

Proposition 3: In-contest performance is a function of individual goal alignment.

Enduring interest

The nature of contests is such that many participants will exit the contest before it is over, and therefore it is critical from a marketing perspective that these participants accrue the maximum positive benefit from their engagement. When marketer's goals for contests are internally focused on increasing product engagement and building enduring interest, the structure of their contests should be designed to facilitate the growth of intrinsic motivation. As we have seen, an appropriately motivated individual engagement results in the development of increased intrinsic motivation in individuals and this leads to increased interest both

immediately and in a more enduring way.^{36,39–41} This duality stems from interest's ability to be both caught and held because of a specific circumstance (situational) as well as interest's ability to be nurtured and instilled, making it enduring (individual).⁶⁰

From a marketing perspective, if we hope to build an enduring connection with a consumer, we need them to have a personal involvement with a product through their interest, enthusiasm and excitement toward it.⁶¹ According to our model, contests provide marketers with the opportunity to achieve this goal. Ideally, we would expect individuals participating in well-designed contests to build increasing amounts of intrinsic motivation throughout, and thus they would exit the contest with deeper involvement with the product and more enduring interest in it. For this to be true, the contest environment would need to provide a positive and enabling environment to facilitate the growth of intrinsic motivation. We expect that consumers with positive in-contest experiences will develop increased intrinsic motivation as a result of their contest engagement that will result in enduring product interest.

Proposition 4: Positive post-contest performance is a result of positive in-contest experience.

DISCUSSION: MANAGERIAL AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Ward and Hill note that 'virtually no work has been done in advertising on the psychology of promotional games. Thus, much opportunity exists ...'.⁷ It is therefore surprising that in the 20 years since the publication of Ward and Hill's article, so little research has been undertaken to inform the theory and practice of promotional competitions and contests. Advertisers continue to use competitions as a fundamental and indispensable element of their impedita of promotional techniques. The rapid and global adoption

of Internet and social media-powered digital communication technologies by consumers and the equally rapid uptake of digital techniques by advertisers combine to make contests and, more generally, promotional competitions even more relevant and feasible today than at any time in the past. Therefore, not only does opportunity exist, but so too does the real need to inform practice.

Our goal in this research was to gain insight into what makes for a successful contest from a marketing perspective. The first problem we faced in meeting this goal was identifying an appropriate measure of a contest's marketing performance. With no standard measures noted in research or practice, we turned to the sales promotional literature and to practice to develop our measures of contest performance: *in-contest engagement* and *post-contest product interest*. These two measures highlight the importance of the contest engagement experience and mark the first contribution of this research.

With measures of contest performance established, we next turned to understanding the factors that affect them. Our conceptual model of contest engagement and performance takes the marketer's perspective and deconstructs the contest life cycle into three stages – attract, engage and outcomes. This provides the structure needed for deeper analysis of the contest life cycle. Within our model, individual engagement in a contest leads to two outcomes: direct internal outcomes such as sales and indirect external outcomes such as improved product perception and enduring product interest. Together, these accrue to the marketer's ultimate goal – increased sales.¹² To understand how contest engagement affects participants, we developed a contest engagement framework based on motivation theory and showed how various factors of engagement affect outcomes and thus contest performance. Our model of contest engagement and performance and our contest engagement

framework make up the second and third contributions of this research.

We concluded by delving deeper into the contest engagement framework to gain an understanding of the mechanisms underlying contest engagement and thereby our overall measures of contest performance. In the process, we developed four testable propositions that can serve as the basis for future research, which represent the forth contribution of this research:

Proposition 1: At various stages of the contest the mix of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation necessary to engage participants will vary.

Proposition 2: Individual differences in motivational orientation will have a moderating/mediating effect on the desired motivational mix at each contest stage.

Proposition 3: In-contest performance is a function of individual goal alignment.

Proposition 4: Positive post-contest performance is a result of positive in-contest experience.

Following Ward and Hill's lead, we too suggest that much opportunity exists in the study of contests. The theoretical model and framework we have developed here provides a foundation, but it is yet to be validated. The four propositions provide the mechanism through which this can be done. The most direct approach, instrumenting an existing contest, is not without its issues. A researcher taking this approach is challenged with finding a contest provider who would allow their contestants to be surveyed and with determining how to survey potential participants to see the impact of pre-contest engagement. Alternately, a researcher might consider creating a purpose-built contest presented to a known and measurable representative population of individuals. While potentially less generalizable, the purpose-built model provides greater data-gathering capacity.

Overall, the insights this research provides into the mechanisms affecting contest performance, once validated, have direct applicability to practitioners. Our model of contest engagement and performance provide marketers with a means of describing a contest in marketing terms and a way of evaluating contest efforts. The framework for contest engagement provides a useful means of illustrating contest structure within the design process. Combined, they provide the theoretical understanding needed to design and operate performant contests.

The very digital technologies that facilitate and encourage growth in the prevalence of contests today also provide a compelling means through which comprehensive contest research can take place. The low cost of digital contests facilitates experimentation and so, returning to the purpose-built approach, it is feasible and quite practical for practitioners to use contests executed in the digital world as both a promotion and a research vehicle. Through careful instrumentation, digital contest participation from initial contact through final engagement can be measured, contestants can be surveyed, motivations and impacts understood, and as a result contest architectures can be tuned and adapted to yield the best results.

In this article, we have introduced a model of contest engagement and performance and a detailed contest framework engagement, but there is much to be done. This research represents a first step toward our understanding of contests as a promotional tool. Future research on the subject is needed across the various stages in our model. In the attract phase, of particular interest are efforts to understand how variations in intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and initial contest messaging affect contest participation rates, contest expectations for participants and impression of and interest in products, services and brands for non-participants. In the engagement phase of contests we have developed four specific and testable

propositions each of which is testable in its own right or in combination with one or more of the others, but they are just a small set of the possibilities. Finally, we have proposed and developed two measures of contest performance that align with traditional promotional goals of actual direct engagement and indirect impression. Further research into effective ways to measure and assess these will serve as an immeasurable aid to practice and research.

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