Online Forums

Social Marketing *with Proven Results*

postrelease®

Your Most Influential Audience

How to Reach Them with Messages That Engage and Inspire Action – With Exponentially Higher Click-Through Rates

Picture a place where you encounter thriving conversations about your products, where motivated people are asking and answering each other's questions about your products, where there's room for you – the company representative – to openly provide useful information about your products – the very subject around which this community formed in the first place.

Then imagine that those same people are highly influential word-of-mouthers – that elusive group of enthusiastic consumers every company would love to find and enlist.

It can seem like Facebook and Twitter are the only names that come to mind when anyone in advertising is discussing how to use social media to reach potential customers. But while the jury is still out on how to measure success between tweets and status updates, another social format is proving itself a measurable, effective way to reach consumers at a time when opinions are being formed and purchase decisions are being made:

Online Forums.

Forums are the hidden gems of the social web. In a forum – unlike Facebook and Twitter – product conversations are not intrusive, they're integral. Those conversations are often a consumer's only reason for being in a forum in the first place.

Instead of "I'm having PB&J for lunch" or "I'm in line at Starbucks," consumers post such pointed questions as "What to look for in a car stereo" and "Can someone recommend the best tire?"

In other words, forums are a communicator's dream – the ultimate way to target your online marketing.

Forums

The Original Social Networks

Forums are online gathering places for people who share a similar interest, communicating with each other by posting messages. There are millions of highly targeted online forums. Examples include VWVortex.com, GreenHybrid.com, and WiiChat.com, among many others.

People are there precisely to discuss products or services, even specific brands. They pose questions to the community, ask for guidance or simply look to connect with people who share their passions. The audience is primed and ready for – even actively seeking – product-specific messages.

In fact, the discussion topics reveal that consumers are in the thick of the research process and are seeking more information to help them make purchase decisions.

> **These are discussion topics taken from actual recent posts:**
>
> "Looking to buy a digital camera"
> "Any good deals on laptops right now?"
> "2010 Ford Taurus vs 2009 Nissan Maxima"

There are many features of forum posts that make them appealing destinations for advertisers and communicators:

- The very nature of forum posts – embedded within the forum itself, rather than placed peripherally around the edges – makes them part of the conversation instead of competing with it.

- Forum posts are indexed by search engines and carry significant weight in optimizing search results.

- Posts also are archived and remain for the life of the forum, continuing to live a long time online even when the conversation isn't active.

Consumers Want
Engagement & Relevant Information- Not Sales Pitches

The Wall Street Journal says consumers today are "info shoppers."

3/4 More than 3/4 of consumers say ads no longer have the information that they need.

92% A whopping 92 percent of respondents in a recent survey said they had more confidence in information they seek out online than anything coming from a sales clerk or other source.

Julie Mathis from Hill & Knowlton said it best in a recent report:

"The most effective way to reach consumers online is with highly-targeted campaigns tailored to engage micro communities that form around common interests."

According to the 2008 Cone Business in Social Media Study:

85% 85 percent of Americans who use social media believe a company should not only be present on social sites, but also should interact with its consumers via social media.

56% 56 percent of social media users feel both a stronger connection with and better served by companies when they can interact with them in a social media environment

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Forum Users

Influential Consumers and Word-of-Mouth Powerhouses

If the Holy Grail of marketing is a band of self-motivated enthusiasts proactively recommending your product, then the Grail's secret location could very well be the world of online forums.

People who contribute to online forums are overwhelmingly more engaged in "influential" activities – both online and offline – than people who don't use forums, according to a nationwide survey conducted by PostRelease in November 2009. In conjunction with Chicago market researcher Synovate, PostRelease asked 1,000 Americans to choose from a list of activities that could be considered influential in helping others make a purchase decision, and select those in which they participate. In every case, those who contribute to forums are more likely than others to engage in the activity.

