Gamification for social good

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What if you could plant a tree just by paying a bill online? More than 280 million Chinese consumers are doing just that, alongside other similarly environmentally friendly acts. The Ant Forest app, launched as a pilot initiative in 2016 by Alipay, China’s leading mobile payment platform, gamifies going green. It rewards users who engage in activities with a low carbon footprint, such as using public transportation or walking to work. Through an animated, interactive mobile game, participants can collect “energy points” and compete with friends to grow a virtual tree. Gathering enough points means Alipay’s parent company Ant Financial will plant a real tree in Inner Mongolia or Gansu province.

Social-impact banking is a rising trend among fintech startups and banks, and responds to a growing appetite among millennials for companies that give back to their community or to the environment. In China, young people increasingly care about charity and sustainability, but the lack of development, regulation, and trust has dampened enthusiasm. This is prompting influential tech platforms such Alipay and WeChat to find innovative ways to step up and support such initiatives.

Alipay takes the challenge very seriously. In light of transparency issues swirling around the philanthropy industry in China, not only does the company use blockchain to power its donation platform, it has also gone so far as to install a live camera feed in its newly planted forests, so that Ant Forest participants, of whom more than half are millennials, can see exactly what their efforts have amounted to. By the end of 2017, Alipay had planted 13.1 million trees as a result of activity on the app, and claimed to have reduced carbon emission by 2.05 million tons.

“Other companies may be doing gamification to increase numbers, but we were responding to the question, ‘what adds value for our users?’” a spokesperson for Ant Financial tells the Intelligence Group. “We do believe that, if our users can be effectively encouraged to lead a low-carbon lifestyle, it will benefit our environment, and in the end, benefit everyone involved.”
Ant Forest is not the only Alipay app that uses gamification for social good. Ant Farm lets users make micro-donations from their mobile payments to selected charities, within a framework that resembles a FarmVille-style game. Users compete with others in their social network as they raise a virtual chicken, gaining feed through making payments and eventually using the eggs their chicken lays to donate to organizations supporting children with congenital heart disease. Players have to keep checking the app to manage feeding times, lest their chicken run away to find food in other users’ digital farms.

Users who prefer to be more active can turn their own steps into a donation in another app, and can compare their fitness progress with those in their network.
Ant Farm
Gamification is growing in popularity as a marketing tool among brands in a variety of industries in China. Ogilvy & Mather China hailed its relevance in a 2015 report, noting that, as gaming has such a strong influence on youth culture, a major segment of consumers would respond to incentives and engagement offered through games. Following the successful reception of Alipay’s latest social good apps, gamification is being hailed as a strong contender for propelling the future of sustainability through digital means.

“Two hundred million people—that’s 3% of the world’s population—are greening their lives because they are getting immediate information about the environmental impact of their choices in a fun and competitive way,” Erik Solheim, head of UN Environment, said in a report responding to Ant Forest. “This shows that digital finance holds a huge untapped power to mobilize people in support of sustainable development and the fight against climate change. And this power is literally at our fingertips through our mobile devices.”

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