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LEARNING OBJECTIVES
After reading this chapter, you will be able to

- Evaluate the importance of writing for social media
- Define storytelling and explain its role in social media writing practices
- Distinguish among content creation, content curation, and content marketing

HUMANS OF SOCIAL MEDIA
JARYD WILSON, SOCIAL CONTENT MANAGER FOR THE BUFFALO WILD WINGS, FORMER DIGITAL CONTENT MANAGER FOR THE ATLANTA HAWKS

Introduction
I actually went to journalism school, something I wanted to do since high school. I attended the University of Missouri, and when I got there, I realized the importance of understanding convergence journalism—this was where the industry was going, so I majored in it. While in school, I worked at the NBC affiliate and updated its social media and websites. Social media was just getting started, so it was mostly web work.

How did you get your start in social media?
I got my first job after graduation at the Fox affiliate in Colorado Springs (similar to the position I was in at Missouri) where I managed the websites,

(Continued)
managed the accounts and content, and handled the social media as well. I didn’t really know social media was my specific interest. Sports was the industry I wanted to be a part of, but it is hard to break into. Getting some news experience would help me stand out and give me the skills I needed to work in the sports industry. I started the process in 2012 by applying for some sports jobs, the Hawks had an opening, and I have been here for four and a half years.

How has your background in journalism helped you in your role with the Hawks?

Having a journalism background is huge. Bad writing on social media is so detectable. You can tell who runs each account and what their background is. A lot of people make grammar and spelling mistakes; they are not good writers. Having a writing background and being able to write for audiences is critical. It is essential not only to understand the basic tactics of writing like grammar and spelling, but also to understand the importance of having a strong writing style to cater to audiences on social media. My background in journalism and writing has helped me tremendously.

Since emojis are one way Hawks fans communicate, however, we use them as well. We try to keep up to speed on what brands are doing on social media, but we also keep up with the behaviors of users and what media they are using.

What is your favorite part of working in your area of social media expertise?

There are some perks to the job. I like what I do, and obviously, to live cover real-time events during basketball games is a high area of interest for me. That’s what fans pay the most attention to. It’s exciting to see what type of content fans react to, and which content takes off and goes viral. Being in the arena and participating in the day-in and night-out experience is great for any fan of basketball and of the industry. This is a really, really cool perk to the job.

What is one thing you can’t live without while working in social media?

You are not the first person to ask me this. We use a tool to cut highlights from a game, and we do this in real time, which allows us to cut videos into highlights as they happen on the court. Without that tool, our social media would have a completely different look. We use video highlights to help fuel our social media and post content in real time, because that is what fans are demanding and what they want. Being able to deliver that to them, through an easy and automated highlights tool, has been a game changer for the past two seasons. It’s now become second nature for us. We have seen our numbers (on social media) spike up tremendously since we got this tool. It has been cool to watch and extremely helpful.

What is your favorite social media account (person/brand/etc.) to follow, and why?

There are several. In our industry, there are a lot. Team-wise, within the National Basketball Association (NBA), I always look at the Portland Trail Blazers. The Chicago Cubs also do a great job, as do the Sacramento Kings, the New England Patriots, the Atlanta Falcons, and the Atlanta Braves. Major League Baseball (MLB) does a really good job at this as well. Looking at brands outside, I think SB Nation is really strong in terms of content—not so on social media, but the writing is really good. Other brands for news like Mashable, TechCrunch, and SportTechie are also good at the brand level.

Some brands excel on certain platforms; for example, the Falcons are really good at video—that is what they have established for themselves, and they do this across all channels. The Cubs as well as the Kings are great on Twitter. The Golden State Warriors have expanded their reach and become really good at targeting and reaching different fan bases on Facebook.

What is the most challenging part of working in social media?

League guidelines along with organizational guidelines and other challenges are always things we have to consider. We need to be aware of the lines in the sand. It’s better to take chances, and sometimes it is easier to ask for forgiveness than permission in our industry. We have done a good job of figuring out where those lines are, but we always want to do more, and sometimes we would love to post, but we know it is not worth the headache at the end. Manpower is also a challenge. Out of the 30 NBA teams, we have the smallest digital staff. It is a challenge to execute...
an idea with limited resources, but we are trying to be more effective with what we have.

**What do you wish you had known when you were starting out?**

One of the things I look for is experience. Have you managed a brand before (for an internship, a part-time job, or a school club)? Writing is also important to me. Can you write? I go back to my background and how many people struggle with that basic skill for social media. Part of this is instinctive—do you have it? Do you understand audiences? Do you understand targeting and how rich media and language play a part in what you write? Do you know what makes good content and what doesn’t? Can you tell right from wrong? Some of this can be taught, but some of it is instinctive. It is a natural process, I suppose. That’s what I would pass along.

**Do you have any tips for emerging social media professionals?**

Maintain personality of voice in your content. A fair amount of people use social media that way. At the Hawks, we want to integrate our personality in a way that is a little cheeky and a little snarky. But we do not want to be disrespectful. There are times when we respond in a cheeky or witty way, as long as we do not overdo it or cross the line of disrespect. We have seen a positive correlation between this brand voice and our audience engagement. I definitely plan for this, and part of our brand voice involves interjecting when it is appropriate.

