

AN ANALYSIS OF REWARD SYSTEMS OF ELECTRONIC SERVICES

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ABSTRACT

A reward system is a diverse and popular program implemented by many firms in various circumstances to motivate customers' behavior for frequent and loyal patronage. With the evolving diversity of electronic platforms (e-platforms), more dynamic, cost-effective and interactive electronic rewards (e-rewards) are developed as a tool or strategy to retain customers and enhance frequent visits to the platform. For instance, Facebook uses virtual currency to gain user participations; Dropbox uses bonus storage to attract memberships and prolong service usage; Myspace uses virtual badges to encourage users to achieve specific goals in order to encourage frequent visits. The rewards on the e-platform can range from real items such as cash and discounts to virtual recognitions to enhance self-esteem. These strategies differ from those used by

enterprises dealing with face-to-face customers. As variant services on e-platforms have emerged, little research has been done to understand the novel concept and effects of reward systems on e-platforms. We propose a taxonomy of e-rewards based on forms of reward, degree of interaction, and targeted needs. Using content analysis we examine the world's most accessed 1,000 websites to define different types of e-reward systems: material, authority, achievement, personal gratification, and affiliation. It is hoped that the findings could provide a base for further study on various impacts of reward systems and provide a guide for managers in designing and implementing more effective reward systems on e-platforms.

Keywords: e-reward system, reward systems, motivation, interactivity, e-platform

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The implications of evolving e-platforms

Not until very recently has information and communication technology become sophisticated enough to allow more complex customized platforms that enable businesses to offer groundbreaking e-platforms to provide services on the Internet. Nowadays, the diversity of e-platforms based on the Web 2.0 concepts are still evolving. Various e-platforms are becoming more dynamic and cost-effective, making a huge difference in the way businesses interact with customers. e-platforms may be used to provide services such as processing transactions online, building and maintaining virtual

communities, promoting businesses, organizing and consolidating up-to-date knowledge, providing entertainment, and providing access to various digitized platforms and applications.

1.2 The objective of e-platforms

Even thorough these e-platforms serve different purposes, each of them exists in order to be sustainable and profitable and to increase customer patronage. The main challenges for the e-platform service providers are attracting visitors to the site and generating significant quantities of repeat visits (Williamson & Johnson, 1995) [1]. The repeat visit issue is partly a function of web site design (Salomon, 1995) [2] and depends on the extent of satisfaction of customer needs.

1.3 The introduction of traditional reward system

To date, most Americans are members of at least one customer rewards program (Kim T. & Gordon.K, 2005) [3]. Many enterprises encourage repeat purchasing and enhance customer loyalty by providing targets at which various rewards are provided (O'Malley, 1998) [4]: airlines, credit cards, retail stores, and hotel chains (Kivetz, 2005; Kivetz & Simonson, 2003; Kivetz, Urminsky, & Zheng, 2006) [5], [6], [7] developed various loyalty programs attempting to develop loyal customers who are perceived as more profitable to a firm. For instance, American Airlines's "AAdvantage Program", or so-called Frequent Flyer Program, is one of the largest and most popular reward programs worldwide since 1981. Members can earn miles for flying and for transactions with over 1,000 participating companies, and members can redeem accumulated miles for awards including flight upgrades, vacation packages, car rentals, hotel stays, and other retail products. Starbucks is a leading coffee retailer, and Starbucks Rewards is another typical frequent buyer program. With rewards, customers can earn free coffee, refills, or other products Starbucks offers.

1.4 The importance of e-reward system

There are many tactics such as customer notification, constant content updating, and search engine optimization (SEO) that can aid e-platforms in gaining customer access, but these methods are passive ways to attract customers. Various reward systems on e-platforms have been developed that apply various activities to attract frequent and repeat visits. For instance, Facebook uses virtual currency to gain user participation; Dropbox uses bonus storage to attract memberships

and prolong service usage; and Myspace uses virtual badges to encourage users to achieve specific goals in order to encourage frequent visits.

Due to the high speed, unlimited reach, and virtually interactive feature of e-platforms, their reward systems, which we will refer to as e-reward systems, can demonstrate great differences from the reward systems designed by brick-and-mortar-based services. Although the underlying purpose is the same—to create and retain customers—rewards on the e-platform can range from real items such as cash and discounts to virtual recognitions to enhance customers' self-esteem. As variant services on e-platforms continue to emerge, however, little research has been done to understand the novel concept and effects of various e-reward systems.

