CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FUNDAMENTALS OF EFFECTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

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Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have encouraged the formation of virtual communities which have signaled dramatic shifts in how audiences engage and interact online (Culnan, McHugh, & Zubillaga, 2010; Drury, 2008,). For example, before the advent of social media platforms audiences used the internet to search for, read, and buy products. This era was called Web 1.0, the era in which the internet was used for information retrieval (Constantinides & Fountain, 2008). Now in the era of Web 2.0, where internet users are both authors and retrievers, social media is used to share, create, and discuss content and services (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011). There is, of course, more to social media than Facebook and Twitter. Picture-sharing websites like Flickr and Instagram that allow users to store and share images and popular sites like YouTube are considered social media as well.

Building a social media presence is critical for building a professional brand. However, engaging audiences effectively on social media can be difficult. Jayson DeMers, writing for Forbes, emphasized that building an effective social media presence requires time and effort and "…you need to carefully craft your messaging and time your posts adeptly, and on top of that, you need to be active consistently, engaging with your audience…." (May 4, 2018).

Structuring engaging posts

While there are various ways to create compelling social media messages, Kietzman et al. (2011) suggest using seven functional building blocks: identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation,

and groups. Understanding the significance of each of these blocks will help us discern the nuances of effective communication on social media. In short, compelling social media messages must have strong identities, encourage conversations, inspire sharing, create a presence, strengthen relationships, reputations and spur the formation of dedicated audiences or groups. Let's begin with the first block, identity.

Identity

Understanding the nature of the social media platforms is crucial before crafting and strengthening the identity of the message (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). As mentioned before, social media platforms like Twitter, Reddit and Facebook offer real time updates (Madway, 2010). Messages that identify with the nature of the medium they are posted on are often the most effective at having an identity that will also resonate with the users of the medium. For example, Twitter, which offers real time updates in 140 characters, can be well used for offering up short teasers. The entertainment industry has discovered this and today many movie trailers are first discussed on Twitter before being posted elsewhere.

Giving social media posts an identity involves giving audiences a sense of who the creator is and what is being offered. Developing a unique voice is necessary here. The case of Justin Halpern, a journalist, who went to live with his 78-year-old father when he broke up with his girlfriend is a case in point. He would tweet the many sarcastic aphorisms his father said daily and soon he developed a cult following as well as writing a best seller. Another exemplar would be the "Its okay to be smart" blog created by Joe Hanson, a Ph.D. biologist and science writer based in Austin, TX. Hanson is the creator/host/writer of PBS Digital Studios' It's Okay To Be Smart. This is dedicated to scientific discoveries written for non-scientists to understand and appreciate. It tackles many topics and every week talks about the science behind everyday things like the origin of being and pooping. Hanson uses a combination of social media like blogging, Twitter and Facebook to reach different audiences. Yet the voice and content remain uniquely his own.

Conversations

Once an identity has been created around social media messages, it is critical to get conversations around it going. Conversations indicate that audiences are engaging with a message. It also implies that it is reaching the

target audience. Audiences will discuss a message if it's compelling enough to draw them in and has something they are looking for. For example, Hanson on his blog talks science. Science is not everyone's cup of tea, but Hanson ensures that his tone and the way he chooses to break his topics down prove compelling for a wide range of audiences. For instance, in his episode on pooping, he brings in the history of toilets, various cultural aspects related to their use and how people in different countries use bathrooms. It is all at once a historical, cultural and travel perspective on something as everyday as pooping. His blog and videos appeal to adults and children who then share and talk about it online ensuring a steady stream of viewers. Thus, messages that must be able to create a conversation around them. A good way to encourage this is to ask a question, Hanson always asks for people to share their experiences. Give viewers a chance and a simple to interact with the message. A simple "Share your experiences below" is often effective at encouraging audiences to start.

Sharing

Posts with photographs in the form of infographics, action shots and personal photographs get shared the most. Vivid and interactive brand post characteristics enhance the number of likes (De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang, 2012; Siricharoen, 2013). In short content has to be shareable, be about matters people want to tell their friends about. Steve Rayson (2017) on BuzzSumo says that the most shared Facebook posts in 2017 were almost exclusively videos. Only three of the top 20 posts were not videos.

Information-seeking is a crucial reason for people to use social networking sites (Lin, & Lu, 2011). So, posts with useful information presented vividly through the use of photographs and infographics can encourage sharing. For example, during disasters, on Facebook and Twitter the posts with the highest numbers of shares are those with emergency contacts information. Research shows that people tend to have positive attitudes toward informative ads on social networks (Taylor, Lewin, & Strutton 2011), but ads and posts that are entertaining as well as informative led more people to consume, create or contribute to content online (Muntinga, Moorman & Smit, 2011).

Presence

Creating a presence for your social media is linked to the concept of identity we discussed earlier on. To build an active social media presence it

is essential to consider the audience you want your message to reach. Ask yourself

- Who do you want to know and share your content with?
- Who do you think should read and share your message?
- When are these audience members likely to be online?

Defining the audience is imperative. It is vital to consider not just content but the voice and personality to be projected.

