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How To Gamify Your Business

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I like reality TV, especially *American Idol*. I've heard the negative comments: "Reality TV rots people's brains" and "For many, reality television is the lowest form of entertainment, an insult to our collective intelligence." I don't agree. Not only do I enjoy watching contestants "sing for their lives," I'm learning business strategies while doing so.

Business strategy from a singing show? Despite its cancellation, there's no denying that *American Idol* has been a success: a 13-year run; 30 million viewers an episode at its peak; and its performance or results show the top ranking TV show in U.S. television for eight consecutive years.

According to media analyst Anthony DiClemente, *American Idol*, one of the most profitable shows in U.S. TV, was transformative for Fox Broadcasting, turning it into the leading TV network in the U.S.

What organization, in any industry, wouldn't want that kind of success? Perhaps by studying what *American Idol* did and applying similar techniques with its own customers or employees they can. The producers of *American Idol* took a talent search and turned it into a game for the contestants and, more importantly, transformed passive TV viewers into highly engaged ones with an active role to play.

Businesses have successfully used game-like experiences such as frequent flyer programs, reward cards and sales competitions to increase loyalty and engagement for some time. However, "gamification," the term for this process, did not emerge until around 2010. To clarify, gamification is not about creating games, but learning why games are so engaging and applying the psychology and behavior behind that to business processes - gamifying non-gaming situations.

American Idol, which began in 2002, was a successful pioneer of gamification long before the term was even coined. As a nationally broadcast TV show it had a platform with the potential to attract a wide following. Gamification has, however, become scalable for many other types of businesses.

The rise in gamification, according to Dr. Ian McCarthy, Associate Dean with Simon Fraser University's Beedie School of Business, can be attributed to several developments. First, the growth of the computer game industry has contributed to a better understanding of what motivates individuals to play and makes games successful. Secondly, the pervasiveness of social media, and web-based and mobile technologies has expanded the ways in which individuals and organizations can participate in an experience.

Gamification is successful when customers or employees continue to play and, as a result, the organization achieves its desired goal. Why is it successful for some organizations and not for others? [A question a team of researchers from the Beedie School of Business that, in addition to McCarthy, includes faculty Jan Kietzmann, Leyland Pitt, and PhD students Karen Robson and Kirk Plangger is working to address.](#) Borrowing from the work of game designers and researchers into what makes computer games engaging, the team developed a conceptual framework of the gamification process. They identified three principles that they tagged with the acronym MDE: the mechanics, the dynamics, and the emotions.

Mechanics

Gamification mechanics include the rules, the setting, the goals, and how players "win" or progress through the experience. The rules with respect to *American Idol* include how viewers can vote - via voice calls, SMS texts, or online; when they can vote - at the start of the show until two hours afterwards; and how often - as many times as they can within the two-hour voting window.

Dynamics

Dynamics are the player behaviors that emerge during the game, such as competing, cheating, bluffing, or bragging. Managers need to monitor the gamified experience to ensure that players remain engaged and are not breaking the rules - gaming the game. If the game is not perceived as fair this could put off other players and they may not continue to play. For example, with respect to *American Idol*, the producers reserved the right to remove "power dialers" that could unfairly influence the voting results.

Emotions

If the mechanics and dynamics work player's emotions are triggered. Positive emotions, such as excitement, goal attainment, and extrinsic reinforcements such as money and status are powerful drivers of behavior. Negative emotions such as disappointment, and avoidance of such, can also be motivating. For gamification to succeed designers need to understand how to tap into these emotions. *American Idol* leveraged viewer's desires to see their favorites succeed resulting in emotions of happiness, relief or disappointment.

"If you get the MDE right then you get powerful games where people are motivated to spend lots of time and money engaging," said McCarthy.

Gamified experiences are rarely static and players may start to lose interest - I switched to *The Voice* a few seasons ago. Managers need to recognize when changes are needed to keep customers or employees engaged and excited. Over the years *American Idol* adapted to the challenge by adding new features; online voting, the fan save, songs selected by viewers, and hometown visits. Even despite manager's best efforts a game may lose it's usefulness or appeal. If you want to attract customers to a new game in the future you need to know when to pull the plug on the old one. Although *American Idol's* last show will air this week, it leaves behind a contribution to understanding the gamification of business processes.

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