By far, the biggest disparities involved blogs and meetups: those who contribute to online forums are 10 times more likely than non-contributors to also publish a blog, and are 9 times more likely to take an active role in organizing an offline event or meetup for a group that originally met online.

Forum-users are:

3.5x 3.5 times more likely to proactively recommend a particular purchase to someone else

3.5x 3.5 times more likely to share links about new products

4x 4 times more likely to post online ratings and reviews

2x Almost twice as likely to share advice– offline and in person – based on information they've read online

The forum contributor's influence is not confined to the world of online forums.

Here's an overview of the PostRelease/ Synovate survey results

79.2% Help a friend or family member make a purchase decision - compared with 47.6 percent of non-contributors; 53.8 percent overall.

65% Share advice (offline and in person) based on information that they've read online - compared with 35 percent of non-contributors; 40.8 percent overall.

66% Post online ratings/reviews of products/services, - compared with 16.8 percent of non-contributors; 26.4 percent overall.

57.7% Proactively recommend that someone make a particular purchase - compared with 16.9 percent of non-contributors; 24.9 percent overall.

43.6% Share links to articles about new products or with reviews of products - compared with 12 percent of non-contributors; 18.2 percent overall.

35.6% Attend an offline event or meet up where people with similar interests or who share the same hobby connect - compared with 13.8 percent of non-contributors; 18 percent overall.

20.6% Publish a blog - compared with 2.1 percent of non-contributors; 5.7 percent overall.

18.8% Take an active role in organizing an offline event or meet up for a group that met originally online - compared with 2.4 percent of non-contributors; 5.6 percent overall.

Forum Users
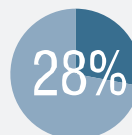
Forum Users vs. Non-Forum Users

Popularity of Forums:

According to a survey by
PostRelease / Synovate:

One in five Americans
contributes to online forums.

Forrester Research reports:

28%

28 percent of U.S. consumers read
online forums –

making it the second most popular
online activity, second only to
watching video.

Who Contributes to Online Forums?

The PostRelease/Synovate survey offers insights about who is
most likely to contribute to online forums:

Younger respondents were
more likely to say they
contribute to forums:

1/3
of those
18-24

1/4
of those
25-34

compared with one in five overall.

Broken out a different way –

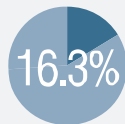**30%** nearly 30 percent of those ages
18-34 contribute to forums

22% 22 percent of those ages
25-54 contribute.

Respondents with children
participate in forums more
than those without

26% **16.3%**
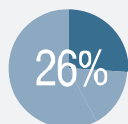
With Children   Without Children

A college education makes
a difference:

respondents with
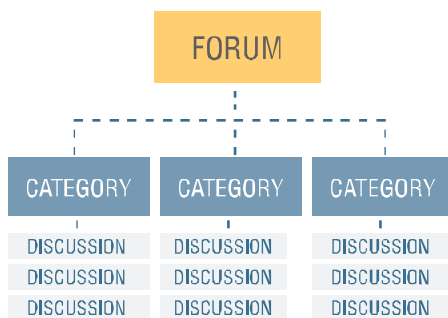post-grad degrees   **20%**

respondents with
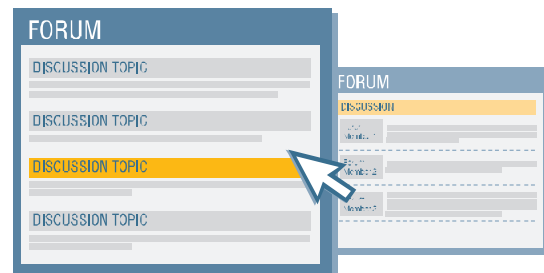at least some college   **21.8%**

respondents with high
school education or less   **12.9%**

How Forums Work

All forums are organized by categories and discussion topics, called threads, that allow people to find specific information.

