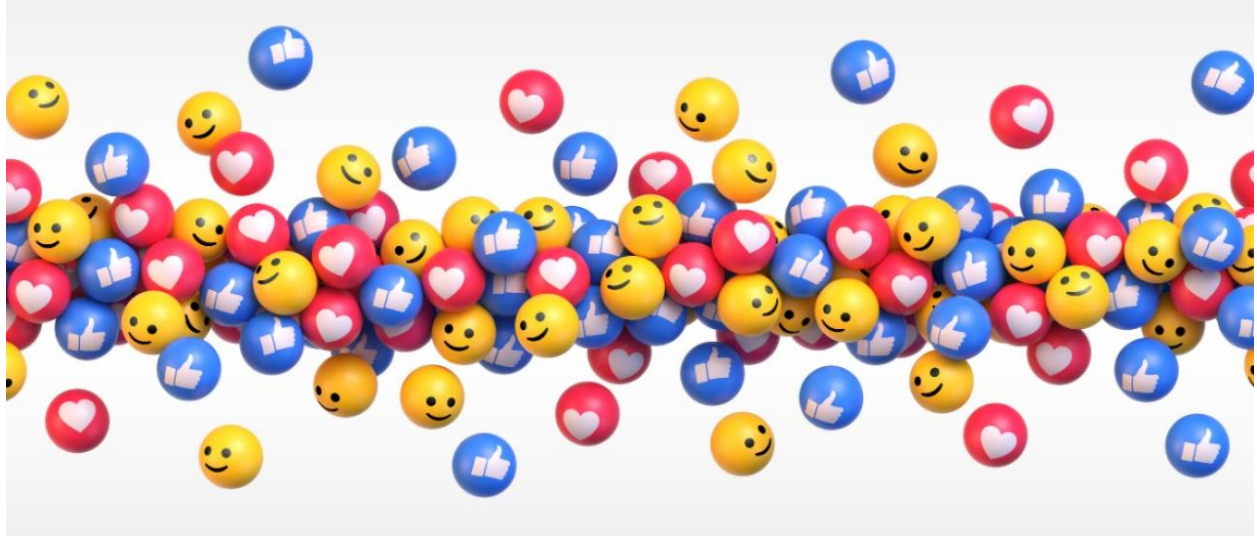

How to Shoot for the Holy Grail of Social Media Marketing



By [Abhishek Borah](#) , INSEAD

Quality, consistent and simple messaging is what will bring in sales. The rest is just noise.

What makes for successful social media marketing? Is it messaging that creates excitement or leans towards the informative? Stunning visuals and/or stirring music? Celebrity influencers and their stamp of approval? And how does it all affect sales anyway?

Identifying the elements of effective social media messaging is critical, considering that 3.6 billion people use social media, and social media ad spend is on track to surpass US\$200 billion by 2024. In a groundbreaking [study](#), my co-authors* and I investigate the impact of different types of firm-generated content (FGC) on the product sales of a large consumer electronics multinational over two years. We found that hedonic messaging, which seeks to evoke fun, playfulness, enjoyment and excitement, increased sales more than utilitarian ones, which emphasise products' functionality. Importantly, this effect came through only when the message was simple and of sufficient quality and consistency.

Our study, the first to study hedonic and utilitarian FGC approaches in the context of a large firm, underscores the importance of coherent and integrated marketing communication based on the principles of quality, consistency and simplicity.

The study

The subject of our study is a major global consumer electronics and manufacturing firm, which agreed to be involved on condition of anonymity. It provided us with its daily sales revenue, measured in US dollars, for each product in our analysis of its 2016–2017 marketing and sales programme database. During the two-year period, the firm engaged with customers on its Facebook page and Twitter account.