When hiring for social media, I look at applicants’ personal accounts to see what they are talking about—what they share and how they write. This is important, and you have to show some of the posts or updates you have done for a brand, including content you have created and posted yourself and links or content associated with it. What are you most proud of? As far as a deal breaker, having a social media account is a must. If you do not have an account on one of the major platforms (Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter), I am probably not going to consider you. Establish an active presence on a platform and set your account to public. It makes no sense to have a private account if you want to work in social media. Plus, what does your personal account say about you? Is it professional or informative? You can still be personal while also being professional at the same time. If you have ever managed social media for a brand, I’ll want to see you do it before I hire you. Many companies and organizations don’t have someone dedicated to social media and would be happy to have a volunteer to help, and this would be a great way to start working in the field. You can even do this remotely, at any time. A lot of experience you can get without a lot of travel.

When writing for social media, you have to know your target audience. That’s obvious, and this is the first step. Know the demographics of your audience members and what content they react to. Use some good sample cases that you know do well analytically to produce some good stuff. If you are just spinning your wheels, thinking your audience will react to certain content without any data to back it up, that’s probably not a good idea. A writing background is strong (grammar and creative writing skills are a must), and a defined brand voice is huge. Do not treat your social media channels like PR channels because they are not. They are much bigger than that. Having that brand voice and defined style of writing is really important. For us, for example, we want to be the voice of a Hawks fan. Everything we post and do is from the point of view and framework of a Hawks fan. We strive to represent the Hawks in each and every single post we make. Although the voice is different for every brand, knowing your brand’s voice and being able to define it will help you. Plus, it will give you a guideline for any content you create.

Jaryd Wilson can be reached at @JarydWilson on Twitter.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Writing effectively on social media is one of the most challenging responsibilities of public relations professionals. Many job postings emphasize this fundamental skill that all young professionals should have in their wheelhouse and tool kit. We sometimes forget that writing is a way to communicate with our audiences, but in
order to be a successful social media manager, you need to have strong writing skills along with an understanding of the six Cs of effective writing for social media:

- Content
- Community
- Culture
- Conversation
- Creativity
- Connection

Writing for social media, however, is not rocket science. You may be intimidated by social media, but this chapter will walk you through the steps to follow not only for your own social media platforms, but also for those of your client, brand, or business. Writing is the bridge that connects ideas and shares them in a strategic and relevant manner. Successful social media writers create messages that are relevant for their audiences, resonating with them on a personal and emotional level, and that at the same time are professional and aligned with the brand’s mission and core attributes. The content created for social media also needs to be entertaining, which will give audiences more opportunities to remember and share what they felt and saw with others. Whether you write an update on Twitter or a long-form blog post depends on the brand, community, situation, and goal in mind.

Content. Many people have a stake in creating and writing content for social media. Journalists use it to release breaking news to their readers. Marketing professionals use it to manage the data and metrics from their marketing campaigns. Public relations professionals use it to monitor, listen, and engage with audiences in real time to build on relationships and keep track of conversations. All of these roles have a place within the social media space, and all require creating, curating, and featuring relevant content while evaluating its effectiveness for senior management.

Social media professionals need to make sure that the content they share is relevant to their target audiences. We need to be aware of what truly matters to the audience we are trying to reach. Both primary and secondary research can help. In addition, exploring the segments of your audience (different categories and groups of individuals you want to reach in your social media efforts) might come in handy. User interests, location, type, and time on social media are some factors to review to determine the content that may be most relevant to your intended audiences. People also want to receive content that is useful. Promotional ads and updates are not always the most successful, especially for brands that go for the “hard sell” or abruptly push users to take action when there has been no transition or buildup to the relationship.

Writing skills come in various forms and include duties surrounding the importance of creating good content. You can have the best writing style, but the substance of content and information you are sharing, creating, and engaging with on social media also needs to be high in quality. These duties include editing, copywriting, and creating messages that fit the appropriate channel and audience. The content that a brand publishes and presents on social media is the first impression that audiences get online, so if the copy is filled with grammar errors, spelling mistakes, or
unrelated jargon that is inappropriate for the audience and channel, this can significantly impact the overall impression the person or company wants to make. These are just some of the reasons why excellent writing skills are so important and fundamental for today’s social media professionals.

Not only must we be aware of having professional and unique content on each platform, but we also must understand the differences to take into consideration when posting on one channel versus another. What works on Instagram may not work on LinkedIn or as a blog post. Each post and platform needs to be evaluated based on the audience, brand, community, situation, and channel. With social media, a lot of channels need to be taken into consideration, as well as the rapid evolution of each channel. New features, algorithm and format changes, and other elements are constantly added on to these platforms, which makes it harder in some cases for social media professionals to adapt their content to fit the needs and framework dictated by these social media companies.

Community. Community, or a group of individuals who come together based on common interests, values, and characteristics, is part of the mix when it comes to creating content that resonates with audiences. The overall dynamics of people’s interactions on social media is one of the most important factors to consider. Do people want to receive content? When do they want to receive content? Do they want engagement, or just to consume content? What are the appropriate times and places to share content and messages with them? These are a few questions we all have to ask ourselves when looking at a community. In Chapter 5, we determined some of the monitoring and listening techniques that can be used to create and foster new ideas for messages, content, and engagement. Sometimes community is also aligned with the overall culture (common practices, work-life ethics and practices, professional experiences, and beliefs of a group of individuals) of the company, brand, or community in question. Etiquette, feelings and significant issues, and historical approaches that characterize how each party interacts and formulates relationships are key factors related to culture that social media writers should consider.

