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Use Hashtags to Generate Greater Brand Engagement

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The hashtag has become the new “like” — and that’s not a good thing. Just as marketers used to (and some sorry folks still do) obsess over how many [Facebook](#) likes they accumulate, many are now plastering hashtags on their communications and adding up the times they’re used.

The problem is the use of a hashtag can be about as meaningless as a like if it doesn’t affect the brand positively. Few companies use hashtags to generate greater brand engagement. Take the hashtag used by [Avocados from Mexico](#) during the Super Bowl a couple of weeks ago. The spot imagined what “the first draft ever” might have looked like back four billion years ago. In the concluding frames, the hashtag [#FirstDraftEver](#) appeared under the brand logo.

The brief appearance was enough to spark approximately 25,000 mentions in the first 24 hours after the ad ran, according to Hootsuite Analytics.

Twitter users talked about how much they liked the ad and cracked jokes about the various animals and countries. The only problem is that many of the early Tweets didn’t mention the Avocados from Mexico. And it’s really no surprise — the concept of the ad was far more interesting than a piece of produce as it was portrayed. For a small brand that likely blew their entire ad budget on its Super Bowl campaign in the hopes of creating brand awareness, those missed opportunities are very costly.

Then there was the much-criticized [Nationwide](#) ad about children dying in preventable accidents. The brand had hoped its hashtag [#MakeSafeHappen](#) would start a dialogue about safety for children. Instead, most of the conversation ended up ridiculing and otherwise criticizing the ad. Twitter audiences reflected the general critical sentiment about the commercial — of

the over 301K mentions, negative comments appeared six times more than did positive ones.



Super Bowl advertisers have learned that, in order to maximize the value of their ad investment, they need to prompt engagement beyond their 30 seconds of fame. But it seems many thought just putting a hashtag in their ads would be enough. Across all the Super Bowl ads, the average time a hashtag was on screen was less than one second. If people blinked, they probably missed it.

And Super Bowl advertisers aren't the only ones guilty of worshipping the holy hashtag. Of the brands on the [Interbrand 100 list](#) that posted a tweet in Q4 of 2014, 97% included a hashtag. Corporate marketing departments now staff people whose primary function is to create hashtags and track their usage; agencies dedicated to hashtag campaigns are popping up.

But hashtags — like likes — are only as valuable as the engagement they produce. And just because someone uses your hashtag in a tweet or post doesn't mean they are engaged with your brand. Hashtags should be used less as a message and more as a call to action that leads to greater brand engagement.

Coca-Cola's [#MakeItHappy](#) hashtag did just that. The company's Super Bowl spot presented a scenario in which a Coke is accidentally spilled into the wiring of the Internet and suddenly online negativity is replaced with happy messages. The closing scene shows a Tweet including the

#MakeItHappy hashtag and the spot's last frame also promotes it.



The #MakeItHappy hashtag got a boost because the ad itself was powerfully emotional and visually arresting. (The spot was ranked #8 in the [USA Today Ad Meter](#).) Also the message of the hashtag directly communicated the core idea of the Coca-Cola brand — happiness — so it did not compete with the brand message for attention or detract from it. And Coke had previously teased its Super Bowl spot with shorts that included the hashtag and it also released four longer hashtagged online videos starring celebrities — so the hashtag got plenty of exposure.

The engaging power of the hashtag was unleashed by an algorithm that Coke developed to automatically convert tweets into pictures of happy things like cute dogs and a sunglass-clad palm trees. As such, the hashtag led to more brand exposure and greater engagement. The images, along with the original ad and videos, were shared by thousands of millennials who quickly jumped on the opportunity to express themselves and their values by spreading a positive and inspiring message. (Unfortunately Coke was forced to discontinue the campaign when the folks at media site [Gawker](#) hacked the Twitter account and used it to tweet lines from Hitler's Mein Kampf.)

Other companies can see such positive results from using a hashtag by ensuring it is well-integrated into the ad it appears in, into a campaign that promotes action, and into the core brand message. Hashtags can generate greater brand engagement if they are used as the starting point for participation. [#MakeHashtagsCount](#)

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