
What Drives Consumers to Share Online Content



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How to craft social media posts that drive both clicks and profits.

How to engage customers effectively in the digital world remains a mystery for many businesses today. And it won't get easier anytime soon, because a growing number of consumers are frustrated by, and suspicious of, digital communications such as online advertisements. To help overcome this consumer fatigue, my co-authors* and I [launched a research study](#) to explore the potential for social media communication that customers do not get tired of and – on the contrary – love to share with others. In short, we encourage businesses to trade upon a provocative and novel marketing tool, namely improvised marketing interventions (hereafter, IMI).

What's an IMI?

An “IMI” (a term we coined for the paper) is a marketing communication launched on the back of a high-profile event as it is happening. The real-time, endlessly scrolling nature of social media newsfeeds makes them the ideal medium for IMI, but email messages, web browser notifications, etc. could be vehicles for IMI too.

A textbook example of an IMI is [Oreo's famous tweeted graphic](#) from the 2013 Super Bowl, inspired by a power outage that stopped the game cold for half an hour: "Power out? No problem. You can still dunk in the dark." In addition to unexpectedly commenting on events as they unfolded, Oreo's ad used humour to promote affection for the product – a combination that led not only to its going viral but also to a healthy financial reward, our research suggests.

The impact of IMI

We began by digging deeper into the Oreo tweet and its effect on the brand's virality (as measured by retweets) before and after the "dunk in the dark" marketing coup. Comparing the hour before the tweet to the hour after, we noted a more than six-fold increase in Oreo retweets per second, from 7.5 to 48. These were not the raw numbers (which recorded a much higher tweet count per second of 115 post-"dunk in the dark"), but the figures as they stood after we accounted for the unusually high volume of Twitter activity during the 30-minute blackout period.

Further experiments confirmed that humour and timeliness were key drivers of virality. For our second study, we showed 800 participants fake tweets and asked them to rate them for humour, timeliness and surprise, as well as their willingness to retweet. We found that tweets that were judged both funny and surprising, as well as funny and timely, inspired far more social-media sharing spirit. The third study analysed 462 actual IMI tweets sent between 2010 and 2015 (with the help of human coders evaluating the attributes of each one). Not only were the ones in the humour-timeliness-surprise sweet spot more viral, but their virality seemed to translate into an abnormal bump in the associated companies' stock price in the days immediately following.

Finally, in studies four and five, our findings were further reinforced through a separate set of comparisons. First, we compare a sub-set of tweets (both IMI and non-) from the airline industry, then a complete set of tweets sent by 25 firms (randomly selected from the S&P 500) during April 2019. Again, humour + timeliness as well as humour + surprise added up to virality. Tweets with all three qualities were correlated with a 0.4 percent increase in abnormal stock market returns on average. This boost equates to a per-firm average of US\$5.1 million in market capitalisation.

The five rules

Based on our research, we offer five main takeaways for marketers.

1. Use quick wit

Wit or appreciation of humour has a major influence on the quality of an interaction and shapes the impression one forms of another. However, sending a funny tweet is not good enough, we found. Instead, the effectiveness of a tweet's humour is closely associated with timing and surprise.

2. Engage social media users in a conversation about what is happening now

People in general and internet users in particular have a desire to engage spontaneously with events as they happen. This helps users contribute to their communities in more valuable and meaningful ways than they could with outdated and uninteresting news. Timeliness in response to an external event injects new fuel into a marketing communication's humour, providing more impetus for people's desire to bond with others via the swift sharing of a tweet.

3. Co-opt external events

Rather than paying more than US\$5 million for a Super Bowl ad, businesses may consider sending a witty and timely (or unanticipated) tweet related to:

- Tent-pole events, which occur at regular intervals (e.g. Oscars, Grammys or Olympic Games – when these are revived after the Covid-19 crisis)
- Specific events on established dates for which some details remain uncertain (e.g. messages designed to stoke the mystery about anticipated products such as the iPhone 12)
- Specific events on uncertain dates (e.g. speculations about when a Covid-19 vaccine will become available)
- Trending topics addressed by popular Twitter hashtags (e.g. #launchamerica or #BlackLivesMatter).

4. Trust and empower your marketing team

Many managers believe that a firm's marketing message is best planned well ahead. Potential advantages of such an approach are well understood.

However, this strategy can also lead to a brand being seen as out of touch, drifting from its target audience and failing to capture the zeitgeist. We encourage firms to empower marketing teams with the latitude to keep a close eye on trends and spontaneous chatter so they can quickly formulate witty messages in response to these events.

5. Relinquish some control over tweets' content at times

For their team to respond to external events as they unfold, businesses may need to relinquish some level of control over the message at times. Be aware, however, that a marketing team may hit the 'send' button too quickly. To protect themselves against backlash, firms must identify the right employees to execute witty and timely tweets – their sense of humour and timing should be on point and not offensive.

Increasing the impact

As our research highlights, tweets that manage to go viral are not only about enhanced market capitalisation, but also relate to investor foresight and signalling. If investors can spot tweets that pair humour with surprise or timeliness, they will be able to make better investment decisions. Managers can use these tweets strategically, to signal their firm's performance and marketing capabilities to financial markets (more often than they could via quarterly reports). Ultimately, IMI can help managers be part of and shape the zeitgeist – rather than be led by it.

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<https://knowledge.insead.edu/marketing/what-drives-consumers-share-online-content>

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About the research

["Improvised Marketing Interventions in Social Media"](#) is published in the *Journal of Marketing*.