

Brutal Honesty: Product Challenges at CPAPtalk.com Pull No Punches, and Founder Johnny Goodman is Keen to Keep the Content Coming at a Fast Pace

Type in CPAP on Google and CPAP.com is at the top of the list. From there, users may end up at CPAPtalk.com, where no-holds-barred Product Challenges feature unfiltered commentary from CPAP users.

With unique site visits hovering at around 8,000 per day, the Houston, Texas based CPAP.com uses the Internet to foster useful discussion among actual CPAP users. Products from several different manufacturers are available for sale on the site, including those that received less-than-stellar reviews on the Product Challenge. Does this ultimately hurt sales? It's hard to say, but Johnny Goodman, founder of CPAP.com, is not about to spare feelings. Instead, he guards the integrity of the site like a protective parent.

Despite the constantly evolving Internet culture, Goodman still battles negative perceptions which he says are largely unfair. After all, he points out that not all Internet companies are the same. Some are good, some are bad, and some are average. With this in mind, we chatted with Goodman and asked him about the challenges, the critics, and the fight to stay above the crowd.

How do you maintain the integrity of your Product Challenges?

The most important thing we do is build a system in which we can't alter the results. How do we do this? We use software to automate all core functions of the Product Challenge. For example, our software automatically scores and vets potential participants. We have an algorithm that catches manufacturer ringers. Results webpages are posted by pushing a button, setting in motion a process where our software collects, compiles, and publishes results.

Once you push the button, the results go public. Once a Product Challenge has been commissioned, the results will be released. The process through which that occurs is something we have built software for, and not something that a human being is running. It doesn't make it impossible to sneak around, but we monitor and audit using tight security standards, and it is the same level of data protection that we use at CPAP.com. It is the same level of audit-ability.

Your users tend to write bold and honest reviews. Do you ever worry that it might hurt your sales?

It is extremely concerning for us to publish a one-sided study. No one likes to see a boxer in a corner that is just being pummeled. However, we must balance this against a commitment to publish everything we commission. We must do that to have integrity. And we must send the unfiltered comments, votes, and voices of patients to the industry. We are a conduit, not a processor. We are not producing this. We are relaying

what is happening on the front lines, and we are doing this for CPAP users everywhere.

We are telling the industry about the nightly experiences with their products. From that perspective, we do this with a sense of duty. At CPAP.com, we take a different philosophy with sales than maybe a dealer or someone in a certain niche would. We believe that if we give the information to the customer to make the decision, they are going to make a better decision for themselves and for their health. That means they will actually use the equipment, have better compliance, and have a better chance if they use a good product as opposed to a poor product.

We are not concerned about the ratings of any one product. We are extremely concerned about our ability to deliver unfiltered patient opinions about products in actual, real-world use.

The only people who may review products at CPAP.com are those who have purchased from CPAP.com. You cannot just go to the Web site and click, "I would like to write a review." You must have used the product verifiably before your input is solicited. That makes the reviews relevant, and the power of that is one of the things that led us to the Product Challenge.

How have the brick and mortar establishments reacted to your continued success?

Many have reacted by using the information available on CPAP.com and CPAPtalk.com as a catalog and product quality guide. There are now two ways of servicing patients, and there was only one way before [prior to the Internet]. There is bound to be friction there. I think the biggest knock I have heard against the Internet is that we offer no service. That is an offensive accusation, and we believe strongly that is entirely without merit.

The sheer amount of organized and accessible information that is available from our Web sites is staggering, and it is unmatched by any other entity in our industry. That includes DMEs, manufacturers, support groups, and governments, and they all stress the importance of education. But when you look at real world patients who need to work to improve their own health, the destination for that is our web sites.

If we offer no service, how can that be? We are not a billion-dollar market capitalization company, and there are some of those in our industry. Those are the places that you would expect to see that level of content, but you don't. If the patient is going into a local DME, he or she receives a mask. Maybe he receives fitting service with that. What they don't get in a traditional local setting is a little star rating floating next to that product. Those stars represent people coming forward and saying, "I did not like this, and watch out for these clips."

The Internet offers the ability to benefit from these comments. It is offering a choice that patients did not have before. That does not mean that the local store is not valuable, but it does mean that there is another way that is effective. The Product Challenge is going further than product reviews even, and giving patients a level of transparency that has never existed. And it could not exist without the Internet.

The data we are producing is unfiltered and deep. Another important thing is that we offer real-time peer groups. The most powerful thing is for patients who are struggling to talk to guys who can say, "Yeah, I struggled when I started, but I made it work and you can change your setup. Don't give up." That happens every day on our Web site.

It is powerful, free, and helping people literally every day. I think that is an incredible service. Specifically, I hear things such as, "You are the Internet, so you put it in a box and ship it." Our customer service reps do not get on the phone with a customer until they have completed 2 months of daily training with hands-on time in the warehouse. They know CPAPs, and they are available from 8 AM to 10 PM central time. They do not work on commission. They do not have any average call time quotas. They solely exist to answer any and all questions relating to CPAP equipment. They do a fantastic job at this, and I believe it is good service, especially now that RTs are spread thinner and thinner and are harder to reach—at least at some DMEs.

If you type in the word CPAP on yahoo.com, you are listed first on the unsponsored results. What do you attribute this high placement?

It is not magic. We have better content than anyone else, so people value it and they link to it. You can't fake that. You have to put the wrench time in.

Where do you find the people for the product reviews and how are the results quantified?

It goes back to the first question: How do we stay objective? We use software to coordinate recruiting efforts and to assist in the process of turning Product Challenge participant votes into quantified results. As we have regular contact with Manufacturers, we have created a process that keeps results quantification objective. Integrity for Product Challenges is job number one, two, three, and four.