Conversation. Conversation is also important in making sure social media content resonates with key audiences. People do not want to be advertised to or promoted to all of the time. They will be more likely to tune out and go on to the next thing if they feel a brand is pushing too hard with its promotional messages. Conversation is not just responding to a post, but rather engaging in a discussion that is meaningful to both parties. This is where understanding the type of brand voice and writing style on social media is important. Your response to a person’s inquiry about your product could be either formal or snarky. Responding appropriately in communications that are not official social media marketing messages is an important skill. Sometimes we can anticipate these informal types of scenarios, and other times social media managers have to think on their feet, essentially, in their responses. Conversing may take some training, education, and testing to see how each social media manager would respond to each message and how far or closely aligned the responses are to the brand voice and mission.

Social care, discussed in more detail in Chapter 12, takes place when brands are able to have conversations in real time with audiences to answer questions, address concerns, or even bounce around ideas. The creativity involved with how these conversations arise (perhaps thanks to monitoring and listening practices) can help build
memorable connections. Strong writers on social media should have skills to address each type of communication.

CONTENT CREATION VERSUS CONTENT CURATION

Within the overall social media strategy discussed in Chapter 6, content creation and curation are two parts of essential writing. You do not want to have 100% of one versus the other, but rather you want to provide a mixture of content that is originally created (content creation) and content that was published from a different source (content curation). Remember, whether you are looking to create content or curate content, the key for successful engagement and interaction on social media is to have good, strong content. Good content needs to be aligned with the goals and objectives set in place for a social media initiative. If the goal is to provide a sense of community and build awareness of the brand, you want to create stories integrated with videos, testimonials, and even blog posts. However, if the goal is to increase share of voice and buzz related to a campaign, you want to create content that drives home a strong call-to-action statement (share this, tweet that, use a certain hashtag, create a video, etc.). For example, the amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) Ice Bucket Challenge succeeded in creating strong content not just for the campaign in 2014, but also as the campaign continues to build momentum. The ALS Association gave audiences clear, concise, and actionable steps.

On the other hand, curation involves collecting and strategically selecting content from various sources that may be relevant for your key audiences. For example, the University of Southern California (USC) Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism might share content from another source about a fellowship or professional opportunity because this content is relevant for its key audiences on a specific platform (e.g., Twitter). This sharing in turn creates a perception among your audience members that you are not only creating original, valuable content, but also taking the time to make sure they get all of the information needed to make an informed decision about various possibilities and opportunities.

The overall purpose of curation is to provide your audiences with useful information that not only resonates with them, but builds on their perception that your brand online is a valuable resource. That said, there should be a standard approach for deciding which resources, accounts, and outlets you would recommend as possible sources from which to share content. It may not be a common practice for a specific brand (e.g., USC) to share content from a competing school (e.g., UCLA) with its audiences, but it is key to monitor and listen to your competitors on social media, just as it is important to note which brands and accounts you would share information from. Once you have a systematic approach and protocol on how to handle this, include it in the social media writing guide (discussed in the next section) as well as the social media policy maintained within a brand, organization, or agency.
UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TONE AND VOICE

When creating your brand voice (Lee, 2014a), make sure it does not reflect your own perspective, but rather that you embody the personality characteristics that are unique, memorable, and authentic to your brand. This is a challenge that can test you as a person for your personal accounts, but also when you are representing a brand online. All brands have an individual voice, characteristics, and history that make them memorable to their key audiences. The voice projected on social media must be aligned with how others perceive the company, organization, or person. Any disconnect between that perception and how people or brands share content online can result in loss of community members, business, and, in some cases, acknowledgement as a viable member of the industry.

Sometimes tone (Lee, 2014a) is confused with brand voice, but in a sense, they are interconnected. Tone is the overall voice characteristics you want to interject within the content you are writing. For example, do you want to sound more professional and formal when you are representing a publicly traded business, or do you want to intertwine some personality into your content by adding humor? The tone of your social media content can be tailored depending on the situation, channel, and audience in question (Buffer, 2018). In addition, the social media tone you convey must be aligned specifically to the characteristics of each area. Understanding the key demographics, psychographics, and location of your community (audience) will influence the overall language (professional, casual, hip, etc.) you use to accomplish your overall objectives (e.g., to create awareness, to entertain, or to educate). All of these factors are interconnected with not only the brand voice, but the overall tone set for the social media brand.

Let’s apply these concepts to a foodie example. Voice is the ice cream flavor, and tone serves as the extra toppings and sprinkles. Each voice (like ice cream) has a foundation that makes it unique and different. Vanilla ice cream has certain key ingredients, for example, but each brand (like Ben & Jerry’s or McConnell’s) has a unique twist and process for creating its products, which is analogous to establishing a brand voice. The unique combination of tone, however, is showcased in the toppings. Some people are cookies-and-cream types, and others love chocolate-covered bacon. Each topping (or, in the case of social media, tone) showcases an additional layer of the brand voice. So many different combinations can be created that no one brand uses the same voice or tone in its message strategies. The most important factor to keep in mind is to be yourself. You do not want to “force” your brand voice and
persona in your written social media content if it is not authentic. This is a time not to be like everyone else, but rather to separate yourself from others. Identifying the gaps in others’ brand voices and the overall tone of their social media content is the name of the game. We are all unique, and we need to embrace ourselves wholeheartedly on social media without any concern about our differences. Brand voice allows us to establish a human connection online, and allows conversations, relationships, and communities to be established in an authentic and true manner.

