

On Kickstarter, everyone wants to be 'Staff Pick'

December 17 2014, by Joseph Pisani



In this Oct. 9, 2014 photo, Shelley Harper, from Woodinville, Wash., works at her ConQuest Adventure Journal booth during the first day of New York Comic Con, at the Javits Convention Center. Harper raised nearly \$12,000 to make her ConQuest Adventure Journals, a book for Comic Con attendees to store autographs, photos and other mementos, after it was chosen as a Kickstarter Staff Pick. (AP Photo/Richard Drew)

(AP)—Want your project to get selected as a "Staff Pick" on

crowdfunding site Kickstarter? Good luck with that.

Entrepreneurs and other users have been seeking the secret to getting their projects selected as a "Staff Pick"—a designation that one of Kickstarter's 98 employees can give a project based on his or her personal tastes.

Charming a staffer has perks. Staff Picks can get prime placement on the website, be promoted to Kickstarter's 2 million followers on Facebook and Twitter, or appear in Kickstarter's "Projects We Love" email, which reaches more than 4 million inboxes every week. That promotion can increase donations. Users get in on the promotional activity by updating their pages to add a bright green badge or banner they create themselves, even though Kickstarter discourages the practice.

Kickstarter's employees can also donate their own cash to a project. And earlier this year, Kickstarter started using company money to give cash to projects it favors.

That has users scrambling to figure how to get picked.

Shelley Harper scoured Google, read blog posts and studied past Staff Picks before launching a Kickstarter campaign for her business, ConQuest Adventure Journal, which makes journals for fans of comic book convention Comic-Con, to store autographs, photos and other mementos. Her research turned up no answers.

An email sent to Kickstarter went unanswered. Then, weeks after her campaign launched, it was selected as a Staff Pick. She still has no idea why.

"It's like this magical thing and nobody knows how it happens," says Harper, who raised nearly \$12,000 in July to help pay for the printing of

more ConQuest journals.

Kickstarter spokesman Justin Kazmark did not make other employees available to be interviewed, but says workers spend a big part of their day keeping up with projects that are posted on the site and pick ones that have a good video, give colorful updates about the project or have an imaginative idea.

The company says there is no science to how its employees choose their favorite projects. Users find out they were selected in an email: "Someone on the Kickstarter team loves your project," it says.

The picks vary widely. Recent ones include a company that makes jewelry from wool, a maker of homemade marshmallows and a company that makes an electric toothbrush that tells users if they are brushing their teeth correctly.

But Kickstarter does offer some clues. Earlier this year, it started using its blog to tell readers what kinds of projects its employees like. Those from Missouri have a chance of impressing staffer Shannon Ferguson. "I basically just try to back projects from my home state of Missouri," she said in a July post. Another employee, Katie Needs, says she backed Nerdwax, a wax that can be rubbed on eye glasses to keep them from falling off the nose, because she's "a lifelong four-eyes."



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Ferguson and Needs didn't respond to an interview request.

Kickstarter rival, Indiegogo, says it does not pick favorites. Instead, projects get promoted to the front page of its website and in emailed newsletters based on what projects are popular among its users.

Why the difference?

Kickstarter wants to play a bigger role in the success of startups, says Paul Levinson, a professor of communications and media studies at

Fordham University. It can claim to be an earlier supporter of a startup if it makes it big. A success can help build Kickstarter's reputation as the place to go to raise cash, says Levinson.

Some Staff Picks have become very successful. Oculus VR, a maker of virtual reality headsets, raised more than \$2 million on Kickstarter and later sold itself to Facebook Inc. for \$2 billion.

But owners of some past Staff Picks say it's not as big as a windfall as they hoped. Harper says ConQuest got a 4 percent bump in donations a week after it was picked, much lower than she expected. Elemoon, a maker of high-tech bracelets that light up to alert wearers of a call or text, says just 11 percent of its \$122,725 in donations came directly from being featured prominently as a Staff Pick on Kickstarter's technology page.

Still, every dollar counts on Kickstarter. If a project doesn't reach its financial goal, the creator doesn't get to keep any of the money pledged. For example, if someone aims to raise \$10,000 in 30 days, but only makes it to \$9,990, the project gets no funding. If a project doesn't reach its goal, Kickstarter feels the pain too. It doesn't get to charge its 5 percent fee unless a project passes its goal.

The chances of a project getting successfully funded jumps to 92 percent if it's a Staff Pick, up from about 50 percent for non-Staff Picks, according to Ethan Mollick, a business professor at The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. He studied 48,000 projects, but isn't sure if Kickstarter picks projects that would have been successful anyway.

Kickstarter has also started showing its love by opening its pocketbook. Since March, Kickstarter has given money to nearly 180 projects.

It gave Dr. Stadnyk's Hot Sauce \$30, a day after the hot sauce company was also selected as a Staff Pick. It raised \$10,089, above its \$6,000 goal, to bottle more hot sauce flavors.

Alex Stadnyk, a co-owner of the company, sent three bottles of the hot stuff to Kickstarter's Brooklyn offices, a reward that comes with the \$30 donation.

"I guess I'm doing something right if they backed it," says Stadnyk.

ONLINE:

Kickstarter's Staff Picks: kickstarter.com/discover/recommended"
target="_blank">www.kickstarter.com/discover/recommended

Projects Kickstarter has backed:
www.kickstarter.com/profile/kickstarter

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