

Solar's social network



PES is very pleased to welcome Noemie Bourdin of Upsolar to its pages. The Marketing and Branding Director talks to us about the company's innovative approach to engaging with the market, and their plans to further embrace social media as a means of spreading the word on renewables.

PES: Upsolar has always had a distinguished look for a module provider. How does that relate to your company's core missions?

Noemie Bourdin: PV module providers tend to focus on delivering the materials to make solar power possible – certainly an important aspect of our business – but the message of solar's benefits is often lost in translation when it comes time to market these products to the general public. We have always tried to distinguish our marketing from the standard PV industry offerings by taking a more light-handed approach. The idea behind our look and messaging is to reach the masses by appealing to what interests them – an idea we took a step further with our advertising design contest.

PES: Can you talk a bit more about how the contest worked?

NB: The goal of our process was to solicit public input on fan-created artwork to find a design that would really resonate with the masses. We launched a call for designs in early 2012, inviting interested parties to “like” us on Facebook to receive instructions on how to submit designs. Entries poured in, each integrating our required messaging about the importance of solar and environmental consciousness, and were then posted to our Facebook page. From here, our fans were asked to vote for their favourite design.

PES: Can you tell us a little about the people who entered the competition?

NB: We received submissions from across the globe, mostly from applicants in their 20s and early 30s. Many of the designers

had little background in the solar industry, but there was a general desire to promote the adoption of renewable energy for the betterment of this and future generations. We were proud to see these young people combine their interests and artistic abilities to visually communicate Upsolar's sustainability message to those unfamiliar with this sector.

PES: Beyond creating a new, community-centric ad, what was Upsolar hoping to achieve for the company through the advertising contest?

NB: By opening our creative process to the public, we hoped to achieve a type of visibility not possible through module production alone. The global community is full of people who feel strongly about environmental sustainability, and we wanted to tap into this emotion and highlight our shared commitment to the planet.

By calling for designs, we wanted to produce an image that really spoke to the public, ultimately helping us reach new audiences and cultivate a deeper interest in solar energy. Additionally, we felt this would be the perfect avenue to expand our social media presence by collecting votes and design feedback through Facebook.

PES: How successful was Upsolar in achieving these goals through this contest?

NB: This contest was a great success for Upsolar. Thirty-five designs were submitted, each offering a unique perspective on our core messaging and providing valuable insight into how our company is being perceived.

The competing designs also drew more than 11,000 votes from our existing and new Facebook fans. The voting itself helped build our social media presence to a scale we had not seen before, including both industry professionals and global citizens interested in solar power.

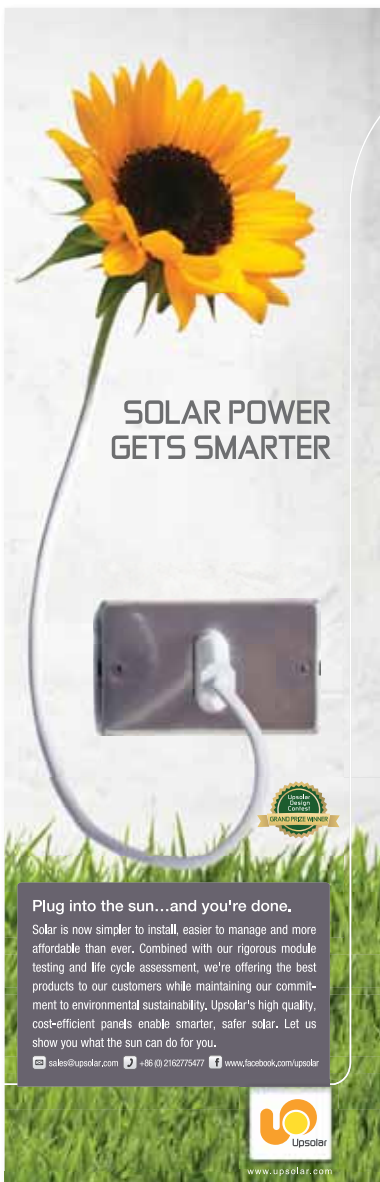
PES: How do you plan to leverage this success to continue promoting Upsolar?

NB: This contest was just the initial step in our quest to facilitate the widespread adoption of solar power and sustainable development. We gained fresh insights into our market base, which will help us structure our outreach to new audiences. One of the most effective ways to reach these target groups will be through our newly developed social media infrastructure, where we continue to gain traction on a daily basis.

And of course, our beautiful winning design, which spotlights Upsolar's commitment to help solar become smarter and more affordable, will be central to our efforts. The ad will be the focal point of this year's campaign, visible in promotional materials across the board.