We retrieved all firm-generated content on both social media platforms as well as consumer comments, posts, shares, and “likes”. Then, we manually analysed if the posts were hedonic or utilitarian as well as their quality, consistency and complexity. We also analysed consumers’ reactions to the FGC. Below are our criteria for each metric:

Hedonic or utilitarian

Utilitarian messages emphasised the product’s practical benefits, such as completing specific tasks efficiently and effectively and informing users how to resolve specific problems with the product. Hedonic ones highlighted the product as bringing fun, enjoyment and excitement. They were experiential and multisensory as well as imaginative and aspirational.

Message quality

Message quality is measured by the average score of three independent experts’ rating of each message, from 0 to 10, in terms of uniqueness, novelty and believability.

Message goal consistency

Message goal consistency is measured by the average rating of three evaluators who independently assessed each message on whether it was compatible, consistent and congruous with the firm’s brand image of “cutting-edge, future-oriented, tech-savvy innovation, world-class and experiential”.

Message complexity

Message complexity was measured by readability of the marketing content. For each product, we used the mean readability score (calculated with the Dale–Chall formula) of the firm’s Facebook and Twitter posts to gauge the messages’ complexity.

Keep it simple, keep it consistent

Our analysis shows that hedonic messaging boosted product performance – measured in terms of daily sales revenue – more than utilitarian messaging. But what’s even more noteworthy is that message quality and message goal consistency played a decisive role in determining the marketing outcome.

Whether the messaging was hedonic or utilitarian, the posts had to reach a certain level of quality and consistency before they began to have a positive impact on sales. The minimum quality score for hedonic messaging was 4 (out of 10) and 6 for utilitarian ones. For both types of messaging, the minimum consistency score was 0.

Further, message quality affected the impact of hedonic messaging more than that of utilitarian ones.

Put simply, high-quality messaging boosted the firm’s sales more when the messaging was hedonic rather than utilitarian, while poor-quality messaging *damaged* sales more when the messaging was hedonic. Message consistency had similar moderating effect on the two types of marketing appeals.

How to make great content

While there’s a growing body of research on FGC, our study is the first empirical test of the effectiveness of quality, consistent and simple online marketing communication on product sales.

So how might firms achieve the holy grail of unique, consistent and easy-to-comprehend messaging? They could start by asking the following questions:

1. Is the content compelling?

FGC should provide value by helping users solve their problems, answer their questions and concerns, pique and expand their interests, or build trust in

the product. The most successful FGC on social media also engages with users, including responding to customer comments.

2. Does the content flow well aesthetically and logically?

Users won't click on content that is not entertaining, intriguing or informative, so use different types of media including photos, videos, music and infographics. But be careful not to neglect the basics – spelling and grammatical mistakes can damage credibility, no matter how good the messaging is otherwise.

3. Is the content aligned with the firm's overall branding?

Consistent messaging is aligned with what the brand stands for, its value proposition and purpose. It also adheres to the brand DNA in terms of style and tone. Consistent FGC makes the brand more recognisable and credible to consumers.

Of course, all that hinge on whether firms have clear brand positioning and a set of branding guidelines for all employees as well as external partners. This will help ensure that the look, tone, terminology and framing of FGC across all products, themes, markets and platforms are consistent.

Take it from Apple. The **“world's most valuable brand”** has few rivals in crafting meticulously curated messages that reinforce its central identity of creating sleek and elegant products that push the boundaries of innovation. Another role model is Walmart, which never fails to emphasise in its FGC its low prices and value creation for customers.

Conversely, FGC that diverges from the brand positioning sends mixed signals to consumers. Many automobile brands fall into this trap: While the brand's own content usually conveys a slick, professional image, the local dealer's messaging is often unprofessional and poorly executed.

4. Is the content concise and well-articulated?

Strong, memorable FGC is characterised by crisp, persuasive and clear writing. It evokes positive emotions and helps customers visualise how they might benefit from using the firm's product or service. For this reason, it is a good idea to test content for readability before posting it on social media.

Remember, the more complex the content is, the more likely it will be ignored.

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<https://knowledge.insead.edu/marketing/how-shoot-holy-grail-social-media-marketing>

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About the research

["Creative Appeals in Firm-Generated Content and Product Performance"](#) is published in *Information Systems Research*.