SOCIAL MEDIA Etiquette

Your guide for engaging as a person not a logo
54% of B2B marketers said they have generated leads from social media. (CMO)
It’s an overstatement to say that everyone is online and using social media, but not by much. Social media not only connects millions upon millions of people across the world, it also opens a channel for a brand new type of interaction between businesses and customers.

But is it actually all that brand new? Countless books, webinars, seminars, and entire conferences have been dedicated in recent years to figuring out the “secret” to social media success. These best practices often include some version of these “tips”: use high-quality images, add value to the conversation, engage often with your followers, and share other peoples’ messages in addition to your own.

If you squint hard enough, you’ll recognize these as the same tips that have been touted by finishing schools and etiquette books for generations: be presentable, talk about your interests, be sociable, and don’t simply talk about yourself.

It’s called “social” media for a reason—it’s just another medium for the kind of human interaction that has been occurring naturally for millennia. The logistics may have changed, but the principles remain.

In lieu of the “secret” to social media success, then, there remain techniques to employ that will make your brand more relatable, more enjoyable to follow on social media, and make your fans and followers feel like they’re making yet another friend online, instead of just signing up for advertisements.

Before you begin, you need to understand your customers—what they want to buy, what is lacking in their customer experience, and what steps, if any, are missing from their journey to purchase your product or service. This requires listening. Although your goal is to interact with your followers on social media, you need to go beyond social listening tools in order to get a broader understanding of your customer base from surveys, inbound emails, call center data, and more. This full understanding will direct and help guide you in creating your brand voice.
Do: Use a Cheery, Familiar Tone

The tone of your social media posts is paramount to the success of your brand on a given platform: too stiff, and people will feel as though they are being talked at and will be loath to engage; yet, if you play it too fast and loose, you risk the sort of social media gaffe that offends a portion of your following and creates headlines and a PR nightmare out of thin air.

It is proper to strike an informal yet professional tone. As always, the grammar and spelling should be unassailable, lending credibility to your voice from the start. From there, make regular use of colloquialisms, contractions, and familiar language. The goal is to be likeable, and that goal is never-ending, so instead of trying to create a viral hit with every post stick to humanizing your brand simply by sounding like a person.

No matter your business type, tone remains imperative. Whether yours is a B2C or B2B enterprise, and regardless of industry, all must bow to the universal truth of likeability—that engendering goodwill among those who observe and interact with your brand is an absolute necessity when attempting to positively influence potential customers. Unless you’re in an almost inaccessibly small class of businesses, your customers always have a choice when it comes to who they turn to for products and services. That choice becomes easier when one brand is more likeable than another.
Don’t: Put Off Responding to Your Followers

It is poor form to keep your followers waiting. The complete saturation of social media, especially in the United States, creates a two-way street of interaction that is easier than ever before; as such, consumers feel entitled to a response when they reach out to a brand through social media. The response time expectations vary by platform, but we’ve reached a place where most consumers expect to hear back within an hour if they’ve sent a tweet or Facebook message to a brand.

Keep in mind your personal interactions with your friends and family. You wouldn’t ignore a text from a friend indefinitely—that would be rude. Similarly, the worst thing a brand can do with social media messages from fans and followers is to ignore them. The positive effects of this type of attention are palpable; when 72% of users expect a brand to respond directly to a message within an hour, that becomes the new standard for customer interaction, and similar studies show that 47% of people are likely to recommend a brand that is responsive on social media. The negative impact of failing to respond is real as well, as the vast majority of those who expect a quick response are registering a complaint—and failing to address complaints in public is a losing recipe all the way.

Beyond pure speed, one standout courtesy employed by some brands is to respond directly to a follower who has reached out—not just by tagging their Twitter handle, but by addressing them by name (if it’s easily discernable on their account). For example, in response to a tweet asking what a brand was
thankful for, Lowe’s responded “We’re thankful for our dedicated employees, Elizabeth!” Personal touches such as this have a dual benefit: Not only does the recipient feel more directly addressed, adding a human element to the interaction, but it feels more authentic and less likely to have been automated or canned. It’s yet another clue to observers that there is a living, breathing person at the controls of your brand’s messaging, and the sense that there is another person engaged in the dialogue creates a bond, however vague or tenuous, between customer and corporation.