Forums are organized by subject area. The main forum page offers a list of discussion topics. When visitors click on a topic they'll find a list of discussion threads within that category. Any member can start a discussion thread – they simply post a message to the forum, posing a question to the group or starting a conversation about a particular area of interest. Members can add to the discussion by posting replies, and conversations flow from there.
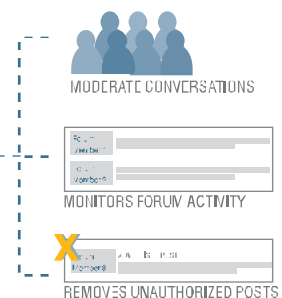
Visitors can read the posts and navigate around the forum at will. But once they want to start adding to the conversation, they typically need to register and create a username and a profile, which can include as much information about themselves as they want to share.

Each forum has multiple designated "moderators" – usually influential and highly active forum members who are assigned the responsibility to moderate conversations, monitor forum activity and remove unauthorized commercial posts. Owners of the forums establish their own rules and guidelines for participation, and they can ban users as necessary, to keep their forums clean and productive.

Example of a Forum
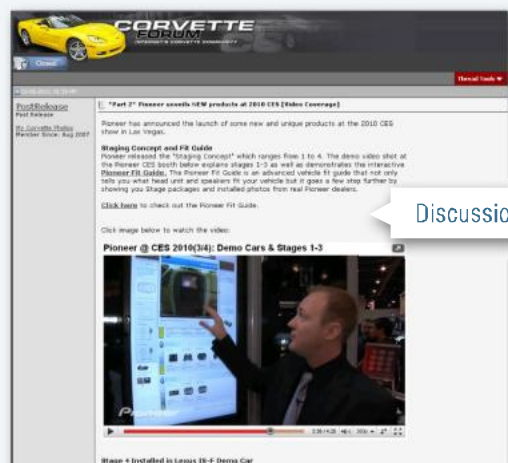
Advertising in Online Forums

The niche nature of forums makes them valuable, high-impact channels for advertisers. But, until now, forums have been difficult to monetize effectively. They're highly fragmented and often operated by part-time hobbyists running their sites using low-cost or free software. The owners don't have the time or specialized knowledge to efficiently monetize their sites.

To date, the primary ad units within forums have been banners and sponsorships.

Banners:

Advertisers can purchase banner ads, but these run outside the forum conversation itself. That is, they're typically displayed along the edges of the forum discussion page, or shoehorned within the part of the page where the forum posts reside, but still separate from the actual discussion. Typically, these banners generate low click-thru rates.

Sponsorships:

Anyone who advertises on a forum typically becomes a sponsor and gains permission to post within that particular forum category. Posting is usually much more effective than banners in generating response, because it puts the message inside the discussion itself.

The Most Effective Approach

Engage With the Forum Audience

Advertisers get the best response by posting relevant information as posts within the forums, rather than placing advertising messages around the forums.

For example, in automotive forums, dealers with permission to post on the forum typically include information about their special deals on vehicles or parts that are relevant to the forum discussion topics. By advertising on the forum, dealers can pay to be listed as a "preferred vendor" and gain automatic consideration with the forum audience when people are searching for products.

Banner ads don't allow for that level of engagement. Sponsorships do, but the manual process of monitoring and contributing content can be unwieldy. Here's why:

> ⚠️ You can't just jump in and start posting – there are rules.
>
> • Advertisers first must reach out to each forum owner to get permission to post (which usually requires becoming a sponsor).
>
> • As mentioned earlier, each forum has its own participation guidelines. Even after gaining permission to post, advertisers must research each forum's rules and follow them to the letter.
>
> ---
>
> Manually contributing content to forums is time consuming.
>
> • To take part in the forum discussion, advertisers have to monitor each discussion thread and manually add posts in order to contribute. They generally only get permission to participate in one category – not the entire forum.
>
> • Because the process is so involved when attempted manually, advertisers are limited in the number of forums in which they can realistically participate, making it hard to achieve the kind of scale they might be looking for.

