

COLUMNS

## The blight of gratuitous hashtags

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By **Andy Maskin**

It seems as though a steadily increasing proportion of television and out-of-home ads contain a hashtag as an implicit call-to-action. There it is, in the corner of the poster or the last couple of seconds of the TV spot. Although a good deal of thought and maybe even rounds of legal approval went into deciding on the hashtag, its presence is based on a fantasy.

The fantasy goes like this: Influential consumer sees ad, has mobile device in-hand, and posts a desired sentiment to social media using the hashtag. The consumer's followers see the post, share it, and then the campaign's reach is amplified.

The reality is that social media does not work as simply as this, especially on mobile.

Making a hash of it

Unless executed with the right strategy, expecting a hashtag to influence consumer behavior is misguided.

The hashtag becomes a gratuitous use of precious real estate. Sometimes and perhaps most of the time the right strategy for mobile engagement is not to use hashtags at all.

Just go to Twitter and look at trending hashtags. They are usually related to current events, clever memes, or major contests. These are the primary sorts of things that motivate an audience to propel a social media conversation. If your planned hashtag does not align with these categories, you might want to think twice.

As an aside, I would argue that social posts driven by hashtag-based contests are not really earned media in the truest sense of the term. You did not earn consumers' social adoration. You are bribing them with the prospect of a prize. It is a perfectly fine tactic for the right campaign, but it should be considered paid media.

The key thing to stop and think about in launching a genuine earned media hashtag-based campaign is this: Hashtags are a form of self-expression. They appear under a person's username and thus are effectively written in the first person. They are meant for their audience, and the authors of the tweets or Instagram posts know that everything they say to their audience reflects on them.

Whether that audience is five people or five million, the user of a hashtag is posting as himself or herself and knows that his or her humor, cleverness, earnestness or grasp of current events will be judged by people who care what they say.

Choosing what to post on social media is like choosing an outfit you do it deliberately to affect the way you are perceived.

Work on it

There is work involved, too. Users have to pull out their phones and craft a piece of content they can stand behind, punching it out on their little touchscreens.

When you promote a hashtag, you are asking a user to do work. Maybe it is an extra 15 keyboard taps, but it is still actual time out of their lives. Mobile users on the go do not just give that time out. Even to brands they like a whole lot.

The litmus test for hashtag usage should be whether it is something someone would proudly use in their own voice. We cannot always fall so deeply in love with our campaigns as to assume that not only will they achieve their goals of awareness and purchase intent, but also will inspire a social media movement.

Hashtags ought to be short and they need to reflect well on the person using them. If your campaign does not lend itself to that, then it is completely OK not to include a hashtag.

GOING FORWARD, I do not see the flood of hashtags receding until enough people learn their lesson about when they are and are not appropriate.

The problem is that when hashtag campaigns fall flat, it does not actually do all that much measurable damage to a multifaceted campaign that does not rely on them. So there is little incentive to stop just throwing hashtags on everything.

More likely, the gratuitous use of hashtags will continue for several years to come and only gradually let up as everyone in the space becomes more seasoned.

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