1.5 Research objective

The objective of this study is to understand different types of e-reward systems on e-platforms and try to classify them. The data used for the first stage is collected from the 1,000 most-visited sites on the Web and uses content analysis to discover what reward systems have been adopted by e-platforms. And we also analyzed e-rewards characteristics based on the e-rewards taxonomy: 1).forms of motivation, 2).degree of interaction. In the second stage, we plan to conduct focus group to examine the rationality of the e-rewards taxonomy.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Distinctive features of e-reward systems

Due to information technology and Internet evolution, the characteristics of e-rewards have significant differences from contemporary general reward systems environment. Both physical

rewards and virtual rewards can be offered by e-platforms. Digitized rewards can be delivered with no time and geographical limitation at very low or no cost. With the wide range of customers online at the same time, the design of rewards can involve multiple levels of interactions, including one-way communication with customers from the business (B2C), two-way communication between business and customers, customer to customer (C2C) and customer to customer to business (C2C2B). And the form of rewards can involve different combinations of online and offline formats. A comparison of general (non-digital) and e-reward systems is shown in Table 1.

organizations are concerned with how employees can best be motivated through such means as incentives and leadership to achieve sustained high levels of performance (ARMSTRONG, 2006) [8]. Wages or salaries are usually not enough to motivate employee to work hard, so many companies offer incentives as well (Angelo & Brian, 2006) [9]. In the marketing field, various rewards such as cash back and gifts are used to encourage repeat purchases. Game designers use exciting rewards to lead players to indulge in the virtual gaming world (Wang & Sun, 2011) [10]. Each of these efforts uses rewards to influence stakeholders' behavior by satisfying certain inner needs of stakeholders.

Table 1. Difference between general reward systems and e-reward systems

		General Reward System	e-Reward System
Environment		Physical stores, organization	e-platforms, Internet
Proposition		To acquire and retain customers	To encourage frequent and repeat visits
Reward	Forms	Entity-oriented	Entity and virtual-oriented
	Interaction	One-way communication	Multiple ways with different stakeholders
Deliver	Cost	Relatively high	Relatively low
	Speed	Relatively inconsistent	Relatively consistent

The concept of motivation can provide a valuable foundation to explain such behaviors as why users habitually rack up points, collect badges, compete with others, and complete various tasks on an e-platform. In general, motivation is a force which arises with enthusiasm from within the individual, activating the individual to persistently pursue a particular task or goal. (Daft & Marcic, 2008; McKenna, 2000) [11], [12]

From the psychologists' point of view, (De Charms, 1968) [13] suggested the dichotomy of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation that differentiates the loci of causality. Intrinsic motivation is defined as the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequence or instrumental value: doing an activity simply for the enjoyment of the activity itself, rather than the additional rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000) [14]. For instance, Stack Overflow provides badges as a reward to encourage knowledge contribution to the community; many active members volunteer to accomplish activities (which often are challenging to achieve and with relatively long-term goals) in order to get accomplishment or

2.2 Motivation

Rewards systems have been widely applied in many areas to motivate different kinds of behaviors. First,

satisfaction from the activity itself rather than the badges shown on the profile.

Extrinsic motivation can be defined as performance of an activity in order to attain some separate outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000) [14]. For instance, Amazon.com rewards purchase behavior with redeemable points that purchasers can redeem for their favorite merchandise. Customers are extrinsically motivated by these points; they may purchase more with this platform service in order to accumulate more points for further credit. Stack Overflow, on the other hand, rewards high contribution and trust ratings by empowering the contributor as a moderator in the community. The moderator assumes a privileged status in the community and restricts other members' undesirable behavior.

2.3 Degree of Interaction

The Internet has become a prime venue for social interaction. The World Wide Web enables users to get to know other people and to seek out affiliation, companionship, and support (Mynatt, E.D. et al., 1999; Farnham et al., 2002).[15], [16] The property of social interaction is where e-rewards most differ from traditional rewards. Some e-rewards can help satisfy the need for affiliation and belongingness. For example, the Facebook "like" and Twitter "follow" functions are designed to satisfy affiliation, as a sort of public praise given from the other group members. Twitter "follow" can allow a member to receive the posts of others in the online community. The Social Power Theory (French & Raven, 1959) [17] even considers that power and influence involve relations between at least two agents or even within a group with diverse degrees of interactions. Therefore, all the rewarding activities involve different degree of interactions among members in the virtual society.

