

Your Chance to Finish a Movie Microsoft Started

Stuart Elliott

CALLING all would-be Judd Apatows, Martin Scorseses and Coen brothers. Your cinematic ambitions may be supported by an unlikely patron, based not in Hollywood but more than a thousand miles to the north in Redmond, Wash.

That geographic clue gives away the sponsor: the Microsoft Corporation, which is underwriting an online movie-making contest in an effort to stimulate sales and burnish the reputation of its Windows Vista operating system. The product has met with mixed reviews since its introduction last year.

The contest is another example of the popular marketing trend known as user-generated content. It is intended to promote the higher-end version of Vista — Windows Vista Ultimate — among videophiles, early adopters of technology and filmmakers.

The contest, which is to begin on Thursday, is called the Ultimate Video Relay and has its own Web site (ultimatevideorelay.com), a spinoff of the Windows Vista Ultimate Web site (ultimatepc.com). The relay reference comes from the invitation to computer users to complete a story titled "The Cube" in several stages. The tale, a humorous cross between "The Matrix" and "The Office" (or "Office Space") begins with a six-minute clip that can be watched on the relay Web site. The clip is directed by Kyle Newman, the director of "Fanboys," a coming movie about "Star Wars" aficionados.

The online clip is labeled Act I of "The Cube" and ends abruptly. Contestants are supposed to finish the story by providing first a middle (Act II) and later an end (Act III). The entries will be judged by visitors to ultimatevideorelay.com.

Microsoft is teaming up for the contest with TriggerStreet.com, the Web site of a production company owned by the actor Kevin Spacey that is aimed at aspiring moviemakers and screenwriters. TriggerStreet.com and Microsoft were brought together by Omelet, a company in Los Angeles that works on advertising, entertainment and branding projects with marketers that in addition to Microsoft include Anheuser-Busch, NBC Universal and Toyota Motor.

"Omelet has helped us to amplify the impact of the contest by hooking us up with partners that have reach, influence and credibility," said Barry Goffe, director for Windows client product management at Microsoft.

"I've done video editing on my PC and could probably write a white paper on it," Mr. Goffe said. "But I'm a geek, not a Hollywood director" like Mr. Newman, he added, so such a technical approach would draw a far smaller audience than the contest.

Encouraging consumers to create content "is a very different approach for us," Mr. Goffe said of the Windows division of Microsoft, but "I think it's the best way to engage with our customers and achieve the long-term goals of the business."

There is always a risk with user-generated content: the materials submitted by consumers may be at variance with the shiny, happy, official corporate approach to a product or brand.

For example, when the Chevrolet division of General Motors asked computer users in 2006 to create commercials for the Tahoe sport utility, many spots made pointed references to its large size and thirst for gasoline.

If the Microsoft contest is flooded with video clips that criticize or mock Vista, "I'd probably end up with a little bit of a red face," Mr. Goffe said.

"But in the end I'd be happy," he added, "if it generated that much noise and traffic."

"One of the things that makes me feel O.K. about this," Mr. Goffe said, "is that we're not asking people to write a script that says 'Windows Vista Ultimate is great' or romances technology." Rather, he added, the idea is to create content that in its tone would mirror the lighthearted approach of Act I of "The Cube."

Shervin Samari, a partner at Omelet, acknowledged that marketers asking consumers to create content must be comfortable with giving up control of the ad-making process.

"Those brands willing to let go will make deeper connections with consumers," Mr. Samari said. "There is that element of 'You never know,' but in this case we're showcasing creativity and how the technology can help deliver that."

Besides, he added, if restrictions were imposed on the intended contest audience — whom he described as "the filmmaking community, superenthused gadget fans and early adopters" — they "would just backfire, because these people are going to smell any funny business from a mile away."

Microsoft has undertaken other efforts to improve perceptions of Vista, including price reductions and statements of support from senior corporate managers.

But reports of problem-plagued upgrades to Vista from Windows XP have been widespread. And ads from Apple that make fun of Vista are among the campaigns most often talked about online.

The Apple ads — by TBWA/Chiat/Day, part of the TBWA Worldwide division of the Omnicom Group — show "Mac Guy" watching "PC Guy" trying to light a sign that reads "Don't give up on Vista." Glitches render the sign's message as either "give up" or "give up on Vista."

Mr. Goffe said: "There are some people having issues with Vista. A lot of people are having a great experience. The people I'm talking to know the technology works for them."

The contest will be conducted in four phases. First, contestants will submit scripts for Act II, and five will be chosen by voters at the relay Web site. After those five scripts are produced, voters will select the winning clip, which will be added onto Act I on the Web site. Act III will be created the same way.

Act I of "The Cube" features an actor, Sam Huntington, who is also a star of "Fanboys," as well as the model Jaime King, who is also Mrs. Kyle Newman. Mr. Goffe even makes a cameo appearance in the clip, as a character named Barry Turtleneck.

"Fanboys" has attracted attention in Hollywood because its intended distributor, the Weinstein Company, is embroiled in a dispute with the filmmakers over which version to release. There has been a large effort online among young filmgoers to persuade Weinstein to release the filmmakers' preferred version.

Mr. Newman, in a telephone interview, had encouraging news for the "Fanboys" fans. "I have been brought back into the editing room to work on a final version," he said, adding: "All the key people are back. That's all good."

Mr. Newman may be the perfect choice to direct a movie for a consumer contest because, he said, "I won a similar contest when I was in college."

In 1998, when Mr. Newman was a 21-year-old undergraduate film student at New York University, he became the first winner of what was known as the Coca-Cola Refreshing Filmmaker's Award. A 60-second film that Mr. Newman made, "Bitten by Love," was chosen from among 150 entries and was shown in about 10,000 theaters around the country.

A decade later, an aspiring filmmaker can “make something so fast, get it online and get millions of people to watch it,” Mr. Newman said. “It’s great.”

Disponível em: <<http://www.nytimes.com>>. Acesso em 8/5/2008.

A utilização deste artigo é exclusivo para fins educacionais.