

Harnessing editorial storytelling for social media marketing: The ‘secret’ to success in the new digital world has deep roots in old media

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Abstract

The very same strategies that newsrooms and primary schools have used to tell stories can help brands tell stories, too — and engage with the audiences with whom they are seeking to do business with. The 'secret' lies in a series of six questions — why, who, what, where, when and how — that can help you thoughtfully map out your social media marketing. Answer those with intention and in alignment with your brand purpose, and you will not be so concerned with demands to 'go viral' or with suggestions to 'be everywhere'. Instead, you will create content and content strategies with community in mind.

Keywords

social media, marketing, digital marketing, storytelling, brand purpose, TikTok, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube

INTRODUCTION

Life insurance. Hot sauce. Commercial real estate. Education. Professional services. What do these offerings have in common? They all use content to reach an audience. At some point every vertical — from products to services, food to caretaking — relies on some form of content to help accomplish goals. And not just any content — in 2021, you would be hard-pressed to find a brand

that is not tapping into social media to reach consumers. Brands today need more content than ever before and are expected to be in constant contact with their 'communities'.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Thanks to the proliferation of mobile phones, everyone always has a camera with them. We have turned into a society

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of 24/7 documentarians. Everyone is a creator. Not only that, we all have a way of distributing our content, whether it is on Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest or any of the thousands of platforms that encourage us to upload our videos, pictures, memes, etc. for the world to see. This democratisation of content creation and distribution has given rise to what we call ‘the faceless publisher’ — anyone can create and share their content with an audience. Publishing content is no longer left to the media, production companies and brands with marketing budgets.

This shift has been revolutionary for brands, who now can organically grow, track and cultivate communities of loyal brand followers in a more nimble, cost-effective fashion. At first, social media marketing was broadly considered additive to existing marketing plans — a cherry on top, if you will. Now the average brand’s presence on social media plays a pivotal role to its brand marketing strategy. Social media is where consumers discover products, hear from brands in real time, shop and share. Consumers have become experts on navigating this burgeoning landscape, but brands often struggle.

WHY DO BRANDS HAVE SUCH A HARD TIME NAILING SOCIAL MEDIA?

The struggle is real, and it is not disappearing any time soon. In other words, it is harder to participate in the social media world as a brand than it is as a consumer for the following reasons:

- Lack of skill set on the team.
- No hard proof of ROI (return on investment).
- Inconsistent brand voice.
- Too many platforms.
- Not enough content to share.

The list goes on and on — we have all experienced these roadblocks at one point or another. But, ultimately, the reasons just cited are not necessarily why brands fail when it comes to social media. The reality is that we fail when we lose sight of our brand purpose and, more importantly, when we disregard the underlying reason social media was adopted by the masses in the first place — its inherent sense of community.

How often have you heard a brand representative say, ‘We just want to go viral’? There is an endless stream of papers online talking about the secret to going ‘viral’ and offering ‘tricks to breaking through the noise’ or ‘hacks for sticky content’. Virality is held up as the ever-elusive holy grail of social media (Figure 1).

Spoiler alert: virality is not the secret to success. Listing ‘go viral’ as the central objective of a social media strategy is inefficient at best and calamitous at worst. Instead of trying to game the system with quick tricks or hacks, brands must take a holistic approach when it comes to establishing and maintaining social media presence. There is no need to pull the wool over the consumers’ eyes. Authenticity matters and will always matter — consumers care about a brand’s intentions. According to HubSpot’s 2020 State of Marketing Report, 86 per cent of shoppers prefer an authentic and honest brand personality on social media.¹

In a 2020 study conducted by Getty Images in partnership with leading market research firm YouGov, which surveyed 10,000 people across the globe, 79 per cent of respondents said that brands need to do a better job of capturing people’s true lifestyles and that they expect companies to be consistently committed to inclusivity and diversity in advertising.² This is to say that audiences are demanding