2.4 The taxonomy of e-reward systems

In order to differentiate complex characteristics of e-rewards, we try to propose a taxonomy for e-reward systems. The taxonomy consists of a dual axis: forms of motivation and the degree of interaction. The form of motivation emphasizes the intrinsic and extrinsic type of motivation of e-rewards, and the degree of interaction emphasizes the interactivity level of an e-reward that may be oriented toward personal needs (low interactivity) or distributed among the virtual society (high interactivity). According to our clear definitions, there are mainly four patterns of e-rewards classifications with different motivation type and interactivity level.

3 METHODOLOGY

The objective of this study is to discover different types of e-reward systems on e-platforms. Based on this purpose, the study conducts three steps of research process: literature review, case content review, and expert discussion. The literature review is used to developing a e-reward taxonomy. Case content review has been done iteratively for exploring e-reward systems on various e-platform services. Expert discussion is applied in classifying e-reward systems based on the rewards taxonomy proposed in the literature review and used for classification validity.

3.1 Data Collection and Analysis

The major source of the study for content analysis is "Ad Planner Top 1000 Sites" as identified by Google(Google, 2011) [7]. From the 1,000 sites we selected 143 e-platform cases for content analysis by the following selection criteria: 1) have implemented reward systems, 2) accessible (some sites are not accessible due to unknown errors or specific service access requirements), 3) no redundant services (several sites have

same service but offered in different regions), 4) not official sites, 5) sites are in English. And each of the 143 e-platforms was iteratively reviewed from February 2 to March 20, 2012, and analyzing each e-rewards from various e-platforms focusing on two e-rewards characteristics: 1) forms of motivation 2) degree of interaction, the complete 143 e-platform lists are shown in Appendix I.

3.2 Expert discussion and classification

After the content reviews for each e-platform we discovered that there are total 215 e-reward cases from 143 e-platforms. At the initial expert discussion phase we invited three experts to review these 215 e-reward cases. One professor who devotes to study of e-business and innovation research with over twenty years experiences and with ten years work experiences relevant to e-business management, and two MIS Ph.D. candidates, one of the Ph.D. candidate with over fifteen years management experiences in e-commerce platform operation.

The three reviewers analyzed 215 e-rewards focusing on the form of motivation and degree of interaction, each e-rewards was classified into four types of reward taxonomy basically.

4 PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

4.1 Preliminary findings of e-reward system

According to the content review results and expert discussion, we discovered a list of mainstream but incomplete eighteen e-rewards methods that were summarized from 215 e-rewards(e-rewards may still be evolving and changing), and then we classify them into five types of e-rewards in further according to their

same characteristics toward dichotomy of motivation and interaction. These five different types of e-rewards obviously present corresponding motivation and interactivity patterns, and these types of e-reward were identified and labeled Material, Authority, Affiliation, Achievement, and Personal Gratification respectively. Material e-rewards inclined to extrinsic motivation and low interaction, Authority e-rewards inclined to extrinsic motivation but higher interaction, Affiliate e-rewards inclined to intrinsic motivation and with high interaction, Achievement e-rewards may both inclined to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and with high and low interaction either. The characteristics differences of e-rewards based on the taxonomy are illustrated in Figure 1. We will discuss these five categories of e-rewards in several representative cases.

