

Introduction

If you ever need to demonstrate how powerful online marketing is to someone who isn't technically minded, you can prove it in a single word: hashtag. Even for people who don't use Twitter or Instagram, hashtags have become unavoidable parts of modern culture. They're standard branding tools in everything from fast food commercials to music videos, condensing a marketable idea or emotion into a simple, shareable concept.

A hashtag is simply a means to organize and advertise an idea. The more appealing the idea, the more likely the hashtag is to be shared. With a little insight into how hashtags work, you can greatly increase the odds that your social media campaigns on hashtag-friendly platforms will actually see real-world results in conversions.

Credit: <http://blog.sumall.com/journal/author/peterborden>

Rules 1-7

1. Informative hashtags are always better than abstract ones.

There's a reason the #IceBucketChallenge created a trending spike for the ALS Association, and #WTFF (what the french fry) failed for Burger King. People won't respond to hashtags they don't understand.

2. Proofread with the mentality of a 12-year-old. It's all too easy for a seemingly innocent hashtag to become a puerile gag thanks to lack of context or poorly combined words. The classic example of this is the 2012 hashtag campaign to launch a new Susan Boyle album using #susanalumparty. If it can be misread, it will be.

3. Have a backup plan if a hashtag goes bad. No one owns a hashtag, and it's all too easy for them to spin out of control as marketing messages. It's always good to test a hashtag before heavily marketing it, and equally important to have an alternative campaign to use should your initial idea become co-opted. When #ObamacareIsWorking became overrun with ironic commentary, for instance, the team behind it let the go and switched to #ILikeObamacare.

4. Incorporate hashtags into other channels. There's a reason that hashtags are popping up in everything from billboards ads to song titles: It works. By incorporating your hashtags into your traditional media and online campaigns, you'll be able to brand the hashtag's core idea more clearly with your customers.

5. Don't be afraid to contribute to a genuine trend. Hashtags often arise organically, generated without any real agenda and gaining traction simply because of relevance or novelty. Fun one-time trending tags like #MySuperpower, #MomTexts and #IUsedToThink can sometimes provide an opportunity for a marketing message and a laugh, while contributing messages of support to trending disaster-related hashtags can help followers see your company in a new light.

Rules 1-7 (cont)

6. Live tweet during big events. One of the most effective ways of using hashtags is to live tweet from your brand or company Twitter account during a shared cultural experience, using the event hashtags. DiGiorno Pizza captured plenty of attention in 2013 when it began live tweeting pizza-themed musical theater commentary during the #TheSoundOfMusicLive event. Elections, sports championships and other major media events are ideal for this technique.

7. Keep it short. The longer the hashtag, the more hassle it is to use and follow. While there are exceptions, the most effective hashtags are composed of one or two very simple elements, such as the event name and the year. Only on rare occasions will a trending hashtag involve more than three or four short, simple words.

Rules 8-16

8. Don't overdo them. You always want your audience to know specifically what ideas you're trying to share with them. The more hashtags you add into your content, the more diluted and confusing your message becomes. As a rule of thumb, limit yourself to three hashtags per tweet. "Excited about #SummerVacation" is a clear, simple message, while "#Excited about #summer #vacation #2015! #summer2015" is not.

****9. Remember why hashtags exist.**** It's very easy to let the logistics of hashtag marketing strategy become a distraction. Hashtags exist as a means of allowing otherwise unconnected comments to share a common element, allowing people who don't know each other to talk about the same thing together. The hashtag itself isn't the message, it's a tool that allows other people to share the message. If you are attempting to co-opt the trend without contributing to the conversation, people will notice. **10. Monitor the conversation.** Following hashtags is an extremely effective means of keeping track of trends in your industry. By keeping track of the conversation, you can gain insight into what your competition is doing, what the influencers are saying, and how customers are reacting. This can inform your hashtag use, and help to shape your social media strategy.

11. Use hashtags in sentences. Twitter only allows 140 characters per tweet, and each one has to count. "Having a great time at CES! #CES2015" may be grammatically correct, but it's no more effective than "Having a blast at #CES2015!" If you can use a hashtag in place of a word without the sentence becoming confusing, do it.

12. Capitalize multi-word hashtags for clarity. The longer the hashtag, the more likely the message is to be misread. A great example of this going awry was the 2013 reaction to Margaret Thatcher's death, hashtagged #nowthatchersdead. Some people read this as #NowThatChersDead, prompting rumors that music icon Cher had passed away.

Rules 8-16 (cont)

13. Consistency is key. Like all marketing efforts, hashtags often take weeks or months before they finally begin to gain traction. By consistently using the same hashtags to promote your message, and by favoriting, retweeting and otherwise encouraging your followers when they use those tags, you'll be able to build momentum.

14. No one owns a hashtag. By definition, hashtags can be created and used by anyone. This means that even the most sincere hashtag is open to being manipulated by anyone at any time. If your hashtag does catch on, you can expect sarcasm, trolling and even co-opting by your competition. To reduce this, consider using hashtags that are less likely to be used out of context, such as acronyms.

15. Only use hashtags to ask a question if the answers are very specific. Social media marketing campaigns with open-ended questions have a tendency to crash and burn, and the more focused your hashtag efforts the better. A good example of this is the campaign that launched the Kevin Smith walrus-themed horror movie Tusk, which simply asked #WalrusYes or #WalrusNo.

16. Avoid banned hashtags. Although Twitter's hashtag system remains open, some hashtag-enabled social media sites ban words with potentially offensive content. A poorly proofed hashtag can easily trip these filters, resulting in content that doesn't reach the audience. Some sites, like Instagram, also filter out popular or generic hashtags like #iphone and #popular, making it vital that you test to see if your content is actually making it through the system.



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