> Giving individuals the authority to write and post responses on the fly, on behalf of the company, carries a certain level of risk.
>
> • As part of the regular discussion thread, forum posts are open for comment from community members. Many advertisers fear negative responses and don't know how to respond in a manner that will ultimately benefit the brand.
>
> • Communications from a company should always reflect the organization's core messages. Letting an employee loose within forums relinquishes some control over that content – especially if he or she is engaged in real-time back-and-forth conversation.
>
> • New guidelines from the Federal Trade Commission raise the bar for transparency online. The rules require those promoting products for a fee to say so upfront. If the forum-posting approach were automated, the advertiser could make sure that all messages clearly indicate the sponsorship status.

Another drawback for going it alone:

Most forums cannot usually provide any most forums cannot usually provide any measurement tools or reporting mechanism to help advertisers track results.

But forums contain what is arguably the most concentrated audience of influential brand advocates and word-of-mouth powerhouses you can find.

That's why PostRelease created an automated way to let advertisers participate in forum discussions and engage with forum audiences.

PostRelease

Forum Advertising Made Easy and Highly Effective

PostRelease is a highly effective solution for online forum advertising and influencing word-of-mouth forum discussions. PostRelease enables companies to insert posts that contain relevant content into targeted online forum discussions.

PostRelease posts offer a hybrid approach – an ad unit that can serve as an editorial or communications vehicle – making forums useful to advertisers, marketers and public relations specialists.

Forums join the PostRelease network to increase revenue and traffic to their sites, allowing marketers to use the PostRelease automated system to identify pertinent forum discussions and insert messages as posts that contain useful content to be absorbed by the community.

The powerful PostRelease search tool allows advertisers to use keywords to find categories relevant to a topic within the PostRelease network of online forums. Then they select the forum categories that best fit their audience and budget.

Search

1. Select Campaign Start Date

Select campaign start date to search for available forums.

Your campaign will run for 7 days and can begin at least 7 days from today.

04/10/10

2. Search for Forum Categories

Keyword Search

Enter keywords that best describe your topic or product to find relevant forum categories.

intakes

i.e. tires, audio/video, home improvement

Search

OR

Select a Forum

– Select General Category

–

– Select Forum

Search

Forum Network List

▶ Buick Forum (2)		$220	
▶ Audi Forums (2)		$290	
Audi A2	★★★★☆	$185	Remove
Intake	★★★★☆	$105	Remove
▶ Dodge Forum		$115	

Total Amount:

$625

clear all

✕ Cancel   Continue ▶

Lotus Talk   Audience: Lotus

Forum Category: **Intakes and Exhausts** $10...
Located in: **Lotus Discussions**

Audi Forums   Audience: Audi

Forum Category: **Intake, Headers and Exaust** $185   Remove
Located in: **Audi Reviews**

4Runner Forum   Audience: Toyota   Traffic: ★★★★☆

Forum Category: **Headers, Intakes & Exhaust** $105   Add to List
Located in: **Brand Reviews**

PostRelease

Forum Advertising Made Easy and Highly Effective

Posts can include text, images, hyperlinks and links to video. The posts are clearly marked as from PostRelease, and they are closed to comments from the community.

PostRelease makes it easy to create a post using a simple template online. The approach is automated but audited – all posts are reviewed to ensure the content is relevant to the discussion topic.

**It is this quality control that sets PostRelease apart from banner and text ads:**

In its year-long beta, PostRelease click-through rates averaged 33 percent, with highs reaching nearly 90 percent.

The PostRelease platform automatically inserts the post into the top position of selected forum categories. Advertisers pay for a one-week campaign, meaning the PostRelease posts remain in a "sticky" position – toward the top of the post list page – for seven days. Once released from the top position, the post moves down the discussion list along with all other posts.