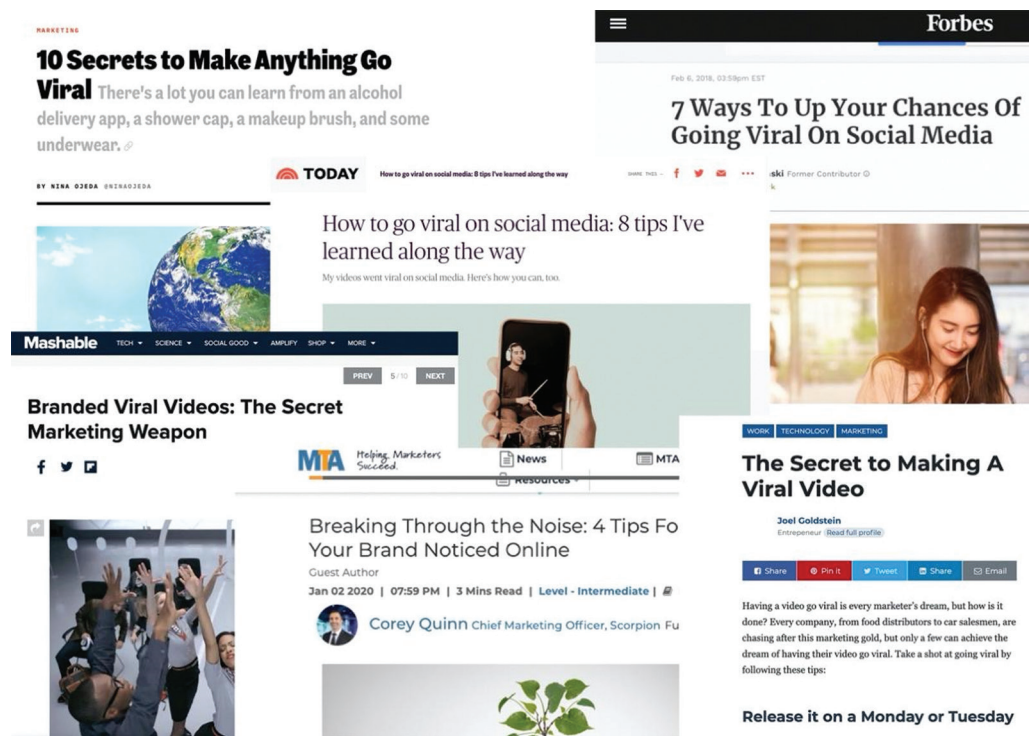


Figure 1 There is an abundance of papers online sharing the secret to going 'viral' and offering 'tricks to breaking through the noise' or 'hacks for sticky content'.

Sources: From L to R (clockwise): Inc.com: <https://www.inc.com/nina-ojeda/10-marketing-secrets-that-can-make-anything-go-viral.html>; Today.com: <https://www.today.com/series/things-i-wish-i-knew/how-go-viral-social-media-8-tips-i-ve-learned-t204380>; Forbes: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/steveolenski/2018/02/06/7-ways-to-up-your-chances-of-going-viral-on-social-media/?sh=784989a217af>; LifeHack: <https://www.lifehack.org/426896/the-secret-to-making-a-viral-video>; MTA: Martech Advisor: <https://www.martechadvisor.com/articles/customer-experience-2/breaking-through-the-noise-4-tips-for-getting-your-brand-noticed-online/>; Mashable: <https://mashable.com/archive/viral-branded-videos>

more authentic representation. Brands are always talking about wanting to 'break through the noise'. Hello! Lack of representation is a chasm begging to be filled.

So if you are thinking, 'That is all well and good, but where does a brand start?' or 'If the goal on social media is not virality, what is it?' or even, perhaps, 'It is all too much!' you would not be alone.

Yes, it is a lot. But there is a framework that can be employed to make the total experience less daunting and more effective.

At a high level, every successful social media campaign has three foundational elements: purpose, content and distribution. Data and insights connect the trifecta. So where to start?

First, resist the urge to start with the content itself or the distribution channel. ('There is this new app called [TikTok, Clubhouse, insert hot new platform] — let us do something there!') Instead, employ the six-question framework and keep it foremost in mind. Yes, the same framework that you learned in elementary school and that has driven newsrooms around the world can also help you frame your social media communications. Why? Who? What? Where? How? When? Together, they form the essential question series for editorial storytelling, which can ensure that your social media strategies are rooted in your brand's purpose, stay authentic and honest to your brand identity

