



The Art of Social Storytelling

Q: What are the best kinds of posts to share on Twitter, Facebook, etc.?

A: There are a lot of ways to generate “likes” and “shares” on social media, but to use it to build a sustaining brand, you should align your social content with your brand strategy.

Videos of cute cats and aphorisms like “life is better with bacon” may get shared widely and boost your brand exposure, but they don’t do anything to build your brand equity. If you only care about the number of retweets or favorites you get, you’re missing the opportunity to tell your brand story and create a compelling narrative on social media.

I asked the folks at Brand Chorus to use their StoryScore tool to provide some data to help explain why you should use social storytelling to build your brand. We selected five pairs of competitive brands for the study (Burger King and McDonald’s; Carl’s Jr. and Jack in the Box; Chipotle and Taco Bell; Domino’s and Pizza Hut; and Dunkin’ Donuts and Starbucks) and they analyzed every post made by each brand during February on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube—1,126 posts in all. The analysis combined human intelligence (rating each post on tone of voice, creativity, use of video/imagery, and fit with the brand and business strategy) and a proprietary algorithm that has been tested and validated by academics and practitioners. The results revealed some important principles about posting on social media.

When it comes to social posting, think quality, not quantity. Starbucks and Chipotle were in the bottom three of the 10 brands in the analysis in terms of post frequency, but they were among the top three highest StoryScores. Starbucks achieved strong brand resonance by posting about its employees and the store experience/environment, both of which are critical elements of its brand; Chipotle’s posts centered on its “Cultivating Thought” program, which features work from authors on Chipotle packaging as a means of sharing the brand’s sense of humor, ideas, and values. A high volume of posts may look good on a traditional social media dashboard, but it is not necessarily an indicator of success when it comes to brand building.

It is possible—and more desirable—to engage people on social media at the brand level, not just the product level. You probably know that social media participants don’t want to be bombarded with product messages all the time, so you might be tempted to post content on other topics as well. But instead of defaulting to irrelevant holiday-themed posts and humorous memes like puppy pictures, the top performers in the StoryScore analysis turned to brand building.

A comparison between the highest scoring brand, McDonald’s (94 out of a possible 100 points), and one of the lowest, Burger King (55), helps make the point. McDonald’s “Pay With Lovin” campaign provided rich social content, with videos showing the promotion in action posted across all channels; Burger King’s Valentine’s Day-themed posts were based on break-ups, bad dates, exes, and being single. It’s no wonder McDonald’s was more effective. Jack in the Box stood out by combining brand and product, with posts written from the perspective of its Jack CEO character about various menu items.

Your brand differentiation should be emphasized whenever possible. “So when’s the pizza?” and “Don’t tell lies. Have some fries” are fun messages, but utterly generic. So are pictures of products out of context, such as an overhead shot of a beverage; one brown circle of coffee looks pretty much like every other brown circle of coffee. Consider how you might include a brand or product reference that conveys your brand, such as incorporating a picture or your brand slogan. And when it comes to product shots, follow Dunkin’s lead; its images usually showed the brand’s iconic coffee cup, making the photos instantly recognizable.

A story about your brand is created by the cumulative impact of your social media posts. Social storytelling is ideal for engaging people more deeply with your brand. Think about social posting less as advertising and more as journalism. What is the brand narrative you want to convey? Causes and community involvement, employees and the company culture, and brand heritage are strong content areas that might contribute to your brand story.

Clever is good, but clear and compelling is better. The “banned” Super Bowl commercial for Carl’s Jr.’s All Natural Burger dominated that chain’s February content; almost three out of five of its posts referenced it. The ad and content featuring a scantily clad model might have been provocative, but it’s hard to see how they strengthen perceptions of the brand. Also, be careful to avoid cognitive dissonance. Your attempts at humor may unintentionally create negative thoughts or confusion. For example, an image of a sad girl with the caption “Fries: The perfect companion for a third wheel” feels depressing and doesn’t represent the brand aspirationally. Including animals—even if they are cute pets—into a food conversation can be subconsciously off-putting. And although it may be nice to share your customers’ photos of your food, even the best amateur shots of cold pizza are still very unappealing.

Social networks can be powerful brand-building media—if you take a long-term, brand-driven, story-telling approach. 📺