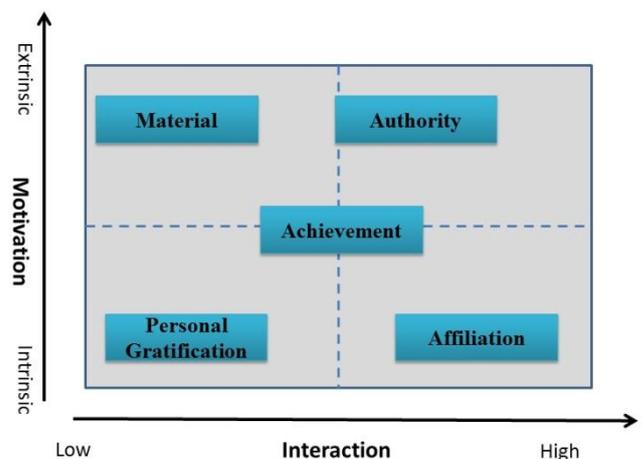


Figure 1. Five types of e-reward system

4.1.1 Material e-rewards

Material e-rewards are commonly used to fulfill customers' physiological needs. These rewards are mostly in the form of extrinsic motivation with little interaction among stakeholders. Customers are usually motivated by these rewards in order to acquire practical benefits rather than to enjoy the behavior itself. This type of e-reward is usually given as redeemable points, cash

back and discounts, affiliate program, services extension, or virtual currency.

- **Redeemable points**

Redeemable points are accumulated by performing eligible behavior. The most common such behavior is goods purchasing. These points usually equal to money that is exchangeable for prizes in a predefined usage scope. Point programs may have complicated rules to encourage repeated purchasing. For instance, the Bing search engine service adopted a point program that encourages members to search as usual to earn points and to redeem rewards for amazon.com merchandise or Xbox Live points.

- **Cash back and discount**

Cash back refers to cash rebates earned for online purchases, but they must be used for the next purchase or be accumulated to redeem merchandise. Online discounts are similar to cash back but more simple, offering a direct reward to customers. The rebate is often binding with merchandise. For instance, eBay is a popular online retailer that implemented a cash back program called eBay Bucks, a reward for members who shop on eBay: they get eBay Bucks equivalent to 2% of qualifying purchases; the credit will calculate automatically.

- **Affiliate program**

Affiliate program is kind of a member profit sharing program, member can be affiliate with company, and it encourages affiliate member to refer a paying customer or friends (potential customer) to become new members, affiliate member would get commissions for their success referral. For example, Document sharing service Wupload adopted “Pay-per-download program” for member to get earnings for each accumulated 1,000 file downloads. Online retailer STAPLES.com also adopted affiliate program to encourage

member to refer their website visitors through banner links to purchase.

- **Service extension agreement**

Service extension agreements are free service rewards for inviting other users to join or use a service frequently. For example, Dropbox is an online storage and synchronization service that enables members to access their digital files anywhere they have Internet capability. For every invited friend who joins and installs Dropbox, both the member and the friend will be rewarded with an additional 250 MB of storage. A similar service, Depositfile, offers its members an opportunity to get GOLD status for using the service regularly, enabling them to download files with no speed limitations.

- **Virtual currency**

Virtual currency is a monetized currency issued by specific platforms that can make payments in virtual environments such as online game play or purchase of virtual items. Although real money can be exchanged for virtual currency, there are also other ways to get free currency, such as by completing free offers and activities. For instance, Facebook members can earn credits by joining Facebook application (apps) games at the first time. Facebook also offers credits for downloading software, linking apps, and so forth. Party Poker encourages members to sign up to be new member and gives virtual credits to play games free for the first time; the site also offers abundant promotions for members to play Party Poker for free. These rewards come for activities such as playing more games or winning a game.

4.1.2 Affiliation e-rewards

Affiliation e-rewards are designed to facilitate relationship building between participants within the virtual community. This addresses human needs for love, affection, and acceptance in

belonging to a group. This type of reward design is mainly intrinsic in that customers and members are motivated by being liked, followed, invited, and consulted by other customers and members. This type of reward is usually given as public praise, subscription, group joining, or virtual gifts.

- **Public praise**

Public praise is a simple relatedness reward that can be received from and given to others. Members usually need to receive positive praise or to be liked in a group. For instance, YouTube, Flickr, and Facebook are virtual communities that enable users to generate contents on the site. Members share interesting contents continuously because they want to be praised or get affirmative words.

- **Follow and Subscription**

Although “follow” and “subscription” are convenient functions designed for members to easily focus on specific content types, they also can be affiliate rewards because of the status that accrues when a member is paid attention by the others. For instance, Twitter adopted the “follow” button, enabling members to follow favorite contents generated by the followee, while the followee’s profile shows how many followers he or she has.