Along with maintaining a consistent and authentic voice with the appropriate tone, social media content should reflect the overall personality as well as the language of the brand or individual. What attributes do you want to display and communicate in your messages? How will you create content to show this in a certain and consistent way? What is the overall purpose and rationale for each post? Social media professionals must take all of these questions into consideration for each individual post, update, and video created and shared online.

How Do You Find Your Brand Voice in Your Writing Style?

This is an important step to consider before you start writing for social media. Before even writing up a Facebook ad or creating an Instagram Story, ask yourself the following questions to make sure you are being true in your social media messages to your personal brand or to the brand of a company for whom you work:

- How would you describe your brand (or yourself) in terms of personality attributes?
- What are some attributes that do not reflect your brand?
- How would you describe your relationships with your audiences online based on the content you share?
- How do people feel about your content?
- What is in it for your key audiences? What benefits are they getting from being part of these communities and receiving your messages?
- Who are your key audiences? What are they motivated and inspired by?
- How would you describe your competitors? How do they communicate online? What is their overall tone? How would you describe their brand voice?
- What goals do you have for how your audience feels about you?
- What is the purpose for your content? How would you rate your content right now, and what are your goals for how your audience will respond to your content?
- What do you want your audience to do in response to your content?

Table 7.1 outlines the various types of content message strategies and executions that can be organized and framed within a social media writing guide. The table showcases examples of how social media managers can break down their writing content based on platform, type of content, key audiences, what voice to present and implement, what writing style to utilize, and how the writing style will be approached.

Social media managers can take several actions to engage with their audiences on social media and brainstorm ideas for content that supports the brand mission and
**TABLE 7.1 Sample Writing Guide for Social Media**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Voice</th>
<th>Writing Style</th>
<th>Approaches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Ad, video</td>
<td>Customers, marketing pros</td>
<td>Engaged and interested in purchases</td>
<td>Professional, product/brand focused, audience focused</td>
<td>Have a call-to-action statement and link to a specific place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>Tweet, video</td>
<td>Fans, media professionals</td>
<td>Entertainment, informative</td>
<td>Witty, snarky, conversational, informational, engaging</td>
<td>Media with specific hashtag or link to track</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>Album, story, post</td>
<td>Bloggers, influencers, fans</td>
<td>Community</td>
<td>Educational, conversational, audience focused, product/brand focused, inspirational</td>
<td>Short update statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
<td>Story</td>
<td>Generation Z, content creators</td>
<td>Experiential, humorous</td>
<td>Audience focused, entertainment</td>
<td>Visual storyboard approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>Pulse post</td>
<td>Marketing professionals, business-to-business customers</td>
<td>Informative, approachable, educational</td>
<td>Professional, educational</td>
<td>Update with key hashtags tagging key words, and cross shares on Twitter and Facebook</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

overall voice online. Kevan Lee (2014b) of Buffer outlined 71 ways for social media managers to create content online. Specifically, he mentioned a few to consider for each platform. Table 7.2 outlines some of these suggestions for building and creating content on social media. In addition, resources like Buffer (2018) allow you to tailor posts to a specific channel and platform, which helps social media managers create the most effective content that is relevant for the audience as well as compatible with the platform format.

You also want to have a set plan to evaluate the message creation steps that already take place within the company or agency. Exploring how team members communicate with each other, with audience members, and outside of the brand is a factor to consider here as well. It is important to conduct a team brand voice audit because writing in another voice (e.g., a social media community manager writing on behalf of a brand on social media) is one of the most challenging tasks for social media professionals to master. This audit can be a way to determine the overall feeling and perception of a brand voice, but you can also address and highlight this by doing research. Exploring the main attributes people associate with a brand through survey questions, focus groups, or even word clouds associated with the brand online based on social media monitoring analysis are just a few ways of identifying some of the attributes tied to a brand voice.

Along with a standard approach for social media conduct and policies, there needs to be a written and digital social media writing style guide for all social media professionals to follow, embrace, and engage in. This guide will help set forth the brand...
### Table 7.2  ■ Platform Characteristics and Content Writing Ideas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Platform Characteristics</th>
<th>Content Ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Facebook** | Max character limit is 63,206, but posts that have 80 characters have the most engagement (Read, 2017). | • Start an update with a question  
• End an update with a question  
• Create a list  
• Add a quote from an article, interview, feature, or event/speaker  
• Update with emojis  
• Use an image with text overlay  
• Attribute and tag other accounts  
• Provide a customized URL |
| **Twitter** | Character limit is 280 but options are available to add images, videos, and collages, and tag users, now.  
• You do not always have to use all 280 characters. | • Place comments before headline  
• Place comments after headline  
• Include commentary + quote of tweet  
• Place tweets inside the comments  
• Integrate multimedia  
• Conduct polls  
• Attribute with tag  
• Create Twitter Moments  
• Use Twitter threads to elaborate ongoing conversations that are more than 280 characters (use /1, /2, etc., as you see fit to complete the conversation).  
• Tag accounts in image or video |
| **Instagram** | | • Give tutorials  
• Try microvisual blogging  
• Offer giveaways and contests  
• Ask a question + probe for engagement  
• Feature products  
• Share tips and tricks  
• Give Q&As  
• Highlight historical features  
• Give interviews  
• Post updates  
• Go behind the scenes  
• Provide storyboards (posts + Instagram Stories)  
• Mix up content for Stories (still images, videos, Instagram-based apps, text only, etc.)  
• Tag accounts in updates, stories, and albums |
| **LinkedIn** | | • Post an update  
• Post an update with a URL  
• Share a Pulse article  
• Post an update with a video  
• Post an update with an image |
standard and overall voice online, while also ensuring that the messages attached to social media are consistent across the board. This is considered the brand standard and framework for social media professionals.