Editorial six-question framework

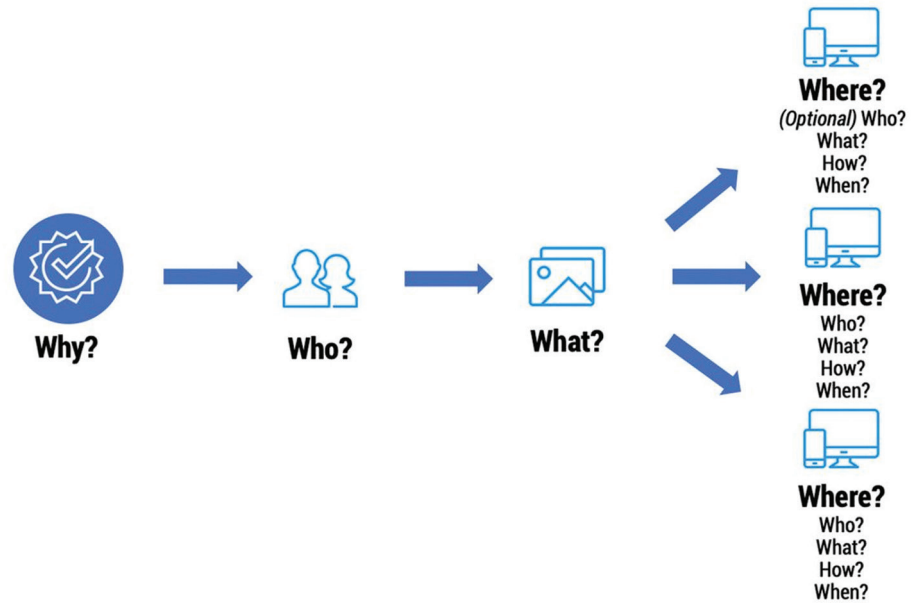


Figure 2 Editorial six-question framework

and reach target audiences in an effective, impactful way (Figure 2).

See it in practice — Case studies: MARA and The Financial Diet

MARA and The Financial Diet (TFD) are two brands with highly engaged social media communities that play different, but equally instrumental, roles in the success of both businesses.

MARA is a clean line of algae-infused skincare founded by journalist and influencer, Allison McNamara.³ Since the brand's launch in 2018, the MARA Beauty line has expanded to several products, is available internationally via dozens of retailers and has grown and cultivated an influential online following with fans like Chrissy Teigen and Hailey Bieber.

TFD started in late 2014 as a personal blog by founder Chelsea Fagan

to help her track her own budget and has since grown into a cross-platform media company and digital destination for women looking to talk about money.⁴ Over the last seven years, TFD has grown a social media audience of nearly 2 million fans.

We spoke with MARA's founder, Allison McNamara, and TFD's creative director, Holly Trantham, about how the MARA and TFD teams utilise editorial storytelling (ie the six-question framework outlined previously) to drive their social media content strategies.

WHY: THE GOAL OR PURPOSE

Before even thinking about content or a distribution strategy, start with your purpose, also known as the 'why'. What is the goal of this social media campaign? Set your intention and impact. Are you trying

to sell something? Drive registration? Change perception? Raise awareness?

The ‘why’ should be specific. Resist the urge to have a laundry list of ‘whys’. While there might be additional downstream impacts, successful social media campaigns have a primary goal. We should be able to clearly articulate our goal for a campaign and describe the desired outcome. For example, if the goal of a campaign is to change perception, we should be able to clearly envision how that shift in perception is to occur. Is it a change in online sentiment? In press stories? How will the outcome be measured?

Tips for answering ‘Why’

- Get specific.
- Understand the goal.
- Understand the desired outcome.
- Write it out.
- Share it with the team.

Articulating the ‘why’ may prove harder than it sounds, and this may explain its going undefined so often. One of the most frequent brand faux pas on social media is having a disjointed brand voice and seemingly random content across different platforms. For example, when a brand’s Twitter voice sounds entirely different from the e-mail marketing voice compared with the Instagram stories voice, which can leave things feeling out of sync. This tends to happen when a brand’s purpose or core message is not ingrained into every fibre of the organisation or when elements have been tacked on, after the fact. The reason is that it is essential to have a clear understanding of a brand’s overarching ‘why’ — or brand purpose — before determining the ‘why’ of a social media campaign.

Case studies: What is your brand purpose or ‘why’?

Allison, MARA: MARA’s DNA is so strong — simple, effective, clean skincare. We do not create products that are hard to understand; we typically approach formulation as singular active ingredients. We are not trying to pull the wool over people’s eyes; instead, we are communicating to people why they need this product and educating them on what we are doing and how we do it.