- **Group joining**

Almost online communities have various groups for members to participate in. Group invitations can be seen as affiliate reward that satisfy a member’s need to belong to a group. To join some groups, members must have qualifications or achieve specific behaviors. For example, deviantART is an art-related social community that offers group creation. Group administrators can set qualifications for members to join the group.

- **Virtual gift**

Virtual gift rewards are mainly designed to increase positive relationships with the member. Members can receive and send special virtual gifts to their friends, most of which are non-monetary. These gifts can facilitate interaction and satisfy the altruism need. For example, entertainment services such as Zynga and Stardoll and social networking site Cyworld offer virtual gifts for those who want to show positive thoughts toward their friends or members.

4.1.3 Achievement e-rewards

Achievement rewards usually consist of virtual badges or trophies. Such extrinsic rewards are bound to challenging activities and reward those who desire to demonstrate competence or winning, thus fulfilling their achievement needs (intrinsic reward). These activities often require competition between members, with a certain degree of interaction. The rewards consist of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Four achievement reward schemes may be noted:

- **Badges**

Both in the real and virtual world, badges, medals, and trophies can be used to reward people’s excellent work. They are visible recognition of completed challenges and activities. For instance, the Myspace and Orkut social networking sites reward members with different badges for participation in activities such as trying out various features and achieving excellent work.

- **Rank and leaderboard**

Leaderboard and rank are explicit rewards to show off members’ excellent work and competence to drive valuable behavior. It encourages members to “compete”. For example, Answer.com adopts a leaderboard to gain members’ participation. Members compete by answering and editing questions. These efforts are reflected by scores and result

in a ranking. If a member stands in a high ranking, it can satisfy their need for accomplishment.

- **Point and level**

Level is a common way to confirm members' achievement of behaviors or to encourage behavior by giving various amounts of points. Level is also an indication that users have reached a milestone, since levels are often defined at certain point thresholds. Users can automatically level up, based on their participation. For instance, entertainment services such as Miniclip and Zynga adopt level systems in numerous Web games. Some players vigorously pursue these games to earn abundant experience in order to gain high levels and satisfy their achievement needs.

- **Vote and rating**

Vote and rating are assessment functions of user-generated contents, rating is a score that present how interesting or quality the content is, some member intend to post useful contents intrinsically, but they are inclined to get high ratings from their audiences too, therefore, rating is also a direct way or reward to confirm contributors achievements given from other members in the community.

4.1.4 Authority e-rewards

Authority e-rewards are basically designed to empower qualified members with physical control power or privilege functions. Members must follow the rules to achieve something in order to gain authority. This type of reward design is mainly extrinsic in that customers and members are motivated in order to gain power and high interaction in the community. There are two types of authority function that represent the

typical case of authority e-rewards: privilege unlocking and moderator.

- **Privilege unlocking**

Privilege unlocking rewards are designed to extend members' basic functions in the community, such as the ability to create chat rooms or groups, to collaborate in editing, to comment everywhere, or to open votes. These rewards mainly do not afford direct control over other members, but these privileges still have strong influence in the community. For instance, programming peer community Stack Overflow uses reputation points to enhance a member's social influence and privilege. The more reputation points you earn, the more privileges you gain, such as the ability to vote up and down, to create chat rooms, and so on.

- **Moderator/Inspector**

Moderator/Inspector is an acknowledged superior reward that is responsible for sustaining the work of community. As opposed to a privilege unlock reward, moderator/inspector is an additional title or rank that grants the power to guide or restrict other members' behavior, such as granting other members privileges and deleting illegal contents published by other members. For instance, Wikipedia grants authority with titles such as Inspector, a position with the power to delete others' edits and records.

4.1.5 Personal gratification e-rewards

Personal gratification e-reward systems are mainly designed to fulfill members' emotional needs. Human beings have the need to exhibit preferences reflecting their emotions in interacting with the virtual community. These emotions involve self-awareness with a low degree of interaction, and thus are intrinsic forms of reward. There are a few types of emotional rewards that represent the typical case of

personal gratification e-rewards: virtual avatars, completionism, and “try luck.”

- **Virtual Avatar**

An avatar is a virtual figure that a member creates to represent him- or herself online, reflecting the emotion of the member. Members can give their avatars a unique appearance by changing their attributes or accessories. For example, Stardoll is a social entertainment service that gives members the opportunity to create their own avatars and thus fulfill their self-expression need; Cyworld mini-apartments also offer virtual avatars and gadgets to let members express their emotion and unique style within the community.