One of the most common mistakes users make when trying to build an online presence is posting late at night. Because of the way social media algorithms work, posts are not likely to be circulated to home screens if they do not have audience reactions within the first few minutes of posting. If there are no audience members awake or free to interact with these posts, the posts are wasted and never seen. Posting while the target audience is awake and likely to be on break at work is critical for the circulation of posts (Takei, 2013). This means that aiming for midmorning, lunch breaks, and between 5:00pm and 10:00pm is most ideal.

Using tropes that the audiences can identify with is also critical. Given the proliferation of many different kinds of social media, boundaries between the social, personal, and professional is very blurred. For example, one Tweet can get a person fired while another rightly timed Tweet can get result in a job offer. So, spreading content across different social media platforms can be useful to grab as many eyeballs as possible. The revival of the Procter & Gamble's Old Spice brand is an example. The brand was at one time, at a decline, when an ad featuring NFL star Isaiah Mustafa as the 'Old Spice Guy' was made. Real success came from its posting on YouTube with millions of downloads, very successful humorous tweets on Twitter, and the creation of a hugely popular fan page on Facebook. Sales of Old Spice increased by 55% between April and June 2010 (Pitt, Mills, Kong, Novianty, Ghavami, & Kim, 2011).

Relationships

Building relationships with the audience is an essential aspect of social media posts. As Hanson's blog shows, striving for individuality and providing original content proves engaging and brings in audiences. Consistency is another essential aspect. Social media encourages instant shares and thus being consistent in posts and content helps create regular

visitors. Cultivating relationships with audiences is paramount. Followers are necessary but engaged followers who are willing to comment, and share are paramount. Research shows that consumers' online discussions about positive product or brand experiences can generate empathy and positive feelings among readers (Bickart & Schindler, 2001).

Content that mention people's social media handles or names, answers questions, raise questions as well and responds to issues that people raise is exigent to build relationships with followers. Content must provoke the urge to comment or respond from viewers, but response is a two-way traffic. To keep audiences engaged, bloggers and other social media content creators must ensure that they are responsive to comments, questions and tweets as well. Planning content with different interactive elements is significant. Leveraging content like Hanson does through different platforms also helps maintain relationships. For example, a blogpost on how a video was created and a tweet to announce its launch as well as discussions started in Facebook groups are ways to leverage content. All efforts need not be concentrated on one platform. Social media management systems like Hootsuite allow one person to oversee multiple platforms simultaneously from one screen to make such efforts manageable.

Reputation

The most prevalent motives for companies to use social media are enhancing trustworthiness, brand attitude, and customer commitment (Weinberg, & Pehlivan, 2011; Van Noort, & Willemsen, 2012). Studies have shown that that in addition to exposure; revenue sharing and reputation are two major incentives for content contribution online.

Social media offers an effective way to build personal as well as corporate reputation. Before creating the message, it is critical to choose a reputable social media platform. Writing for Forbes, Susan Gunelius (2010) says that an authentic voice that does not read like "a corporate brochure," that is consistent and focused, producing content that shows awareness and is responsive builds reputations online (Tang, Gu, & Whinston, 2012). For example, among the shared tweets of 2017 was Malala Yousafzai's tweet marking the beginning of her time at Oxford, five years after her attack in Pakistan. She tweeted: *5 years ago, I was shot in an attempt to stop me from speaking out for girls' education. Today, I attend my first lectures at Oxford.* Another was the Tweet from JK Rowling on the 20th anniversary of the publishing of the first Harry Potter novel. She tweeted: *20 years ago, today*

a world that I had lived in alone was suddenly open to others. It's been wonderful. Thank you.#HarryPotter20

Build groups or communities

Effective social media messages build groups and communities where the conversation can be carried on in greater depth and detail. Posts that encourage audiences to post or specifically ask viewers to retweet or repost to show agreement are essential. Creating brand communities in the form of brand fan pages on social networking sites where customers can interact with a company by liking or commenting on brand posts (McAlexander, Schouten, & Koenig, 2002; Muniz, & O'guinn, 2001) works as well. Brand fans can share their enthusiasm about the brand on these dedicated pages and be united by their common interest in the brand (Kozinets, 1999). Messages that foster discussions are the most effective in building up groups or communities of loyal audiences that will enhance the reputation of the content creator. For example, publishers such as NPR, The Washington Post, the Boston Globe and ProPublica have devoted energy to building targeted Facebook groups in the last few months. Messages with specific themes as well as unique but diverse range of topics that encourage audiences to get involved with an active manager to moderate and manage the discussion helps build communities and reputation. In 2018, singer Shakira had the eight-most popular site on Facebook, having accumulated more than 103 million fans on the social network. She uses a lot of visuals, information about her concerts as well posts on her daily activities to keep fans hooked.

Tips

1. Make posts when your audience will be online such as during work breaks or in the evenings before bed.
2. Tweet consistently. Blog constantly. Whatever platforms are used need constant updates. Audiences will be turned away if they do not find fresh content.
3. Remember as with most things' media related, content is king. Tweets and posts must be relevant to the audience.
4. Try and engage the audiences. Actively solicit their views, encourage them to share them.
5. On social media, giving is as important as self-promotion. Promote other people's work. Encourage followers to share and retweet. This helps connect people and as connections grow, your audiences will too.

6. Keep it simple. On social media, remember the number of characters matter.
7. Trending topics are what people are talking about. Tap into them. Use them to ensure that you stay recent and relevant.

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