Manufacturers participating in the Product Challenge receive an e-mail that lays out our ground rules during the challenge. The summary of those ground rules is we won't discuss the Product Challenge with anyone. We will not provide any additional materials along with the product. Whatever the manufacturer usually and customarily packages, the user will receive.

Participants can reach out for help or support via any channel they choose, but neither manufacturers or CPAPtalk will contact them.

We release unedited and unmodified results no matter the outcome. And we are going to give the manufacturers a 1-day heads up as to the outcome of the results via e-mail before public release. So if you are participating as Respiroics, and the results are due out on the 20th, on the 19th you're going to get a link that says, "This drops tomorrow, we're done with the challenge, and here are the results."

How do you find and enroll people for the Product Challenges?

We have a large CPAP.com customer base and a large CPAPtalk.com user base. We also may contact patients of traditional DMEs. We can leverage these sources for a wide breadth of access. More specifically, we'll typically announce an enrollment period via press release, a notice in the CPAP.com newsletter and banners on CPAPtalk.

Usually we get between 300 and 500 people for each challenge. And depending on the mask or machine, there are going to be between 30 and 50 slots, with five backups. Those people fill out a detailed history, and we use that detailed history against our algorithm which is designed to weed out unqualified participants. We build it, feed it, and we run people through. They all get a score or a number. We double check the enrollees selected by the ranking scores and those 55 people become Product Challenge participants.

We inform the people who were selected, let them know when to expect a package in the mail and review the rules of a Product Challenge. They can reach out for help, but we are not going to reach out during this time, because this is a real world home-use simulation. Participants are not to discuss any aspect of the Product Challenge with any other participant, or with any other party.

Survey participants are free to keep the products that we send them, but it is in exchange for their honest feedback and detailed feedback when the trial ends. We have five backups, as I mentioned. So those first 50 folks get to vote. We almost always get all 55 back. Everybody on the Web sites is extremely interested in telling the industry what the front lines of CPAP use looks like every night, because they share a common belief that if a few things could be tweaked, and the simple messages received, the quality of products could be dramatically increased for everyone.

Sometimes we get questions such as, "How do we know these people on the Internet will give us good answers? How can you trust this information?" Just because someone goes on the Internet doesn't mean they don't get off the Internet. These people get to bed with their CPAP equipment. They have addresses and workplaces. They are likely more Internet savvy than your average person, but if your nose is red because the mask is rubbing on it, your opinion is just the same as everybody else.

They struggle with this, and they consider it a civic duty and almost a cultural responsibility to enroll and support these challenges. And they do staggeringly good jobs of pointing out exactly where their issues are. When their trial ends, they get an e-mail and they click a link and they vote. And they vote in a silo, meaning they do not know what anyone else voted, or what anyone else says. They see the results of their work when the public does.

Is it a questionnaire where numerical ratings are added up?

If you visit any of the Product Challenge results page, you will see a three types of scores. The first is a final score in large font at the top which reflects the answer of each participant to the question "Which product will you use most in the future?" Additionally, You will find an "out of 5" star category rating for things like "comfort", "quietness", and

CPAPtalk.com Presents: Finished Product Challenges

FullLife Full Face vs. Mirage Quattro Full Face CPAP Mask

Opus 360 Nasal Pillow Mask vs. Swift LT Nasal Pillow Mask

Sullivan Chinstrap vs. Premium Chinstrap

IntelliPAP AutoAdjust vs M Series Auto with A-Flex

Breeze SleepGear vs Mirage Swift LT

Performance Tubing vs CPAP.com 6 Foot Hose

IQ Nasal Mask vs. ComfortGel Nasal Mask

Comfort Gel vs. Ultra Mirage II Nasal Mask

Hans Rudolph V2 Full Face vs. Ultra Mirage Full Face

Zzz-Mask Full Face vs. ComfortFull 2

Bravo vs. Swift II

“seal”. This enables participants to indicate how varying features of the product performed. Lastly, participants are encouraged to write detailed comments about their experience, which serves almost as advice to those reading the comments.

The goal of each Product Challenge results page is to make it easy to see which product worked better for the participants, in both overall and in specific areas. That is the ultimate test of quality. Our participants are pragmatic, self-interested people who want to be comfortable tonight. We seek to explain not only which product is more preferred, but what made “Product X” better than “Product Y”.

This is huge, deep, and meaningful content, and the true goal of the Product Challenge is reading through those comments. And as you do, you start to see the same two or three things come up. Manufacturers can easily see the things that need to be fixed. There are things such as quick clips on a mask that people like. And as it turns out, back lighting on a CPAP machine's display is not always a good feature. After all, this is a sleeping machine. If you can't turn the back lighting off, no matter how good you think the machine is, it will not be well liked. These are somewhat simple things that can be changed with little effort, and will have a huge impact.

Are there any other misconceptions you want to clear up?

You hear talk of good DMEs and bad DMEs, however you do not hear talk of good Internet companies and bad ones. You just hear talk of the Internet. We are a company, we have an office, we have a user base, and we can thrive or fail based on how well we serve customers.

What are your future plans and initiatives

We are going to continue to make our Web site easier to navigate and make information easier to find. That benefits us, because we are a company that wins when information is transparent, customers are empowered and play a more active role in their own health decisions. We want good equipment for every CPAP patient, and we think we have the ability to contribute to that worthy goal.

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For more information about CPAP.com and the CPAPtalk.com Product Challenge Results, please visit <http://www.cpaptalk.com/productchallenge/>