

Message Strategy and Consumer Engagement in Sponsored Posts on Facebook and Twitter

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ABSTRACT

Research on message strategy on social media, especially Facebook, is increasing rapidly, providing greater insight into both types and effectiveness. However, this research has primarily utilized brands' posts on their own pages, not brands' paid messaging. Posts to a brand's page may end up as sponsored messages in user news feeds, if the brand pays to promote them, or they may not. Furthermore, most studies have looked at either very broad categorizations of message strategy or at very narrow tactical features. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine both broad advertising objectives and specific advertising tactics used in sponsored posts as they occur in users' news feeds on Facebook and Twitter.

Social media research into message strategy has drawn on frameworks developed for traditional media (Laskey, Day, & Crasky, 1989; Puto & Wells, 1984), while acknowledging that the unique features of social media, such as its interactivity and focus on relationship-building, influence message strategy (Kim, Spiller, & Hettche, 2014). Tafesse and Wein (2017) provide a comprehensive review of approaches to categorizing social media posts, which they then use to produce 12 message types.

Research has shown that, as theoretical models would suggest, message strategy has an impact on advertising effectiveness and that the effectiveness of strategies can vary, depending on product category and effectiveness measure (Laskey, Fox, & Crask, 1995). Recent research has shed light on the relationship between message strategy and the effectiveness of social media. For example, De Vries, Gensler, & Leeflang (2012) found that vivid and interactive brand posts on Facebook enhance the number of likes, and Araujo, Neijens, & Vliegenthart (2015) found that Twitter messages that contained information about products from the brand were associated with high levels of re-Tweeting.

As highlighted by Tafesse and Wein (2017), interpretation of the relationship between message strategy and effectiveness in social media has been complicated by the differing conceptualizations of message strategy. The present research attempts to enhance comparability across research studies by defining message strategy to include both objectives

and methods (O'Guinn, Allen, & Semenik, 2008). Specifically, it identifies three objectives that mirror the three components of attitude: awareness/comprehension, attitude/image, and action. In addition, it identifies five tactics—promotion, cause/institutional, curiosity, image, straight sell—to provide additional specificity.

In order to study the objectives and tactics in social media paid messaging, 63 undergraduate student subjects were led through the process of visiting the desktop and mobile versions of four different social media platforms, logging in where applicable, and capturing screenshots from each. Only the desktop data collected for Facebook and Twitter were utilized in the present study. Eliminating screenshots with no sponsored messages due to ad blocking or failure to log in resulted in a final sample of 44 subjects (22 male, 21 female), 64 screenshots and 174 sponsored messages—70 from Facebook, and 104 from Twitter—for analysis.

Analysis of the contents of the sponsored messages revealed a significant relationship between objectives and tactics ($\chi^2 = 150, p = .00$). In addition, message effectiveness, as measured by “likes,” varied significantly with respect to tactic ($F = 3.42, p = .01$), with mean likes for cause/institutional ads being greatest on Facebook, and likes for image ads greatest on Twitter. On average, ads on Facebook garnered more likes than those on Twitter (2919 vs. 879, $F = 4.38, p = .04$). Product category alone showed no significant effect on likes, but a full factorial regression analysis revealed that product category moderated the effect of tactic on message effectiveness, as measured by likes (category * tactic: $F = 4.07, p = .00$).

The preliminary results of this study suggest that the effectiveness of social media strategy depends upon a complex relationship among site, product category and tactic. Further analysis of the data is needed to better delineate the nature of these differences, while replication over time and with different demographic samples can also contribute to our understanding of social media as advertising platforms as they continue to evolve.

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Keywords: advertising, content analysis, Facebook, Twitter, message strategy, native advertising, social media, sponsored messages

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: This paper is of relevance to educators teaching current practices in social media marketing, to researchers studying advertising message strategy, particularly for social media, and to practitioners interested in utilizing Facebook or Twitter to promote products to college-aged students.

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