Certain consistent sections need to be included in the social media writing guide. Sometimes brands will already have established a set social media writing guide, but other times one has to be set forth from scratch. Looking at the main components as follows is important for either following or perhaps creating a social media writing guide for a client, person, or business.

**Content you are passionate about.** This is content that you feel focuses on your strengths as a person (if you are managing a personal account) or as a representative of a professional account. If you are passionate about blogs, videos, GIFs, tweets, Instagram posts, or another type of content, discuss what makes it relevant to your cause. Most importantly, remember that it may not take as much time to create and write these pieces of content due to your positive association with them. It is always easier to write content that you like to create rather than content you are “forced” to create.

**Content that your audience members are passionate about.** This is where you will have to conduct a thorough audit of the type of content that will be well received by your audiences, and what content needs to be revamped for the appropriate platform. This content may be similar to or different from the content you are personally passionate about as discussed in the section above. If the content is the same for both parties (the person or organization and key audiences), then you are in a good position for the moment. However, if these perspectives are different, then an adjustment needs to be made. Keep in mind that these items must be surveyed on a regular basis since audiences evolve over time.

**Audience and persona summary.** Your audience is one of the first things to define and discuss. To write the best content, you first have to note who you will be reaching, what messages and content they want to hear, and what they are looking for in the online community. This is another way to identify the various channels of communication to focus on. You may assume your audiences will gravitate to other places and channels, but in order to fully write effective content, you have to know where they are going in order to reach them. Keep in mind that language and tone are also big factors here since different audiences will have access to these messages at different times and places, and they may want information presented to them in different ways. Social media professionals have to account for the various ways in which people comprehend messages across the channels. Some audience members may be more likely to respond to video, whereas others may have a preference for long-form content. Tailoring the content for the channel, audience, and situation is crucial for social media professionals to establish a strong connection with their audiences.

**Branding.** Along with writing great content, social media managers need to make sure that their content is informed by the art of branding. Branding is more than just slapping a logo on an image or using a specific hashtag. Instead, it encompasses the way in which a message comes across in its voice, image, community, and perception. There should be a rationale for creating the content, and it should be aligned with and connected back to the overall mission and purpose of the company, person, or organization. Content that is not aligned with the designated characteristics or perceptions of a brand could mislead audiences. Branding also translates into what
messages are sent out on behalf of the brand. For example, Coca-Cola does not send out social media messages that are not representative of its overall persona or image. The company stays true to its “Open Happiness” mantra and writes content aligned with this perception. Message branding exercises to determine the types of messages reflected in the brand voice and whether they are (or are not) connected to the brand form an important component of the social media writing guide. Table 7.3 provides a template for the type of content reflected in the brand voice, the type of content not reflected in the brand voice, how the content is connected back to the personal or professional voice, and a purpose and rationale.

### Types of Writing Styles for Social Media

For every brand and professional, a specific writing style and tone for communication is one of the most important things to solidify before executing written content. Creating a writing style guide will provide a consistent and sustainable format for writing, framing, and executing messages on various channels depending on the situation. The following are examples of the writing style approaches brands have taken to create their content (for more examples of voices on social media, see Seiter, 2012):

- Professional
- Snarky and Spunky
- Product and Brand Focused
- Audience Focused
- Inspirational
- Conversational
- Witty
- Educational
- Personality Focused

**Professional (General Motors).** Brands that are traditional yet consistent with their online presence treat social media like any other traditional communication channel. General Motors has one of the more professional and traditionally oriented voices on social media. The company’s approach focuses on providing clear information to
audience members while giving them an opportunity to interact on the account. This does not necessarily force the audience members to engage, but rather extends an invitation to be part of the conversation.

Most of the professionally oriented messages on social media come from corporate accounts, allowing the individual brand accounts (like Chevrolet) to showcase their personalities on social media a bit more. What is good about the General Motors style is that it is concise and appropriate for the platform, and it has a call to action to engage audiences with a question. This provides a window of opportunity and an invitation for the user to participate in the experience and conversation. The focus is to create content and a message that drives back to the corporate brand mission, but also extends a hand to those who perhaps want to join the conversation.

**Snarky and Spunky (Wendy’s).** One rising trend in writing content for social media comes from brands who want to be “snarky” —or integrate their attitude within the messages on social media to provide entertainment and promote reactions. Wendy’s, for example, has done this successfully on Twitter. The company has had an active social media presence on this site for years, but only in 2017 did the Wendy’s social media manager take over and engage with audience members in a more informal and conversational way. Wendy’s has been praised for this interaction by its fan base, while others trying the same approach have not been as well received. Some organizations have tried to jump on the Wendy’s bandwagon, but because the tone was not consistent with their overall portrayal online, this caused some additional challenges. As Jay Baer (2017) points out in *Adweek*, some brands may not get the same reception as Wendy’s, and posting
snarky content could result in negative perceptions for a brand, and even loss of trust, among its key audiences.

