

More big brands are tapping creative crowdsourcing sites

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To fashion an alluring look for its latest pair of DC Shoes, Quiksilver extended far beyond its team of in-house artists. It challenged a worldwide crowd.

Entrepreneurs have grown accustomed to spinning their projects into motion by using crowdfunding websites such as Kickstarter and Indiegogo to raise small amounts of money from a mass of intrigued consumers.

Now a swelling group of established businesses are summoning the "crowd" for help. This time they're seeking concepts and content, not funding.

Surfwear maker Quiksilver, smoothie shop Jamba Juice and the pop band One Direction are just a few of the brands looking for help on creative crowdsourcing websites such as Talenhouse and Tongal. Companies pay a fee to post a need. Musicians, designers, videographers and other artists weigh in with pitches. The best submissions earn payouts of a few hundred dollars to many thousands.

"If you're in a big company like us, prints and graphics tend to get a little stale or you see too much sameness," said Quiksilver co-founder Bob McKnight. "You want to seek out new ideas, and we think it's really important to reach outside."

Last fall, Quiksilver's DC Shoes campaign on Talenhouse drew more

than 2,000 submissions, including pretty florals and tough camouflage patterns. Anyone who registers with Talenthouse can vote for favorites, with the results posted publicly. The startup company, however, makes the final choice.

Inspired by memories of his afternoon hangouts with friends, Felipe Serrano suggested stitching tiny images of pizza slices on a pair of black shoes. Rahul Kumar chose a samurai theme, drawing a "calm yet swift" warrior onto his red-and-black design.

Ese Izhi of Mexico City won Quiksilver's vote for a psychedelic sketch of bright green marijuana leaves on hazy-purple shoes. The 26-year-old said he leaped around his room screaming when he learned a \$10,000 prize was on its way.

"I think Talenthouse gives me a big chance, a chance to grow as an artist by putting me in the eyes of the world," said Izhi, who left an advertising agency to go full-time freelance two years ago.

In a separate Talenthouse offering, Quiksilver partnered with the Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles to solicit pattern ideas. McKnight and Otis fashion department chair Rose Brantley selected three winners from 250 submissions, and Otis students are placing them on products to be unveiled in May. Winners will collect royalties if the products sell.

Though Quiksilver receives unsolicited ideas every day, Talenthouse enables companies to tap a larger network. In turn, artists get easy entry to a new forum where they can be seen and heard on a level playing field, said Talenthouse Chief Executive Amos Pizzey.

"This is the platform I wish I had at 18 to catch a break," he said.

Tongal is a creative crowdsourcing website that specializes in video. Three friends who formed a video production company in Indiana called RezFx Productions say they've patched together about 90 percent of their living by winning contests on Tongal. One video for Jamba Juice won \$4,750. The 56-second montage shows a rock band in concert, dancers in a studio, hikers and skateboarders "living life fruitfully" as instrumental music rises in the background.

Everything was shot locally, and the Midwestern feel probably gives them an edge when pitching companies trying to appeal to a Middle America demographic, said RezFx's Matthew McCrory.

"It's very cool to work with the brands we've worked with without being in LA or New York," he said.

Indiana also means lower costs. Businesses there appreciating the attention let them shoot without paying. Equivalent locations in Los Angeles would cost top dollar.

Crowdsourcing enables advertisers to generate commercials flavored to specific regions or media. That's key because they're likely to be better received than made-for-all ads, said Tongal President James DeJulio. And companies can produce content for more platforms because of the savings from using freelancers, he said.

It might seem that crowdsourcing websites substitute for full-time workers. But industry recruiters interviewed for this story said that's not so. Hiring at advertising agencies remains robust despite companies of all sizes leveraging the online platforms, said Camille Fetter, president of placement agency TalentFoot.

"Crowdsourcing is really fueling more opportunities for the people who want to work independently anyway," she said.

The online opportunities roll in so consistently for RezFx that the team hasn't even discussed a different arrangement. Tongal typically separates a solicitation into separate contests - idea generation, storyboarding and production. The tiered process is appealing to producers because it means there's less wasted energy and more creative freedom than standard contract work.

"Much less micromanaging," RezFx's Troy Koch said.

Tongal touts itself as a "studio on demand." The company's resource base grew 120 percent last year to more than 70,000 creators, according to company board member and Insight Venture Partners venture capital partner Jeff Lieberman.

Talenthouse, which bills itself as "the world's creative department," described December as its most lucrative month since launching in 2009.

Another service, CrowdSpring, said revenue has soared as it nears its 45,000th listing in nearly seven years. Contest platforms have multiplied to include Copyshopy for copywriters, Poptent for videomakers and Cloudpeeps for social media community managers. Blogging service Tumblr recently launched a creative crowdsourcing platform called Creatrs.

Some companies are launching their own destinations for crowdsourcing initiatives.

Frito-Lay's Doritos brand helped pioneer the space with an online contest, now in its ninth iteration, to crowdsource a Super Bowl commercial. A few months ago, Doritos launched the Legion of the Bold website to host contests year-round, and user sign-ups have outpaced expectations tenfold. Doritos recently used crowdsourcing to find a holiday video card, said Brad Alesi, a vice president at the company's

contract marketing agency Marketing Arm. His firm also developed a platform for [crowdsourcing](#), Flockstars, with a hand-picked contingent of freelancers.

"There's always need for concepters at agencies who know a brand on an extremely deep level, but the ability to tap into a crowd to spark big ideas, there's something innovative there that impacts work in a positive way," Alesi said.

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