PES: Speaking of that, can you go into the winning design a bit more?

NB: The winning design, created by Nélia Pinheiro of Portugal, was a clear audience favourite from the beginning. The design features a sunflower plugged into an electrical outlet and taps into our ability to generate power from renewable resources more easily than ever before. After incorporating the “Plug into the sun, and you're done” slogan and additional Upsolar language, the ad was complete and we are thrilled with the result.



The winning design from Upsolar's Design Contest 2012, "Solar Power Gets Smarter" as voted by over 11,000 Facebook fans.

For her efforts, Pinheiro walks away from the competition with a great piece for her portfolio, as well as 3,000 Euros.

PES: This territory is pretty unique for the PV industry. Did you experience any unexpected challenges during the process?

NB: As with any new endeavour, there were a handful of hiccups along the way. Opposing opinions were made clear on our Facebook page when the three final contestants were revealed. Of course, the point of a public voting process was to choose designs that resonated with a majority. To hear dissatisfaction from a handful of individuals was disappointing, but we are confident that our finalists were the best selections because they were chosen by popular demand.

Our next challenge begins now. The Upsolar team must find unique ways to

spread this message and further build our audience – a challenge we are more than happy to accept.

PES: How easy was it to get the message out there that you were running this competition? Is it something you would encourage other marketing departments to try?

NB: We didn't anticipate that spreading the word about our competition would be one of the more difficult aspects of the program. Upsolar had to proactively build its fan base by reaching out to global design institutions, students and various additional audiences online. With the assistance of a social media agency, we were able to gather a strong virtual audience to get submissions rolling.

As the first solar module manufacturer to attempt crowdsourcing for an advertising campaign, we did experience a steep ramp-up and much trial and error. However, the end result was encouraging. After many

last-minute entries (a huge stress relief!), we managed to secure more than 30 entries to post online, each combining design and sustainable messaging in its own way. We hope to see others employ similar concepts as we search for more effective means to reach a broad audience.

PES: Would you consider repeating a campaign like this to help continue your effort to spread Upsolar?

NB: Absolutely. After this competition's success, we would love to host another contest that engages our audience. We already have a few ideas in the works and can't wait for the next opportunity to bring the public on board the Upsolar creative team!

PES: Do you believe that the industry in general should do more to embrace social media?

NB: As the solar industry continues to gain traction among the general public, it is



Upsolar's 2011 Advertising Campaign, "We all share the same sun, but not the same expertise"



Upsolar's 2010 Advertising Campaign, "Protecting the Benefits of the Sun"

important for key players to establish themselves as highly visible advocates. While other avenues exist to accomplish this goal, including major sponsorships and association affiliations, Upsolar chose to leverage social media platforms as our primary channel to promote environmentally friendly lifestyle choices. Because social media is driven by curiosity and interaction, we feel it is an ideal way to engage people at all levels of familiarity with photovoltaic technology. Social media has proven to be an invaluable tool for the cultivation of new relationships with industry professionals and solar advocates alike, and we believe these types of connections drive real progress.

PES: Some would argue that engaging with consumers is unnecessary for a module provider, whereas others would say that

brand building is vital. Can you elaborate on your reasons for this campaign?

NB: While brand building is a vital reason to engage with customers, our real aim with this campaign was to determine the best method to educate a broader audience. The simple fact is that the general public is often unaware that solar technologies have become more efficient, more affordable and easier to implement in recent years. By soliciting ideas from consumers and opening voting to the public, we put the power in the hands of the people. There is no question the winning design was one that compellingly conveyed the benefits of going solar; thousands of voters made that perfectly clear.

Ultimately, education is what drives our social media planning on a daily basis.

Through our social media channels, we strive to enlighten consumers on everything from key R&D advancements (even by competitors) to the latest in international trade policy. In doing this, we hope to encourage environmentally conscious decisions from the public and create a mutually beneficial relationship between the industry and consumers – one that stretches far beyond sales.

PES: Do you think that this more collaborative model will become a permanent part of Upsolar's marketing approach?

NB: I believe the collaborative model of marketing and branding will become an increasingly popular choice for companies, especially as the industry experiences a shift from commercial and utility-scale installations toward residential systems. With the public becoming more interested in environmental sustainability and demanding more corporate social responsibility from their preferred brands, companies will have to pay closer attention to the desires and input of end-users. We see this as the perfect opportunity to bridge the gap between consumer interest and manufacturer engagement, and we are ready for the challenge! ■

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The welcome page for Upsolar's online design contest on Facebook