Knowing when being snarky will work comes down to understanding the community, culture, and position within the industry for the brand. Plus, getting buy-in from leadership also needs to be accounted for when it comes to taking this approach. Feeling the burn or using the fire emoji may have some short-term success (e.g., it might get a laugh or even a mention from a high-profile account), but this approach may be difficult to maintain in the long run. People move on to the next big thing that comes along, and they will be looking at what else is trending. However, building long-term relationships means focusing on the different steps needed to maintain and sustain the community on each platform. Other brands known for their personality approach include Arby’s, Denny’s, and the Houston Rockets.

Keep in mind that while it is appropriate to be creative and entertaining for audiences when it comes to message execution on social media, brands have to ask themselves, “What do our customers and audiences really want?” The social media management company Sprout Social found that most consumers and audiences want brands to be honest, friendly, and helpful, and being snarky was rated in last place (Morrison, 2017). Understanding what key audiences expect and want to see is an important driver of the content social media managers share, create, and execute on behalf of a brand.

Product and Brand Focused [Under Armour]. Some brands use their writing style to “stay in their lanes.” These brands, such as Under Armour, are innovative within their industries and among their competitors, but they stay focused on what they want to say and create that will help their bottom line. This Facebook update, for example, showcases a call to action to take advantage of a running series. This focused approach has a certain goal in mind for the user, such as an opportunity, sale, experience, or connection to the brand.

Audience Focused [Budweiser]. One of the best brands for storytelling is Budweiser, and the company has taken a similar approach to social media. When the brand partnered with VaynerMedia for a campaign to celebrate the retirement of Derek Jeter’s number (2) for the New York Yankees in May 2017, it integrated the message, content, and execution across all platforms on social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube). The message was tailored appropriately for the audiences in question, and the focus was creating content that best represented the message. Different video lengths were integrated along with a specific campaign hashtag, #ThisBudsFor2. The hashtag, message, and content all resonated but about the experience Budweiser wanted to share with the rest of the audience, the campaign’s primary focus.
Inspirational (Adidas). There is a time to promote products and services, and there is a time for brands to use their writing style to enhance an idea or feeling. Adidas does this very well for key message strategies on social media. The content from Adidas on social media focuses not just on the company’s product, but also on the overall psychological emotions it wants to persuade its audiences to feel as part of this community.

Conversational (Dunkin’ Donuts). Brands and users alike should note that social media is not always driven by sales. First and foremost, social media is about being social—which means striking up conversations. Interaction and two-way communication between brands and others is one way to foster relationships virtually. Several brands do this very well, such as Charmin and Hootsuite. Dunkin’ Donuts, as well, not only taps into the interactive nature of social media, but engages with audiences through various appropriate means, including emojis. The overall tone and framework of the content shared by the donut and coffee company is fun and engaging and, for the most part, positive in nature. This inspires people to interact with the content, which then leads to engagement that can be monitored and tracked.
Witty (Taco Bell). Including humor and cleverness in your brand messages on social media can be both challenging and memorable. Taco Bell as a company has become a leader in the art of being creative yet witty in its strategies and messages, which it executes in a memorable manner aligned with the brand. This approach to crafting messages or adding wittiness to a brand voice may not work for all organizations, but social media managers may want to look at this as an opportunity to branch out to their key audiences. Taco Bell is conversational and fun on social media, but adds a layer of wit to its messages that makes the company a bit different from other brands on social media. The taco emoji campaign (#TacoEmojiEngine) was automated, but the content created to get the word out about this feature was well executed and backed by strategy and insights, which were supported by research and connected back to the brand.

Educational (Sephora). One position people can take on social media is the role of educator. Information, tutorials, resources, and additional articles that may be relevant for key audiences are a few things that brands can contribute. Sharing this type of content will help foster relationships that will extend to others referring their network to the account, which of course builds a stronger community. One brand that has done this very well is Sephora. The beauty company not only promotes its products and campaigns, but creates a content calendar that allows it to schedule messages and content that educate audiences about the latest makeup trends, tutorials, and even how-tos for getting a certain look.
Personality Focused (Charmin). Some brands try to make themselves more “human” in the eyes of their key audiences. Personality-focused accounts can be either loved or despised on social media. It really all depends on how the brand is perceived as a traditional company, and whether or not it has engaged in a way that is authentic, memorable, and entertaining to its key audiences. While earlier in the chapter we discussed the difference in reception to brands that are snarky and brands that are not, brands with a personality voice in their messages focused more on the positive nature of their engagement, rather than trying to make others feel they have been “burned.”

One brand that has been very successful in using personality is the toilet paper brand Charmin. The company is engaging and interactive and focuses on a positive tone in all of its conversations on social media. The adjacent message illustrates how Charmin interacted with sports reporter Darren Rovell after the brand sponsored Michigan tight end Jake Butt before the 2017 NFL draft.
Common Writing Mistakes on Social Media

It is possible to make many types of writing mistakes on social media. People write inappropriate content, produce spelling or grammar mistakes, or share false information. Social media is still the first line of communication for a lot of people, and first impressions matter. Making a mistake or taking an approach that is not aligned with how audiences perceive you as an organization or person may lead to further consequences down the line. Here are a few examples of some common mistakes that happen on social media from a writing perspective.