Holly, TFD: exists for women to talk about money and live their life on any budget. Everything we do ties back to that purpose. Whenever we are making a piece of content, it is in the back of our minds: ‘Is this budget friendly? Is this helping women live the life they want to live?’

WHO: DEFINING THE AUDIENCE

After defining the ‘why’, it is time to define the ‘who’. For whom is this piece of content or campaign intended? Get specific; do not generalise. There is a tendency to gravitate towards ‘universal’ stories (‘We want to reach as many people as we can!’) when our audiences are truly anything but.

Although it may seem like common sense to cast as wide a net as possible to get the most engagement, clearly defining a target audience is essential and also noticeable when it is absent. A 2018 survey from Epsilon found that 80 per cent of consumers are more likely to do business with a brand that uses personalisation techniques.⁵ In addition, Sales Insights Lab found that over 50 per cent of prospective customers turn out to be a mismatch for businesses.⁶

Instead of ‘spraying and praying’ with broad messaging, specify whom you want to reach, and you will likely see higher engagement. Not only that, but content that is directed at and crafted with specific audiences

in mind will resonate more strongly and inspire customer loyalty. Customers want to feel seen and understood. According to Accenture, 43 per cent of customers spend more money on brands they are loyal to.⁷ If a message is directed at a generalised group instead of being targeted, a brand risks potential impact and loses out on higher ROI from the content. In other words, it is a missed opportunity — even a loss.

Tips for identifying the ‘who’

- Ask questions to narrow options (eg Where is this product available? What is required — age, purchasing power, etc — for a person to participate/purchase?)
- Use internal and external data to inform.
- Get specific and stay specific. Remember, groups are not monoliths (eg not everyone in Gen Z is the same).

Case studies: Who is your target audience?

Allison, MARA: Although our audience is anyone who wants to improve their skin and we are looking for someone who will give the product a shot and time [to work], our biggest segment of buyers is between 25 and 34, followed by 34 and 65. With the price point, we do not see a ton of drive in Gen Z (under 24), but the younger segment likes the supplements and the travel-size bottles.

Holly, TFD: TFD’s audience is largely millennial women. However, we are ultimately targeting anybody who is trying to understand money for the first time and people who have been left out of the [financial] conversation. While our YouTube channel has a more global audience, our focus is primarily domestic (ie US-based audiences).

WHERE: CHOOSING A DISTRIBUTION PLATFORM (OR MULTIPLE PLATFORMS)

In a world with seemingly endless options for distribution, it is easy to get distracted and choose a platform or channel that is ultimately inefficient or just downright wrong for your campaign. Most, importantly, go to your audience. Where is your ‘who’ congregating?

According to a 2019 breakdown by eMarketer, 90.4 per cent of Millennials, 77.5 per cent of Generation X and 48.2 per cent of Baby Boomers are active social media users.⁸ In addition, 54 per cent of Gen Z and 49 per cent of Millennials say social media is their preferred channel for ad influence.⁹ In other words, the odds are that your target audience is on social media and ripe for marketing — it is just a matter of finding them.

A campaign might have dozens of ‘wheres’. These days there are countless options when it comes to programming channels on platforms, and it is often rare to create something for one channel alone. It is important, however, to treat each location or ‘where’ separately — gone are the days of straight syndication of exactly the same thing to every platform. If a campaign can do double-duty, great — but do not expect it or force it or try to fit a round peg into a square hole.

Step 1: Use demographic data by platform as a guide.

Facebook:

- According to Pew Research Center, 69 per cent of US adults use Facebook, which remains unchanged from two years ago.¹⁰
- According to Pew Research Center, Facebook usage among teens is dropping gradually. While 71 per cent of

teens claimed to use the platform in 2015, the number has now dropped to 67 per cent.¹¹

Twitter:

- Based on data from Statista, in 2019, 22 per cent of US adults used Twitter, down from 24 per cent in 2018.¹²

Instagram:

- According to GlobalWebIndex, 67 per cent of Gen Z and 57 per cent of Millennials use Instagram, in comparison with only 38 per cent of Gen X.¹³
- 64 per cent of Instagram users are under the age of 34.¹⁴

YouTube:

- According to Variety, 18- to 34-year-olds use YouTube to view video content on TV 7.9 per cent more often than basic cable and 14.5 per cent more often than premium cable.¹⁵
- 85 per cent of US teens were active on YouTube in 2019 (Statista).¹⁶

TikTok:

- According to GlobalWebIndex, 41 per cent of global TikTok users are between the ages of 16 and 24.¹⁷
- 58.8 per cent of US TikTok users are female (Statista).¹⁸

Reddit:

- According to Statista, most Reddit users in the US are male, but 15 per cent of US adults say they use the platform. And only 8 per cent of female US adults say they used Reddit in 2019 (Figure 3).¹⁹

Case studies: Where are your audiences congregating?