Social media managers of smaller or growth companies may find the task of providing timely, personalized responses to be an easier one to tackle than those with brands who command a substantial following—so for those who may be inundated, where to begin? Well, it’s said that you eat an elephant one bite at a time, which is true, but not all bites are created equal. First, read everything. If that feels daunting, management platforms like Clarabridge Engagor help parse out messages directly involving your brand for faster and more efficient identification. From there, perform a bit of triage using equal parts common sense and strategy: timely questions and any complaints should be addressed first, compliments and general comments second. It is far more important to give a prompt response to a query such as “When does your store close?” or “I had a horrible experience at this location” than it is to address softballs like “I love your burritos!” or “What are you most thankful for?”

For maximum efficiency, put a response structure in place for the team that will be responding to customer messages. Social media management tools like Clarabridge Engagor allow for multiple users to monitor inbound messages across several channels, all at the same time. No matter what tool you use, stick to your order of prioritization and maintain open lines of communication about who is handling which question or comment—multiple responses to the same query will give the (justified) impression of disorganization,
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and at worst, can create the opportunity for conflicting information. Whether there’s a group email chain, an in-office chat, or a system of digital checkboxes, always maintain an awareness of who is handling what.

A large beverage manufacturer manages 3 million social posts per day. They implemented the Clarabridge customer intelligence platform to quickly manage and understand the sentiment of these posts. As a result, they saw a 25% increase in productivity. Furthermore, brand managers were, for the first time, able to prove brand activation and quantify the impact that their social campaign had during one of their largest campaigns.
Do: Initiate Customer Interactions

It is socially unbecoming, and awkward, to wait for each and every interaction to come to you. If you think of responding to customer-initiated interactions as playing defense, then initiating those sorts of interactions would be the social media version of going on offense. Creating positive moments between individual consumers and your brand has been shown to increase followings, engagement levels, and overall brand sentiment. To do this, search through your following and directly engage individuals, or chime in on a conversation that’s in progress.

In order to get the most traction with these posts, broadly determine how best to relate to your customers. If your brand is one with a diverse following, dividing your base into segments can help you create strategic personas for interaction; in this way, you can better speak to an audience’s needs, wants, goals, and emotions. Always be polite; surprise and delight by speaking to your followers as you would an acquaintance, opening up an avenue for conversation on familiar terms. Importantly, don’t feel too constrained by your industry or brand message. The point of these interactions is to humanize your account, and therefore your brand. Search out and engage with your follower base on universal topics of interest, including and especially pop culture (it’s much safer to engage here than to comment upon the news or politics). Social media was created to encourage conversation—so have one, and don’t worry about ham-handedly steering the conversation back to your product or service.
In this example, Oreo’s back-and-forth does more than just create a positive experience for one follower—it creates a shareable moment that can impact the perception of thousands of consumers.
This interaction by JetBlue isn’t just about showing a brand personality; it lets observers know that someone is at the controls and able to answer questions or comments of real consequence as well.
**Don’t: Only Talk About Yourself**

Simply put, it’s rude to talk only about yourself or your interests. If you’re an active brand on social media—and you should be (‘be sociable!’)—there are plenty of instances between promoting your own content and that of other outlets where you’re looking to keep your profile raised, but want to do so without pushing your own agenda too obviously or directly. This is yet another chance to score some points for your brand by participating in topical, timely, or novel conversations that are not directly relevant to your brand.

The opportunity, here, is to further relate to individuals, enhance the positive sentiment around your brand, and gain followers by simply seeming like a person. Make sure to understand what resonates with your audience, for starters. Millennial audiences, among others, maintain a pronounced interest in pop culture, so make use of pop culture references. Experiment with a sense of humor, and comment upon industry conversation while tying-in references to movies, song lyrics, or universal points of interest. The point is not to have a tweet go viral because it’s so funny—rather, the goal is to create a connection, even if it’s only a single connection, between your brand and a follower. Interactions of this kind draw attention, and for those who make the connection, stand as a memorable moment involving your brand.

Having engaged in a variety of customer interactions and deployed untargeted messaging of your own, it’s important to keep a pulse on how you’re doing. Make sure to monitor spikes in a conversation around Tweets with 1-2 hashtags get 21% higher average engagement than those with none (SteamFeed)
Don’t: Only Talk About Yourself

a specific topic and detect sentiment, which will inform your ongoing strategy and alert you to any tone or messaging-related changes that need to be made.

Creating a connection with a follower, no matter how seemingly random or inconsequential, can lead to a productive opportunity that otherwise may never have materialized.
Do: Decide Who Your Brand is, Then Be That Person

These opportunities coil into one central theme: Be a person. The public has been consuming advertising for the entirety of their lives, so don’t add to the noise by bombarding your followers through yet another medium—instead, stand out by creating simple, easy, and seamless brand interactions. Employ a sense of humor, be polite and courteous, and always strive to maintain a strong sense of self-awareness. Take your business seriously, but don’t take yourself too seriously as a brand. Self-awareness, self-commentary, meta or inside jokes about your industry, and wry wit are all elements that appeal to a wide swath of the internet citizenry.

