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## How To: Run a Promo Contest

**Creating a friendly competition can build excitement around your brand.**

[Emma Johnson](#)

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Whatever your objective—whether it's to introduce a new product, collect contacts, drive social media engagement, create media buzz or draw foot (and online) traffic to your business—a promotional contest can be a great tool.

From kindergarten up, everybody loves getting a gold star. So creating a friendly competition can be a great way to promote yourself to customers (or potential customers) who have their eyes on a prize. The key is to track the marketing success of your contest and make sure you, the business owner, get something out of the endeavor besides a bunch of new friends.

“A well-designed contest can offer small businesses an affordable way to build excitement around their brand,” says Katherine O’Hara, founder of the integrated marketing firm [The O’Hara Project](#). “Many small-business owners read about contests run by major corporations but are mistaken in thinking something that worked for United Airlines or Doritos will work for them. You have to establish a clear goal for your contest and devise an event to help you reach it.”

O’Hara emphasizes the importance of tracking the success of a promotion, which might be orchestrated with any manner of objectives.

First, what *not* to do:

**DON’T offer prizes that defeat your business’s purpose.** “In many instances, this contest will be the first impression you make on a potential customer,” O’Hara says. “If you’re offering a freebie or an over-the-top giveaway, you are making a cheapened first impression or launching a brand in a discounted tone.” A well-thought-out contest that elevates the brand’s worth will be most effective.

**DON’T create contests that have nothing to do with your mission.** “The contest should dovetail with your message,” says Carolyn Wilman, a marketing consultant who specializes in online contests for small businesses. For example, a local credit union aiming for attention to its commitment to financial literacy among youths might hold an essay contest for high-schoolers on the topic of saving, offering a chance to win a certificate of deposit. The credit union could partner with the high school English department to choose a winner and coordinate with the local newspaper to run the winning entry. In this case, the contest reflects the credit union’s core brand and assures media coverage that will appeal to target customers.

**DON’T aimlessly try to amass social media interest.** “It’s better to have 400 potential local customers who interact with you than 10,000 people around the world who do nothing but clog your feed,” Wilman says. A local dry cleaner, for example, does not benefit from generating social media interaction globally.

Here are some examples of goals and ways to achieve them through contests, according to O'Hara.

**Goal: Collect data and build loyalty.**

- **Solution:** A restaurant can offer the classic fishbowl business card collection for the chance to have the chef visit the winner's home to cook dinner for four.

**Goal: Build a reputation.**

- **Solution:** A community bank could place its social media details on banking envelopes, encouraging customers to tweet or post their favorite local charity. The top three most-mentioned organizations receive a monetary donation.

**Goal: Create local awareness.**

- **Solution:** A dog grooming company can launch a "Picture-Perfect Pooch" contest, inviting people to post pictures of their spanking-clean dogs onto their Facebook pages and tag the grooming company. Participants qualify for a chance to win a free grooming.

## Scott Brown

### Co-Founder

**Business:** Marbles: The Brain Store, retailer of games and products designed to sharpen the mind, with 27 locations nationwide

**Contests:** Monthly game nights, an annual crossword puzzle contest in five locations, and an annual game design contest

**Results:** Strengthened customer engagement, brand awareness, research and development, and higher sales

Contests are a natural fit for what we do—offer fun and stimulation.

Monthly game nights have been a part of our stores since we started, but for the past five years we've hosted charity crossword puzzle tournaments at five of our locations. All our stores are located in shopping malls, and about a month and a half beforehand, we start advertising with signage throughout the mall, in-store, and through social media and our newsletter. Participants pay \$15 for advance tickets, and winners get gift cards from \$25 and up, with proceeds supporting the Brain Research Foundation.

These contests tend to be really fun, with about 20 participants each time—people drive from all over. The investment is low, and our ROI (return on investment) is large. Sales spike on [event days](#).

Additionally, we've always developed our own products, and customers often suggest game ideas. Each February for the past three years we've held game design contests, awarding the winner \$2,000. We then invest in developing the game and sell it in our stores.