Allison, MARA: MARA's target audience primarily lives on Instagram, TikTok and Pinterest. We have very specific strategies for in-feed versus Stories versus Reels on Instagram. TikTok is about discovery and testing — and Pinterest is the underdog that always delivers. Of course, community engagement — influencer sharing — is key, too.

Holly, TFD: Our oldest platform is YouTube. Outside of YouTube, we focus mainly on Instagram. We choose channels on Instagram based on what our goal is: if we want people to swipe up, Stories; if we want to have a conversation, Lives are the way to go. We are more flexible with Stories, but our in-feed grid is set.

Step 2: Include members of the targeted community in your process. There is no better way to understand how to reach someone than to intentionally include them.

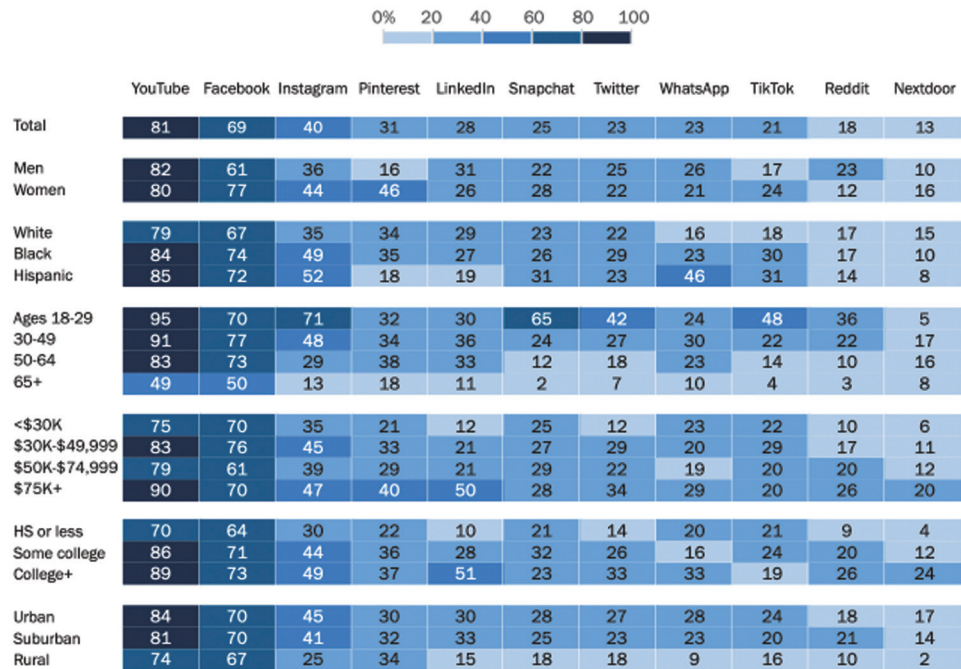
Case studies: How do you go about finding your audiences?

Allison, MARA: We look at several things, but the analytics we get from our website on Shopify tell us real-time data about our buyers. We also get a lot of high-level demographic detail from our digital marketing spend — we can see exactly who is buying from Instagram ads. Plus, it helps that everyone on the team is a member of the target audience.

Holly, TFD: Our entire team is millennial women. We found a niche in the market — at least when we started there really was not an urban-centric, personal finance platform for women talking about money. It has been organic growth, word of mouth, sharing on social media.

Use of online platforms, apps varies – sometimes widely – by demographic group

% of U.S. adults in each demographic group who say they ever use ...



Note: White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. Not all numerical differences between groups shown are statistically significant (e.g., there are no statistically significant differences between the shares of White, Black or Hispanic Americans who say they use Facebook). Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 25-Feb. 8, 2021. "Social Media Use in 2021"

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Figure 3 Use of online platforms, apps varies — sometimes widely — by demographic group

[Our content is] genuinely useful. It is relatable.

Step 3: Know and understand your platforms. Pick specific channels within each platform.