United Jumping Into the #NuggsForCarter Trending Topic

Do not attempt to jump on the bandwagon when it is not appropriate. There is a time and place to interject yourself into a conversation. Ever since Oreo released a tweet during the 2013 Super Bowl (“You can still dunk in the dark”), brands (e.g., United) have tried very hard to interject themselves into a conversation when they have not been invited. Survey the environment and listen to what others are saying. You do not want to start a conversation about how you were “trying too hard” to be relevant on a trending topic or issue. Sometimes, silence is golden.

Delta Ghana Tweet

Research all components of your message before posting. Doing your research and double-checking your facts and sources is important. Making sure you use the right image for your message, especially if it is related to a trending event, is key. Otherwise, your mistake will be open for everyone to see and react to, like what happened with Delta when it posted an image for another country rather than Ghana during the World Cup.
Before engaging in a conversation with a trending hashtag, research the hashtag. In 2014, for example, DiGiorno became a trending topic when it did not research the hashtag #WhyIStayed before creating a message that caused an outrage on Twitter. The #WhyIStayed hashtag was created around the serious issue of domestic violence in light of the NFL cases involving Ray Rice back in 2014. Before speaking, see what people are really talking about.

Check spelling and grammar. Social media is the front door to a brand, and social media managers must be aware that each message and approach to audiences needs to be properly edited before hitting the publish button.

Evaluate the possible reactions people might have to your content (good and bad). Before hitting post, ask yourself, “How would people react to this? What are some ways this could be misinterpreted? What are some of the things we would need to address before we send this out?” These extra steps could save brands (like Vera Bradley) a lot of grief and time. People may interpret messages differently, and you may have the right intentions, but if people feel they have been slighted at all on social media, they will come out in full force. Taking the extra time to copy edit and discuss all of these factors will be for the best in the long run.
BEST PRACTICES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA WRITING

Spelling and grammar are still important—and, in fact, are more important than ever—in social media. First impressions matter, and these principles are important in every channel and medium used in communication. While sometimes conversations may be informal online, it is still necessary to use proper grammar and spelling principles. No one wants to see their names misspelled online or to have information presented in a distracted manner. The same principles used in journalism (adherence to a style guide, checking fact errors, etc.) should be not only encouraged in social media writing practices, but enforced. In other words, there is no excuse for spelling mistakes or grammar errors in your updates.

Keep track of the best tools to support your writing. To write the best content, you have to have the right tools and services. While most social media managers use a variety of services for their social media management tools, some are specifically available to help social media managers create the best content possible before hitting the publish button. Here are a few to check out:

- **Grammarly.** This platform allows you to check your grammar and spelling online for a variety of different forms of content. From long-form content to discussion board posts, this tool helps ensure you do not make any grammar or spelling mistakes.
- **Hemingway App.** This tool helps when you are using another program (e.g., Word) to copy and paste content from offline to online.
- **Slick Write.** This online program not only checks grammar and spelling, but helps out with word associations (e.g., thesaurus). It can even check the overall word structure to make sure you are not using the same phrases over and over again, or even writing biased statements you may not have intended to include.
- **Trello.** This is a great tool if you are working on a team (as a social media manager) and want to make sure all of the content going out is synced and aligned with the appropriate message, tone, and content that reflects well on the company. You can have various columns set for ongoing content, completed content, and status of content. This might look similar to a content calendar, but Trello allows the social media team to make everyone aware of the state of the content being created and when it will be executed.
- **Hashtagify.me.** Are you wondering what hashtags to use for your content on social media, specifically Twitter or Instagram? This is a good tool for exploring some of the associated hashtags you might want to use to connect to your key audiences.
- **Ulysses.** Whether you are creating a PDF to upload to SlideShare from a presentation deck or writing content to share on a blog, this tool allows you to download any file, anywhere, which is great for a social media manager on the road.
- **Wordy.** Do you need an editor to review your content? This service allows you to have someone look over your content with another pair of eyes and offer feedback and suggestions.
Brevity is the name of the game. The goal is not to squeeze the highest number of words into a single space. Sometimes, the hardest content to write is the shortest. Your messages should be concise and appropriate for the platform. In some cases, you will be asked to write short-form content (fewer than 140 characters), while in other cases, you will be asked to write long-form content (500–1,000 words). Social media professionals are expected more than ever to embrace multimedia content, or a mixture of short- and long-form content with the addition of multimedia. Whether it is a GIF, video, or infographic attached to an update, all of these elements have to be taken into consideration. Testing these messages based on the platform algorithm (e.g., Facebook versus Twitter) is a very helpful step.

Don’t force a certain writing style. Be yourself. While it is tempting to follow in the footsteps of other social media professionals and brands on social media, this may be a temporary fix to addressing key message strategies. Copying others is not viewed as authentic and true to the brand (personal or professional). To build a community and reputation on social media, brands and others have to be true to how they approach their audiences online, and a lot of this depends on how a brand creates content. No one wants to have the same writing style or brand voice on social media—this is almost like the kiss of death. The goal here is to be unique in how you present, share, and create messages using various writing and visual content that is true to who you are. We can always look for inspiration, but we have to ask ourselves, “What are other brands doing that works for them? What can we learn from them as far as how they present their content on social media? What do we have that they do not have? How can we showcase this in a sustainable way across all of our platforms and channels? How does our brand voice on social media impact our mission and vision statement as a brand?” These are just some additional questions we have to continue to ask ourselves and our team members when it comes to our writing style and content.