We promote the design contest online, in our stores, and to colleges and design schools in our area. Each year we get between 30 and 40 submissions and then post our favorites on [Facebook](#) to let our fans weigh in. Each year the winning game does really well in our stores, and last year's winner, [Rock Me Archimedes](#),

was our best-seller in the fourth quarter.

The design contest is a great way to show customers that we want to engage with them and make them feel part of the process of bringing great games to market. Plus, it's a really efficient way to develop products.

Our cashiers always ask customers how they heard about us, and contests drive a lot of awareness.

## Sloan Kamenstein

### Founder and Owner

**Business:** Sloan's Ice Cream, four South Florida retail locations with franchise deals in the works

**Contest:** Create an ice cream flavor—and have it named after you.

**Results:** Increased social media engagement, media attention, foot traffic *and* fun

Last year, during our busy season, we announced a contest via [Facebook](#), inviting customers to submit a new ice cream flavor. The winner would get to take home some of their recipe—which we promised to make—and have it named after them.

This contest made sense, since we are already known for our fun and creative flavors, like “coffee and doughnuts”—a mocha-flavored ice cream made with real Krispy Kreme doughnuts. Customers are always coming into our store making flavor suggestions and feel as if they are a part of the hometown ice cream store. A contest like this just made sense.

We announced the contest with in-store signage and through our social media tentacles. In fact, the official name of the contest was Sloan's Ice Cream's #MySloan's Flavor Contest—the hashtag gave it a nice boost on Twitter.

We had 25 submissions, including some that were really crazy, like grilled cheese. But our Facebook fans voted on their favorite, and the winner was [Katya's Apple Caramel Crisp](#), named after the winner, as promised.

The winner, her family and friends came into our flagship store in West Palm Beach, where I greeted her and ceremoniously scooped up a cone of the winning flavor. A local TV station and the newspaper were there, and the store was full of customers. We sold out all 50 gallons of Katya's Apple Caramel Crisp in three weeks, and it was one of the best-sellers in the store at that time.

The benefit of this was multifold. The flavor contest served as R&D. We plan to do it again, and maybe in the future one of our winning flavors will become a permanent part of the menu.

We got a lot of media buzz, our customers seemed to really enjoy it, and our Facebook follower count jumped by 20 percent during the contest. And, not to mention, the contest was a lot of fun!

## Jeffrey Rockmore, M.D.

## Surgeon

**Business:** The Plastic Surgery Group, Albany, N.Y.

**Contests:** Breast cancer essays and “Prepare for Spring” photo submissions

**Results:** Increased data collection, social media engagement and several new customers

Over the past year we’ve had four contests, and each was a success. The key has been to design contests that reflect the nature of our business and the sentiment our services provide.

For example, our first contest was called “Prepare for Spring,” and we invited the public to send in pictures of ways they made over their lives for springtime—a season we typically experience an uptick in scheduled procedures, as people start to think about how they will look in summer clothes. The prize was three free spa treatments.

We got a wide variety of responses, including weight-loss stories, kitchen makeovers, cleaning out closets and new haircuts. Of the 25 submissions to our [Facebook](#) page and website, we chose one that really caught our eye and made a great story that would resonate with people. The woman had recently lost her father and explained that her mother was suffering from the loss. To cheer her, the woman bought her mom a Chihuahua. She submitted pictures of her mother before the dog came into her life, and after, with her mom holding the new black and white puppy—she was clearly much happier.

Last fall we held an essay contest asking for stories of how people supported breast cancer charity efforts. One of our services is post-mastectomy reconstruction, and the contest was in the spirit of cancer survival and positivity.

We announce these contests through Facebook and Twitter, on our website, and in our newsletter. They are great for brand awareness as well as social media interactions. Typically when we post about new products and promotions, we get 10 to 20 Facebook likes. But contests garner much higher interest. The breast cancer contest resulted in 325 interactions and 267 Facebook “likes.”

The real value comes from deeper engagement. When people submit to our contests, we ask for contact information and other data, and add them to our newsletter’s mailing list, creating more opportunities for them to learn about what we offer.

In the past year we have seen an uptick in procedures that coincide with our contests. There are a million marketing tools. Contests are just one facet of our approach.

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[Not sure how to hold a Facebook contest? Learn how on SUCCESS.com.](#)