It is not enough to go where an audience is congregating. We must also fit into their behaviour — in terms of both how people behave within the platform itself and how members of the target community behave. These two things are not always mutually exclusive.

The simplest way to understand how communities are behaving is to join them. Spend at least five minutes digging into any platform or channel that you are planning to programme. Pay attention to how communities gather. How are people sharing information? How are they interacting with it? How is content shared? How is it discovered? Does the app support leaving the platform (eg swiping up from an Instagram Story), or does everything happen natively? Spending time in a learning mindset at the outset pays off.

Case studies: How do you approach adopting new platforms?

Allison, MARA: I am voracious when it comes to reading the beauty trades. I am always open to trying and learning the ‘new, cool thing’. I try to emerge myself and stay relevant. Remember that endless search for what is cool that you had in your 20s? You have to keep that.

Holly, TFD: Instead of trying to be everywhere all the time, we focus on doing one platform really well. We know our audience is on TikTok but we are being very intentional with how we make our voice translate on this new platform. There is a lot of money content on TikTok and people doing great stuff — but there is also a lot of misinformation. That said, I recommend always securing your username and URL, even if you are not ready to post.

Step 4: Utilise your community.

Case studies: What role do influencers play in your distribution strategy?

Allison, MARA: As a small brand, when influencers share because they love our product, that does so much more for us. We have our top 50 core influencers, and we do not delineate between who has the most followers; we treat people who have been loyal to MARA since day one equally. We are also strategic about reaching out to glam teams because celebrities will listen to their make-up and hair stylists — that is how so many of our major celebs became fans of the products.

Holly, TFD: We collaborate with other content creators who have the same values as us. They might not have the biggest followings, but they have dedicated followings. We also love doing collaborations with people who have knowledge about something we do not, and there is organic overlap.

WHAT: DETERMINING THE TYPE OF CONTENT

Once the ‘why’, ‘who’ and ‘where’ have been defined, it is finally time to shift forward toward content — specifically, the type of content that will be best for this campaign. To do this, ask the question, what vehicle will most effectively lead the target audience to the desired objective, or the ‘why’?

There are countless methods of bringing a campaign to life, including contests, humour (eg memes), interactive content (eg polls), content that is providing added value in the form of education and storytelling.

Storytelling is one of the most effective types of content for brand marketing because it strikes an emotional chord with audiences, ultimately making the message stickier than just facts alone. In his book *Brain Rules*, molecular biologist John Medina explains why a well-told story can have such a lasting impact on audiences: ‘When the brain detects an emotionally charged event, the amygdala releases dopamine into the system. Because dopamine greatly aids memory and information processing, you could say it creates a Post-It note that reads, “Remember this.”’²¹

When determining what medium of content to employ, also consider how target audience(s) typically interact on the distribution channel(s) that have been selected. For example, if the goal is to drive e-mail registration, it makes sense to engage on a platform or within a space that supports linking out to other sites — versus something like TikTok, which does not currently support hyperlinks leading outside of the platform.

Finally, remember to stay consistent with the brand’s overarching purpose.

Examples of 'whats'

- a. Desire to tell a story
- b. Desire to inform and educate
- c. Facilitate a contest
- d. Promote a sale
- e. Facilitate interaction/solicit information

Case studies: How do you decide on the type of content you post?

Allison, MARA: We try to do 1 or 2 educational posts a week, one piece that is more shopping oriented and then reposts and takeovers make up the bread and butter of our posts — especially on the weekend. We put the type of stories that I was pitched as an editor in our Instagram stories. When we launch a new product, that product is the focus for a few weeks.

Holly, TFD: We like to distil bigger concepts that we talk about on the site and on our shows into more bite-sized pieces of content on social media. Even though we have lots of things we are promoting, we try to find a good balance and always put content first [over promotional posts]. Engagement is so important to us and organic content is key to our engagement. When we have heavy event promotion, we balance it out with organic content. We will look at what people are saving the most on Instagram and for long conversations in the comment section and use those [as gauges for our audience's interests].

HOW: CREATING THE CONTENT

Finally, it is time to bring the 'what' to life in order to reach the 'who' on the chosen platform (or channels) by creating assets for the campaign. Creating content can feel as overwhelming — if not, more so

— than determining distribution channels. Content mediums range from imagery (eg photos, videos) to written verbiage to audio experiences and everything in between. Fortunately, by clearly defining a campaign purpose, target audience, distribution strategy and medium in advance, there are guard rails in place for the content creation — almost like building a creative sandbox.