- **Completionism**

Completionism is a concept and strategy that uses a series of collectable gadgets to satisfy members' collecting needs. Such members wish to form complete collections of virtual items. Thus, members are often encouraged to revisit or participate repeatedly in order to collect exclusive awards; these awards usually have no value other than their collection value for the member. For instance, Miniclips and Zynga offer many webgames, most of which offer collectable virtual items. Some members try to play more frequently in order to collect these virtual items.

- **“Try Luck”**

“Try Luck” is a experience and random reward schedule aimed at helping members have fun and feel surprise rather than focusing on the prize itself. For example, members could have the chance to experience luck through a drawing, bingo, a lottery, or other game-playing activities. For instance, Zynga's Web game FarmVille uses a random reward scheme to encourage players to return and play more, such as continuing to reap vegetables in order to have the chance to win mysterious

prizes. Players are inclined to return because they enjoy surprises and feel joy at experiencing luck.

4.2 Conclusion

This research uses content review to discover e-rewards from “Ad Planner Top 1000 Sites” and analyzes their characteristics through three experts discussions: 1). Forms of motivation 2). Degree of interaction . According to the result shown in the preliminary findings, we discovered total 253 e-rewards on 143 e-platforms and summarized them to eighteen e-reward systems methods, these eighteen e-rewards were classified into five e-rewards categories according to their motivation and interaction types: Material, Authority, Affiliation, Personal gratification and Achievement. These five different e-rewards obviously present corresponding characteristics patterns. Material e- rewards are mostly in the form of extrinsic motivation with little interaction among stakeholders; Affiliation e- rewards are mainly intrinsic motivation with high interaction; Achievement e-rewards both could be intrinsic or extrinsic with different degree of interaction ; Authority e-rewards incline to be extrinsic and high interaction ; Personal gratification e-rewards are mainly intrinsic motivation with low interaction. It is hoped that the finding can serve as a basis for further study on e-rewards systems of e-platforms, and facilitate the understanding of e-rewards toward virtual environment for website manager, marketer and web designer.

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Appendix I 143 e-platforms list selected from Google Ad planner

Facebook	FRIV	PartyCasino	travelocity	xdating
Youtube	livingsocail	Girsgogames.com	skyrock	ancestry
wikipedia	hi	squidoo	wikiHow	Gamesgames.com
bing	wikia	nick	Star doll	walgreens
twitter	Hotels	deviantart	Etsy	1channel
amazon.com	Nexttag	webs	AA.com	Break
ebay.com	livejournal.com	constantcontact	Hubpages	issuu
linkedin.com	slideshare	Dropbox	KAYAK	Gamezer
paypal	bestbuy.com	DELTA	shoplocal	BED BATH & Beyond
orkut.com	vimeo	videobash	FixYa	Shockwave
flickr.com	Cyworld	armorgames	ezinearticles	ziddu
myspace	allrecipes.com	ORBITZ	BIG FISH	snapdeal
booking	SOUTHWEST.COM	RYANAIR	SpeedDate	newgrounds
Answers.com	The Home Depot	Overstock	STAPLES	qvc.com
scribd	TAGGED	Barnes&Noble	docstoc	stackoverflow
tumblr	twitpic	Costco.com	LEGO	cheapair
vk (eu)	Zoosk	KOHL'S	Zappos	soundcloud.com
walmart	priceline	firstload	Wupload	veoh
target	local.com	Ning	travelzoo	Mashable
miniclip	ShopAtHome.com	Citysearch	NORDSTROM	Grooveshark
Tripadvisor	hotfile	Hilton	Argos	next.co.uk
Partypoker	Lowe's	Marriott	multiply	SamsClub.com
Groupon	AGAME.com	888.com	toysrus	united.com
metacafe	jcpenney.com	imvu	formspring	iwon
Verizonwireless	depositfiles	Hotwire	goalunited	food
Expedia	TypePad	sonico	Victoria's secret	jetblue
Netlog	AddictingGames	ticketmaster	livestrong	king.com
American Express	POGO	T Mobile	TESCO	
zynga	wikimapia.org	gap	esayJet	