Forum Template

Sticky Post
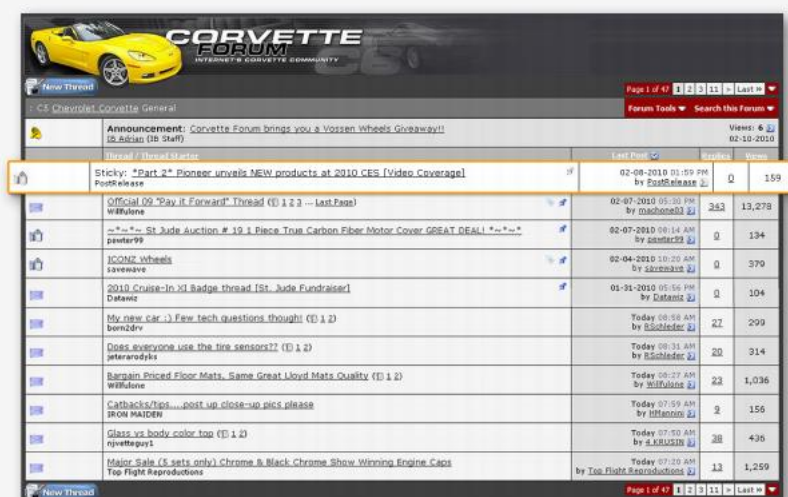
The PostRelease platform automatically inserts the post into the top position of selected forum categories.

Residual Traffic

The Ads That Keep On Giving

PostRelease posts remain part of the forum content for the life of the forum and, as this analysis shows, their ability to drive response increases with time – by an average of more than 100 percent one year after a paid campaign has ended – as consumers discover the content organically in search results.

"The most unexpected result was the speed and position of organic placement of our client's content on major search engines. We're talking 1st and 2nd pages within a week. This result had many of our clients begin to pull dollars out of their SEO/SEM budgets, and throw it into PostRelease."
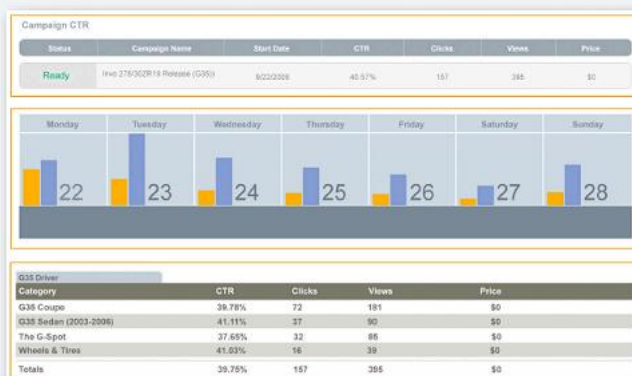
— BJ Birtwell, President, The Armory Marketing Group
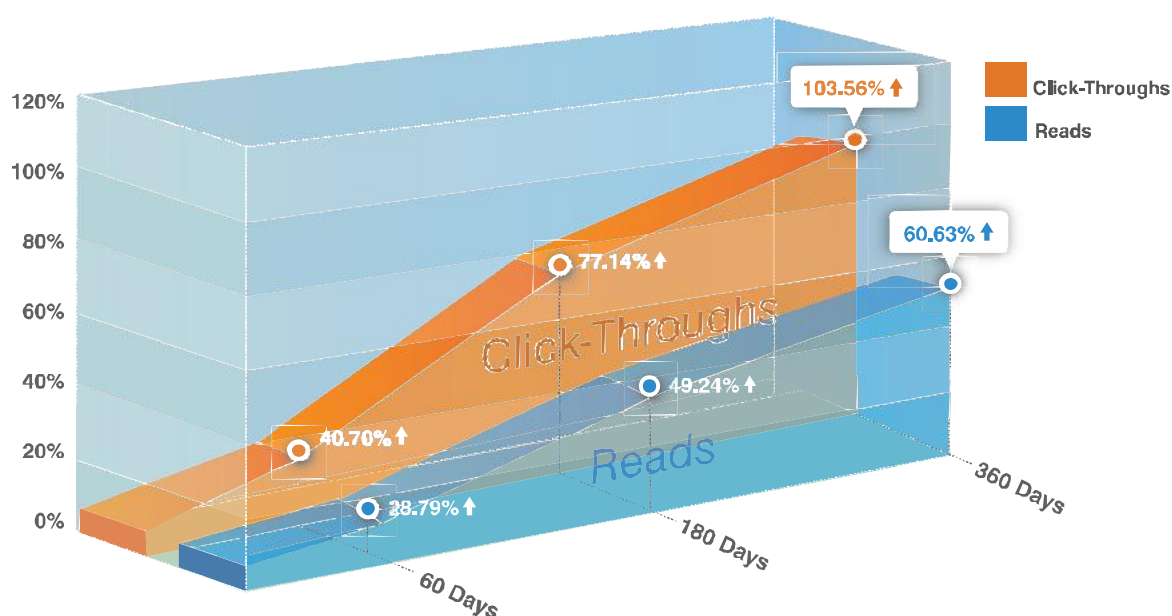
Easy-to-Read Charts Show Results