Real-life variables, like lack of resources or lack of a particular skill set, also play a role. If resources are limited, get even more specific on the target audience or the 'who'. Also, always prioritise the campaign objective and revisit the key performance indicators (KPIs) to ensure the distribution platform and channel(s) can support the desired customer journey. Importantly, utilise existing assets and/or resources to support the vision. For example, revisit archival content from the brand's past, or get personal and tell the stories of the people behind the brand, the employees and even customers.

When utilising all your resources to create, consider:

- Tapping into your archive
- Getting personal, by telling the stories of the people behind the brand
- Utilising your community
- Licensing content
- Commissioning content

Case studies: How do you keep your messages consistent while also reaching different audiences on different platforms?

Allison, MARA: Our design and background does not change. Most importantly, our messaging does not really change from

Instagram to TikTok — we just use more fun sounds and trends on TikTok.

Holly, TFD: We will shift tone depending on the topic, but we are consistent about the ethos of talking about money, and about owning different privileges and being forthcoming about the financial realities of the world we live in. (see Table 1)

Case studies: How do you go about creating the content for your brand's social channels?

Allison, MARA: After years of learning, I believe now in working smarter, not harder. Content creation is not easy all the time! At MARA, we need certain lighting for our shoots, so we try to do three shoots a month with the in-house team and we do larger shoots quarterly. It is all about capturing as much content as we can and then repurposing that same content across platforms. In terms of day-to-day, we work with a graphic designer once a week and use Instagram tools for the other days of the week — focused largely on pretty dripping images and education.

Table 1 Platforms in order of number of active users (MAUs), July 2021²⁰

- Facebook — 2.853 billion
- YouTube — 2.291 billion (logged-in monthly users)
- Instagram — 1.386 billion
- LinkedIn — 740 million members total
- TikTok — 732 million
- SnapChat — 514 million
- Pinterest — 478 million
- Reddit — 430 million
- Twitter — 397 million

Holly, TFD: We have four people on the team who do copy and ideating and then others who do the design. Content creation is very different from content management and strategy. People who write the best are usually not the best designers.

Describe the role brand aesthetic plays in your social media strategy.

Allison, MARA: I think with brands you have to know the DNA of the brand and let that be the aesthetic. We live in an aesthetically driven world where branding matters. Fantastic product used to work its way to the top [regardless of branding], but now there is too much decent stuff out there that looks great. If you are truly design challenged, hire a branding company or at least a talented graphic designer to help shape your brand aesthetic and build templates for your content.

Holly, TFD: Our different platforms have different branding, but we have a colour story that we use consistently. Even though they are different, the branding is cohesive. We follow a design guide. We want everything to look like TFD.

What are your go-to apps for social media?

Allison, MARA: I love Tezza — it has the prettiest filters. Later is essential for planning out all of our content. But really, I suggest using the tools in the apps themselves.

Holly, TFD: We use Canva — even the free version is great. It is a fantastic design tool and allows for group editing without disrupting the process. Later.com is good for scheduling and the link-in-bio function. And for project management, we use Trello — the free version is pretty good.

WHEN: SCHEDULING CONTENT

The ‘when’ is self-explanatory. Prepare. Plan ahead. Establish a cadence that aligns with the target audience behaviour. Repeat.

Case studies: What is your approach to posting cadence? Do you follow a schedule?

Allison, MARA: We really approach our content calendar and scheduling the way I did at POPSUGAR or Refinery29. We have a massive calendar and work 3 months in advance. Holidays and national days we outline at the top. Newsletters go out once a week, which we tie to Instagram stories. We post five times a week on Instagram stories but skip Tuesdays and Thursdays since they are the lowest engagement days for us. We save weekends for repost days, unless it is someone huge (like Chrissy Teigen!) and then we live post.

Holly, TFD: We have a pretty standard posting schedule. We base a lot of our social content on the content we post on YouTube and our website. We try to change up the tone (for example, a serious video and then a fun video). We do not post really frequently (more than a couple times a day) because people engage more when they see less.

CONCLUSION

Stop wasting time by chasing ‘virality’. Instead, focus on what really matters — engaging with your audience(s) while staying true to your brand purpose. Be intentional and mindful from the outset by using the proven six-question framework to build social media campaigns, and secure real results that will move the brand forward.

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