How to Create Brand Engagement on Facebook

By Arvind Malhotra, Claudia Kubowicz Malhotra and Alan See
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A recent study of 98 global brands identifies factors that increase — or decrease — the chances of consumers “liking,” commenting on or sharing a company’s Facebook posts.

BY ARVIND MALHOTRA, CLAUDIA KUBOWICZ MALHOTRA AND ALAN SEE

Over the last few years, brands have embraced Facebook Inc. as a key marketing channel to drive engagement and brand awareness. The question we asked was whether some brand content creates more brand engagement on Facebook than others. Looking for answers, we coded more than 1,000 wall posts from 98 global brands, hoping to gain a better understanding of how different wall-post attributes impact the number of “likes,” comments and “shares” a post receives.

From our research, we identified eight ways brand managers can increase the number of “likes” a post receives:

1. **Express yourself through photos.** Every picture tells a story. A photo is personal, and it can communicate quickly and easily. It also requires more thought and effort to take and include a photo in addition to text. To our surprise, what might be considered as blatant product promotion, in other words, putting up pictures of products from a company’s catalog, elicited a high number of “likes.”

2. **Be topical.** Keep up with the times. Messages considered topical are those referring to holidays, festivals, important events, etc. Topical messages may or may not contain a hint of the brand’s products. Even when they allude to the brand’s products, these messages are perceived to be more personable, rather than scripted promotions.

3. **Don’t hesitate to be in your face.** Promote the brand and its products. When consumers visit the brand’s wall, promotional messages are expected. We found that such messages also generate “likes.” Consumers visit the walls of brands they identify with and want to engage with.

4. **Share the validation.** Take a bow. Everyone wants to align themselves with a winner. By sharing success stories, achievements, awards and praise through wall posts, consumers can signal approval while also basking in the glory of a brand they identify with. By “liking” the post, fans indicate to their personal network their alignment with a successful brand. They are expressing their own positive self-identity through the brand’s achievements.

5. **Educate the fans.** Create informational value. Brands that generated or passed along information through wall posts also garnered a high number of “likes,” especially information designed for fans’ enrichment and education. This education could include informing fans about the history of the brand or the ways in which the company operates or produces products. When fans “like” these posts, they are in turn creating educational content for their personal networks.

6. **Humanize the brand.** Inject emotions. The salience of brand communication using social media is the “social” part. Fans like messages that paint the brand as a living object and express human emotions. Brand managers should view Facebook as a personal communication platform rather than a broadcast medium. Sharing posts that contain emotions helps fans convey their own emotions to their network of friends.

7. **Humor is the best social medicine.** Laugh and everyone laughs with you. People like to laugh. Funny things are appreciated. Being funny is an art, and not everyone can be funny. In terms of sheer numbers, most posts are not funny, especially brand posts. So the posts that generate a chuckle receive a significant boost in the number of “likes.” We found that posting funny pictures, such as the one above that Heineken posted, is...
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3. Social Cause Affiliation
Don’t assume consumers care about the same causes you do. On average, posts regarding social causes also did not generate many “likes.” In fact, these posts were not well “liked” at all. Brand managers should not assume consumers will care about the same causes as the brand. These messages may come across as pushy and preachy.

4. Enter Our Contests
They can see through your brand promotional strategies. Contests are a popular sales promotion technique, but our research showed that wall posts announcing contests were less likely to be “liked.” Given the informative content (contest availability and participation instructions), these messages may be read and acted upon but do not result in many “likes.”

5. Deal (or No Deal)
We’ll take no deal, please. Wall posts offering deals were less likely to be “liked.” In fact, deal-related posts, on average, got the least “likes” of all the attributes we measured. These wall posts from brands could be electronic coupon codes, supplementary offers or time-sensitive discounts. While fans might want to avail themselves of these deals, they see no need to express appreciation through the click of a “like” button.

Talking to the Wall
Facebook’s functionality enables anyone to respond to a brand post on a wall. In fact, one brand post can receive thousands of comments where Facebook users communicate with the brand and other commenting consumers. This open dialogue can be used to the brand manager’s advantage to solicit information, gain feedback and understand the consumer better. The understandable risk is that there is no guarantee the comments will be positive. Yet, if addressed quickly and appropriately, negative comments can facilitate favorable brand outcomes.

Facebook users were much more likely to comment when wall posts included a photo, stayed topical, included new product information, contained validating information, humanized the brand, added humor or simply asked for action — in this case, to comment.

One technique that drove comments to wall posts was posing questions. When brands asked, people answered. There was a sense of talking back to the brand. Speaking of open-ended questions, brands can pose voting questions to their fans to elicit decision drivers. Further, fans of a brand can ask their friends to weigh in on the “vote for” wall posts. Users click their response, and Facebook graphically shows the results.

Comparing Best Practices on Facebook and Twitter
Audience engagement is most directly enabled on Facebook through the “share” button, which gives users the ability to share the original post (including photos, videos and URLs). Whenever a brand’s fan clicks...
“share” on the brand’s wall post, the entire message is posted on the fan’s own wall and is also sent to the news feed of their friends. Sharing a post is not only a commitment to the message, but also to the brand. In effect, by electing to share a message, a Facebook user self-appoints himself or herself as a brand ambassador and acts on behalf of the brand to propagate the entire brand message to his or her network.

The same types of posts that are “liked” are often also shared — with a few interesting exceptions. Whereas length decreases the likelihood of being “liked,” length does not influence whether a post is shared. Additionally, we found no negative effects on “shares” for posts announcing contests, advocating social causes or asking questions. We identified two types of posts that drive “shares” more than “likes.” First, while posts with video content were not “liked” more, they were shared significantly more than non-video posts. Second, whereas posts announcing deals did not receive high “like” totals, these posts were shared much more often. It seems as if consumers chose to share attractive deal information rather than indicating appreciation.

The Facebook “share” functionality is very similar to a retweet on Twitter Inc. Drawing parallels to our prior research on retweeting (see “Related Research”), we found many similarities between content that has a higher likelihood of being shared on Facebook and retweeted on Twitter, including messages that are topical, educational, humanizing and deal-related. In addition, simply asking increased the likelihood that the message would be shared on Facebook or retweeted on Twitter. Moreover, we found that messages posing questions decreased both “shares” and retweets.

However, there were some key differences between the two social network platforms. Length of message did impact the propensity of the message being shared on Twitter, with longer messages being retweeted less. But length did not impact the likelihood of content being shared on Facebook. Given the character constraints on tweets, length has an impact because users often like commenting on the tweet being propagated to their network.

Including pictures on Twitter did not increase retweets, but including pictures on Facebook significantly increased “shares.” In that way, brands have more capacity to leverage Facebook as a visual medium. Lastly, messages with event information were retweeted more on Twitter and shared less on Facebook. Twitter is arguably more of a locational information medium than Facebook is; it may also be that Twitter serves as a platform enabling real-time communication, whereas Facebook serves more as an asynchronous “bulletin board.”

Regardless of whether a Facebook fan “likes,” comments, shares or does some combination thereof, engagement through Facebook is becoming a critical element of any organization’s marketing strategy. An opportunity exists to leverage wall posts more effectively to generate greater propagation and richer conversation — and to convert more consumers into brand advocates. In the highly networked social world we live in today, such brand advocates are priceless.

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