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What Works

Competing for a Change: How Changemakers’ “collaborative competitions” harness the wisdom of crowds

By Leslie Berger

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what works

Strategies, Approaches, Developments

Competing for a Change

How Changemakers' "collaborative competitions" harness the wisdom of crowds *by Leslie Berger*

EVERYBODY LOVES A CONTEST, it seems, from high-brow tests of knowledge like "Jeopardy," to rollicking displays of artistic ambition like "American Idol," to less strenuous undertakings like bingo and sweepstakes. These contests are often associated with profit because they entice people to tune in, get exposed to advertising, and, inevitably, buy. Now Ashoka's Changemakers.net is tapping into the same sporting instinct to inspire people to think, connect, and help.

The Arlington, Va.-based group hosts online competitions in which contestants offer solutions to specific social problems. Recent topics have included how to reduce domestic violence, how to prepare and respond to disasters, and how to use interactive computer and video games to improve health and health care. Anyone can submit his or her program, and anyone with access to the Internet can read and compare the submissions, which are all posted online. And, as in "American Idol," anyone can be a judge and vote for his or her favorite entry.

The top three winners get not only a modest prize of \$5,000 each, but also priceless exposure. Meanwhile, corporate and philanthropic sponsors get access to new ideas, groups, and projects. Perhaps the most important outcome, says Changemakers' Executive Director Charlie Brown, is the creation of an international community of social innovators all focusing on the same issues. After reading each other's submissions, many contestants end up working together, he notes, which is why the contests have the oxymoronic name "collaborative competitions."

The breadth of entries is a testament to the unifying potential of the Internet – and to Changemakers' inherent appeal. Submissions come from major organizations like Procter & Gamble and Kaiser Permanente, as well as from citizen groups in rural India and Mozambique. They arrive in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Persian, among other languages. And they come from surprising groups, such as the U.S. Army soldiers stationed in Southeast Asia who submitted their program to keep young men from joining terrorist groups by finding them jobs.

The entries inspire unlikely authors, such as the Mexican man convicted of domestic violence who wrote from prison about the program he had started for other abusive men. And they encourage strange bedfellows, such as the Tel Aviv-based Peres Center for Peace initiative to unite Palestinians

and Israelis in the shared problem of importing and exporting goods.

Changemakers' success is evident in both its roster of participants and its growing budget. Since the group launched its collaborative competitions three years ago, it has received more than 1,400 innovations from more than 100 countries.



Jadwiga Lopata founded the European Centre for Ecological Agriculture and Tourism to help small-scale organic farmers survive in the European Union. Her program was a Changemakers.net finalist.

According to Brown, a recent competition called "Disruptive Innovations in Health" generated more than 310 entries from 27 countries in a 10-week period. And Changemakers' yearly operating budget has ballooned from a shoestring that Brown didn't even want to specify to \$800,000.

Geeks for Good

Changemakers started out as an online journal of articles about social change. But soon its directors were hungry for more action-oriented work, and so began experimenting with ways to engage readers directly. Harnessing the interactive capabilities of the Internet, they created their hallmark collaborative competitions.

"We call ourselves 'geeks for good,'" says Brown, who is 29 years old and, like many of his cohort, began his career working for a dot-com company. He and his staff set up the technological infrastructure for the collaborative competitions, keep it up and running for users worldwide, and provide the translators for entries in foreign languages.



The organization is part of Ashoka, a global network of social entrepreneurs, investors, and academics interested in social change. Changemakers isn't unique in its use of online contests. But its association with an established organization like Ashoka and its almost immediate popularity place it at the forefront of the movement to make the funding process more transparent.

Each contest lasts three and a half months from the time that Changemakers posts a problem statement on its Web site, www.changemakers.net. Using a form called a "blueprint of innovation," contestants answer a series of simple questions such as "How is the initiative financed?" and "Is it financially sustainable or profitable?" The blueprints automatically show up online, triggering an ongoing conversation among competitors and onlookers.

Sometimes contestants join together; they are also allowed to revise their plans. After three months, a group of judges culled from corporate sponsors and Ashoka's pool of fellows whittle the entries down to 12 finalists, based on the programs' innovativeness, social impact, and sustainability. Finally, the online audience votes for the top three. (See "15 Minutes" on p. 27 for a discussion with the X Prize Foundation's president about the organization's competitions.)

"Changemakers provides visibility, some seed funding, and a marketplace of ideas for those of us in the business of supporting businesses to help poor communities," says Rob Katz, a research analyst with the World Resources Institute in Washington, D.C., a nonprofit environmental think tank that mentors and helps find funding for social entrepreneurs. He adds that the competitions also spark an international brainstorming of ideas and new partnerships, many of which eventually bear fruit.

"I think what Charlie's doing is outstanding," Katz says.

Channeling Cash

Potential underwriters who are trolling for worthy projects sponsor almost all of the competitions. For example, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in Princeton, N.J., gave Changemakers a grant of almost \$750,000 to help the organization expand its staff and to pay for three competitions,

including one called "No Private Matter! Ending Abuse in Intimate & Family Relations." This competition inspired 243 submissions from 46 countries – causing a revelation among program officers at the foundation. Like most funders, Robert Wood Johnson usually circulates its requests for proposals within a limited circle of U.S.-based nonprofit groups, and then treats submissions as intellectual property. The whole process has an air of secrecy about it.

In contrast, Changemakers' approach was novel and refreshing, says Jeane Ann Grisso, an internist and epidemiologist who works as a senior program officer in the foundation's vulnerable populations division. "Organizations I'd never heard of, doing projects I'd not even thought about, bubbled up through this process." She says the foundation plans to solicit more proposals from the winners, and will almost certainly fund some of them.

Being a finalist can attract the support of other funders as well. On the other side of the world, for instance, support began pouring in for Albino Forquilha's security and peace-building plan in Mozambique when Changemakers named it a finalist in the "Entrepreneurship Peace" collaborative competition. "After that, many organizations and universities, institutes and private companies started to contact us," says Forquilha.

Mozambique's rebel army recruited Forquilha when he was only 13 years old. He later founded a community group called FOMICRES (Mozambican Force for Crime Investigation and Social Reinsertion), which trains citizens to collect and destroy weapons, counsels former child soldiers, and offers lessons about preventing crime and building peace. He says that since 1995, in the wake of civil war, he and his colleagues have collected more than 800,000 leftover weapons, which were fueling unrelenting crime. Now, his group's focus has shifted to training young men to help understaffed local police patrol their communities. Because of the publicity he received through Changemakers, he says, Portugal University has offered to help train the citizen officers and to support FOMICRES staff interested in pursuing master's degrees.

Brown sees the growth of groups like FOMICRES as part of a global trend. "Society is really poised right now, not just in the United States but all around the world, to make the shift to much more social involvement and change," he says. "It's an exciting time to be involved in this type of work. The Internet's a big part of it. So is the general climate: People are worried about climate change, about Iraq. People everywhere want to see more safety and stability and they want to be part of doing all that. And we want to help them." □

COMPETE FOR GOOD

- Tap into people's love of competition
- Make contests transparent, creative, and fun
- Set low barriers to entry
- Let the public decide the winner