

Joy *to* the World

Bringing happiness to runners of all abilities, ages and genders across the globe, The Color Run is a case study for social media best practice, global unity – and putting the ‘fun’ in fundraising

By LOUISE HOFFMAN





ONE OF THE most ingenious uses of colour today is surely The Color Run.

Already a global phenomenon, having only been launched in 2012 in the US, the initiative is dubbed 'the happiest 5k on the planet' – evidenced by the many photos and video clips of beaming faces that circulate on social media after each event – and sees participants showered in colourful powder at various points around the route.

An untimed event, which is followed by a celebratory 'Finish Festival', the run is designed to be unintimidating and all-inclusive, encouraging people to lead a healthy lifestyle, to raise funds for good causes, and above all, to have fun!

"I wanted to create an event that would encourage people to get out and run just for the fun of it," says founder Travis Snyder. "I wanted people to enjoy the community experience of running together, and I wanted to add something a little out of the ordinary to the race; something that could serve as a sort of visual reward for all the hard work these runners put in to training for the event."

The model is proving to be extremely popular, appealing to a whole new demographic of people – internationally. In its launch year, The Color Run hosted 53 events worldwide with more than 600,000 participants, and by 2013 it had tripled in size, with more than 170 events in 20-plus countries, and 1.6 million participants. By the end of this year, there will have been 240 events across 50-plus countries.

Joe Rafferty, event organiser for the UK and Ireland, has been involved with The Color Run since March 2013, prior to the first UK event in July 2013, and it was the structure of the event that attracted him to the role. "Bringing something completely new and different to the marketplace excited me," he enthuses. "The run isn't timed. It's not specifically about one single cause. It's about having fun and engaging with people in exercise, health and wellbeing."

Over 65% of the participants in the UK and Ireland are first-time runners – people who have never taken part in a running event before – and this is no doubt partly due to the fact that the 'running' element of the event is very much

secondary, or perhaps even tertiary. The opportunity to become an evolving artwork in their own right as they progress around the course, and the anticipation of the music and dancing that await them at the Finish Festival, are welcome distractions from the five kilometers of physical exercise. And there's most certainly no shame in that.

"At school, running often became something of a punishment – you ran laps because you hadn't done something well – and I think that's why a lot of people fall out of love with it," Joe suggests. "But with The Color Run they don't think, 'I'm going for a run', and they therefore have a more positive mindset. When they finish, they do so with a huge smile on their faces, and they walk away thinking, 'What a fantastic experience'. So all of a sudden their perception of exercise and a healthy lifestyle is a positive one, as opposed to a diet where they have to cut out all the things they love, or carry out exercise that is hard and painful."

One participant described the event as "a festival you have to run to get to" rather than 'a run that ends with a festival', which Joe agrees is the perfect way to describe it. "And I don't think we should be shy about the idea of distraction and reward – if it →

means that people exercise, and they enjoy it and engage with it, then, why not?" he adds.

For this and other reasons, it's important to view The Color Run, and its success, in a social context. Albeit a problem that varies in degree from country to country and from community to community, health is very often compromised by the abundance of fast and processed food that is available nowadays, and the tendency to spend free time indoors with home entertainment systems rather than venturing outdoors to exercise or to engage with the community.

"We're not pushing a hard and fast diet plan or dietary requirements, but we will give people advice, because the majority of our participants are first-time runners, not the members of your local running club who understand what hydration is all about, or understand what a good diet can do for you," says Joe.

"Above all, it's about trying to inspire people to take part in exercise on a more regular basis. They might look at the 10-kilometer run or half marathon and think, 'No way, I can't do that', but a five-kilometer distance is incredibly achievable for everybody, and participants are more likely to do it multiple times. Hopefully that will ingrain a healthy lifestyle into people."

But by far the most significant cultural influence upon The Color Run is social media. A case study for best practice in the use of this platform as a marketing tool, the event in turn owes much of its success to its social-media-savvy participants.

"I think a lot of businesses out there are using social media channels, but they don't actually know why they are setting them up – it's a case of 'we need them, just because'. Therefore they don't approach social media use



with a fully thought-out plan," Joe explains.

"With The Color Run, a lot of work goes into our social planning, because we know what a powerful tool it is for us. So many people share their photos, especially on Instagram and Facebook, because the event is so visually appealing. Pretty much everybody at the event has a camera, to film what's happening and photograph each other taking part."

Indeed, the UK Facebook page already has just under 110,000 'likes', having been launched in April 2013, while the US page has achieved 3.8 million since 2011.

Social media is already recognised for its ability to 'make the world a smaller place', bringing people together from all corners of the globe, and The Color Run is a case in point. "These days families are often split across the world. One very good friend of mine who lives in Amsterdam did the run and put his content online, which prompted his sister and her husband and children who live in Australia to decide to take part in the event in Adelaide," Joe explains.

"I think that's one of the great things about The

Color Run – people can go to their local run and experience the same thing that their family member or friend experienced in another country."

Above all, the event seeks to send a message of happiness across the world, in an age where we are so often subjected to bad news. "We have a tremendously positive outlook on life, and if you visit our social channels for any of the events across the globe you will see that positive outlook manifested in the event photographs, which show so many people with a smile on their face," Joe affirms – with a smile. ■

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