Put audiences first; write content they not only want to share, but have to. Make sure your content matches what the audience not only needs, but expects to see, from your brand or company on social media.

You want audiences to get the information they need in a quick manner, but also to recognize that they want to experience something in return with the messages and content. Experiential media (where audiences feel like they are part of the conversation and community) and content that sparks emotion are more likely to be shared among audience members.

Emphasize embracing messages, not hard-sell messaging. The point of social media is to be social, not to bombard people with paid ads trying to make a quick sell. Social media is about building relationships that could ultimately turn into financial returns, but the steps (whether from a marketing standpoint or a public relations perspective) should never start off with the hard-sell message. Brands have to meet people in a place where they want to actually have a conversation. Not everyone wants to interact with brands on social media—that should be noted and not forced. Understanding the health dynamics of a community (from monitoring and listening protocols) will inform social media professionals about when it is or is not appropriate to enter a conversation with audiences. Evaluating the state of the mood and situation will help determine which messages audiences will embrace, and which messages will be discarded completely or even spark outrage among audiences.
Don’t be inconsistent and confuse your audiences. Changes within a company among community managers require a smooth transition to make sure the writing style and brand voice is the same across the channels. You do not want audiences to know there has been a change within the company. Make sure your messages are not full of jargon that is commonly used in the industry but does not translate into other areas. Do not overwhelm your audiences in ways that distract them from the message. It is better to have a clear point and call to action than to distract people with a ton of emojis, visuals, and jargon all communicating different things. Keeping it simple is the name of the game.

Have a balance between your personal and brand voices. Many social media professionals maintain personal and professional accounts. One thing social media professionals struggle with when it comes to writing for their own platforms is the transition between their own personal voice and their professional voice. The purpose of writing on social media is not to make it 100% about you all of the time. You want to have a ratio of four areas when it comes to writing content:

- 25% should focus on your story and personal journey (what you are doing, where you hope to go in the future, what you can offer as a professional and person, etc.).
- 25% should focus on sharing content that may be relevant for your community or industry.
- 25% should focus on engagement (answering questions, giving shout-outs to fellow community members and brands, commenting and sharing your perspectives, etc.).
- 25% should focus on producing value and paying it forward.

Understand the differences in content and writing style based on the platform as well as the audience. Some platforms allow you to communicate visually with not a lot of text, and on other platforms short-form content (fewer than 140 characters) will not be effective or efficient for the intended audiences. For example, updates that are effective on Facebook are a bit longer than those, of course, on Twitter (63,206 compared to 280 characters), but in some cases long-form content will be necessary to explain a concept, idea, or story for an intended audience. Keeping the messages short while writing in an active voice are also elements to consider here, even with the opportunity to write longer pieces on certain platforms.

Be brief and direct. Another goal for writing on social media is not to make it a million pages long. Brevity and concise writing (which sometimes is harder) is the name of the game. Creativity in using each word for a specific purpose is important. However, you do not want to lose your audiences completely by using jargon or emojis they do not understand. We may know what they mean from the social media side of things or even from pop culture, but we have to make sure we edit and tailor our messages to be not only direct, but effective. We are not all mind readers, and you do not want audience members to be confused about what you are trying to communicate on social media. Understanding the call-to-action statements highlighting what you want to do for audiences will be effecttive in the long term. Tell people what you want them to do based on being exposed to a certain piece of content, but also work toward giving them a direct statement about what to expect once they are exposed to this message.
CHAPTER SUMMARY

Excellent writing for social media is a fundamental task for social media professionals. Writing, like most activities and hobbies, takes time and dedication. Having the right tools and resources to create the best content is extremely important for social media managers. However, in order to become an effective writer, you have to practice writing. Posting content on behalf of a brand, agency, or person requires a strategic framework that identifies the overall brand voice, tone, and writing style to maintain across all of the platforms. Like all aspects of social media, writing style guidelines and expectations for what content should be created on each platform changes, but fundamental skills and best practices remain the same.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. Why is excellent writing for social media important for professionals and brands today?
2. What is the difference between brand voice and tone? How can they be incorporated into social media content?
3. Identify the different writing styles discussed in the chapter. Which ones do you feel are the most effective for brands? Which ones best describe how you approach social media?
4. What are some best practices when it comes to writing for social media? What are some things to avoid doing on social media?

EXERCISES

1. You are a social media manager for a local school system. Some of your colleagues have been watching some larger brands be creative with their writing style, embracing a “snarky” approach. What are some benefits and challenges you would want to identify in this writing style for your client?
2. You are now a social media intern for the Kentucky Derby and Churchill Downs. You have been asked to update a writing style guide for social media for all of their platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat). What are some things you would want to have in your writing guide? What are a few updates you would suggest they create for Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter?
3. You are programming content to put forth in your content calendar, but you see a trending topic arising in your community. Participating in this trend would be appropriate for you to jump into the conversation. What steps would you want to take before participating in the conversation?
4. You are graduating and about to apply for a job with Droga5, the agency working with Under Armour. If you wanted to showcase your writing skills on social media, what pieces of content would you want to create based on the Under Armour brand voice?

REFERENCES

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