The online PostRelease Manager handles all insertions, tracks reads and click-throughs – all through one simple, easy-to-use interface.

Results are measured and delivered in easy-to-read charts, with reads and clicks broken down by day and by forum.

Transparency

An Authentic Way to Be Part of the Forum Conversation

One challenge for forums is that some advertisers pose as users simply to insert "disguised" commercial messages. Forum owners spend considerable time keeping such posts out. PostRelease, by contrast, creates a structured environment for inserting content that is useful and relevant, and introduces transparency, clearly identifying its messages.

PostRelease's current network consists of over 170 participating forums representing automotive, motorcycle, boating, power sports, video games and more. The company is expanding into additional verticals.

> "Our most recent campaign saw a 40 percent conversion rate from clicks to landing page. That's an unheard-of metric in the forum world. But this is a 'business as usual' experience with PostRelease."
>
> — BJ Birtwell, President, The Armory Marketing

PostRelease began testing its platform in 2008 by addressing a single category – automotive forums.

The company has executed more than 200 campaigns for companies such as eBay Motors, Pioneer Electronics, Toyota/Scion, Nitto Tire North America, American Tire Distributors and more.
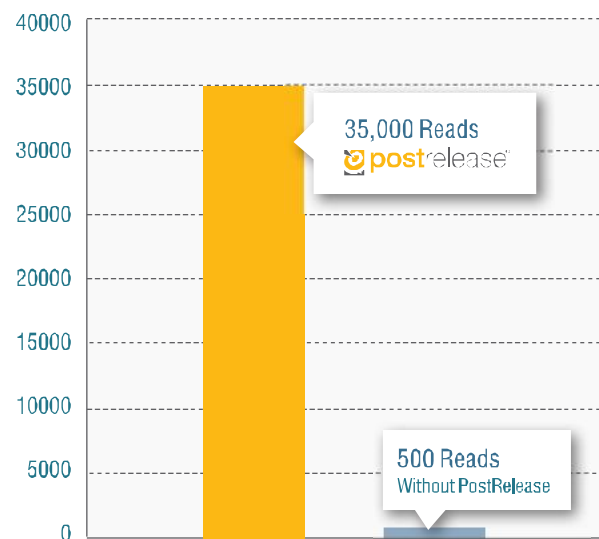
Proven Results

Case Studies

Pioneer Electronics

Pioneer Electronics ran a holiday promotion that achieved a *60 percent click-thru rate* using PostRelease to target automotive forum audiences. The company offered rebates for its new flagship AVIC-Z110BT and AVIC-X910BT navigation systems, crafting a sponsored forum post which included product images, direct links to the product web pages and the rebate page on Pioneer's website. The campaign ran as a sticky post – meaning the post remained in the lead position in the forum discussion category for one week in early November – *in 55 automotive-themed forums.*

60%
Click-Thru Rate

Pioneer Electronics

Pioneer Electronics used PostRelease to help announce the launch of its AVIC-D3 in-dash navigation system, embedding a link to a company YouTube video within the PostRelease post. *The post generated 35,000 reads*; another Pioneer video that wasn't promoted through PostRelease only received 500 reads during the same time period.