If a personality is the vessel for your brand messaging, don’t lose sight of the actual content of your content. Though it may be trite to suggest yet again, do your best to bring value to your followers—and in this context, value is nearly synonymous with assistance. The help that you offer can take many forms: respond to customer questions and complaints, sure, but once again remember to go on offense once in a while. Tweet out suggestions, tips, or tricks for using your product; inform your following of expanded store hours or timely sales; or simply remind people what they might be missing by not having patronized you recently.

As has been suggested elsewhere, and often, make good use of imagery. Posts featuring images not only encourage higher levels of engagement; they offer another opportunity to display a sense of humor, cultural awareness, and to resonate with followers.

Twitter has 255 million monthly active users. (Social Media Slant)
Plus, images provide you with a literal canvas on which to place your logo, branding, or a campaign hashtag that you’re trying to highlight. As with the tone of your messages, the images that you use should be carefully curated and fit with an editorial style and theme that will create an association with your business in the minds of your followers.

Develop a universal voice for your brand, to be employed by all who touch your social media platforms. While wrangling a variety of writing styles and personal senses of humor can be challenging, develop processes for that voice to become a shared one. Conceive a single distinctive voice that is vague enough for multiple people to emulate; for example, instead of an overly idiosyncratic persona, settle on an idea such as “ironic” or “enthusiastic” for your brand’s identity, and build from there. Write up a list of example messages and disseminate them throughout your team; train your community managers on what their messages should look like; and, to begin with, review each message for a short period of time to ensure that your strategy is taking the shape you envisioned.

Do: Decide Who Your Brand is, Then Be That Person
Don’t: Lose Your Balance

Mind your manners at all times on social media. Engage with each of your followers as if they are a potential friend, but never lose sight of the fact that each is an important possible customer and critic, whose approval you are ultimately and inevitably attempting to win. It’s obvious, but worth repeating, that the foundational function of your social media presence is to build/maintain positive brand reputation and resolve customer questions or complaints. Without a solid understanding and execution of those core goals, none of the previously mentioned personality-based goodwill is as meaningful to your brand.

Consider always the permanence of the internet. Tweets, Facebook updates, and Instagram posts can be deleted, but the screenshots that your followers take can never be expunged from the record of public opinion. While the fear of a gaffe should never discourage you from innovating, it should guide your editorial process and help you focus your messages. In short, the solution for the person says something stupid is not to refrain from speaking further, but rather, to be smarter about what is said. Embrace what we call the Tight Rope Theory: recognizing the danger of falling should not prevent you from attempting to cross on the rope, but does demand the focus required to cross safely. Though there is much value to gain from cultivating a sense of humor and engaging your fans on general topics of conversation, always

The half-life of a tweet is four minutes — so don’t sweat the small mistakes.
trust your initial instinct. If you second-guess the wisdom of a joke or a comment, you should refrain from posting that message 10 times out of 10.

Beyond maintaining strong personal editorial standards and focus, consider putting a review structure in place. The more layers of review that a message must pass through, the more likely you are to keep anything questionable from seeing the light of day. Social management tools like Clarabridge Engagor can help here, too, as these platforms have a built in mechanism wherein messages can be created and submitted for review. Worried about a review process interfering with the timeliness of your posts? Clarabridge Engagor streamlines the process so the post is instantly published upon approval.

Despite all that, when—definitely not ‘if’, but when—the odd social media mistake makes its way out into public, don’t panic. Odds are, the typo, grammatical error, or misstated fact will be nothing more than a ripple in the vast social media ocean. The half-life of a social media message is a matter of minutes—even if a portion of your following notices, the chances that a substantial number will be affected remain quite small. As long as you remain social-savvy and avoid the truly catastrophic mistake, you can afford to be less than perfect on social media.
Clarabridge helps hundreds of the world’s leading brands understand and improve the customer experience. Powered by the industry’s most sophisticated customer analytics engine, Clarabridge collects and transforms all forms of customer feedback into intelligence, allowing businesses to activate the voice of the customer across the enterprise.

Clarabridge Engagor is the most comprehensive platform for real-time social customer service and engagement. It operationalizes customer analytics and helps business leaders present a more attuned organization—one that not only listens, but also adjusts to customer desires. With Engagor, businesses can track all conversations relating to their brand, filter out the noise, streamline engagement, and respond to what matters most to customers.

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