35,000 Reads
postrelease

500 Reads
Without PostRelease

Proven Results

Case Studies

American Tire Distributors

American Tire Distributors sought to build awareness for a new website, WheelEnvizio.com. *The company used PostRelease on 20 different forums*, tailoring the images in each post to the specific forums (Audi images for Audi forums, Mustang images for Mustang forums, etc.). *The PostRelease post was read more than 44,000 times in a matter of weeks*, and generated a click-though rate of 69 percent. The Wheel Envizio website had its single largest traffic day on the day the PostRelease campaign went live. Traffic remained high throughout the campaign.


Read more than 44,000 times

69%
Click-Thru Rate

Nitto Tire Corporation

Nitto Tire Corporation promoted its new Invo tire product exclusively via PostRelease, by offering a free, Nitto-branded, downloadable desktop wallpaper. *The PostRelease generated a 33.8% click-thru rate and was Read over 3,300 times by the core of the brand's target consumers.* With PostRelease, Nitto was able to target audiences by vehicle make and model. Combined with the near-instant insertion of messages, PostRelease allowed Nitto to promote the right product to the right audience at the right time. A new size release announcement could be made the day the product was available for purchase and only to the specific vehicle make and models for which the sizes were applicable. This allowed Nitto to stimulate demand for new tire and new tire size launches very quickly making it one of Nitto Tire's best-performing products.

Over 3,300 Reads

33.8%
Click-Thru Rate
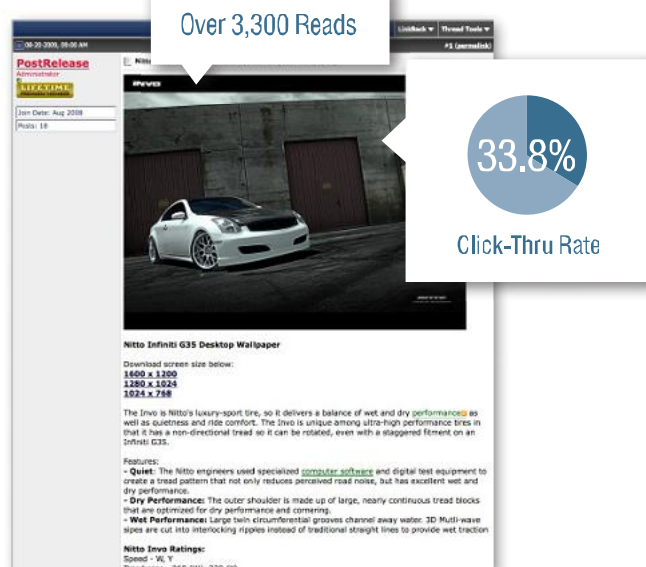
Created By a Swat Team of Digital Inventors

PostRelease

The creators of PostRelease have been participating in online forums since they were called "bulletin boards" back in the late '80s. Recognizing that the people in forums were enthusiastic consumers, and that forum owners desperately needed an effective revenue channel, PostRelease founders set out to do the legwork of building a system that would connect these wildly disparate entities in a way that works for all parties.

PostRelease is a spin-off of Cie Studios, a Long Beach, Calif.-based "digital lab" that combines compelling user experiences with cutting-edge technology to build next-generation interactive entertainment and rich Internet applications. The company began in 1998 as an interactive services firm providing innovative digital marketing campaigns for companies like Pioneer Electronics, Chrysler and Toyota/Scion.

The PostRelease company has a patent pending for the PostRelease program.

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