How to Hashtag: A Publisher's Guide

While all social media managers at this point know what a hashtag is, sometimes it's not so clear when to use them or which ones to choose. We get a lot of questions at SocialNewsDesk about them from our media partners, and spending a few minutes to think about the hashtag you plan to use can make a big difference in the way your posts perform and ultimately how successful your strategy is. Here are some guiding principles for using hashtags effectively in your newspaper's social media.

Why use a hashtag at all?

Our take on hashtags is that they don't hurt (unless you have a tweet full of them, that's just annoying). It kind of depends on what you want to get out of it. Do you want to make it easier for people to follow the thread of a story (like #Baltimore), or collect user-generated content (#DetroitFireworks), or promote a sense of community (#GoSpursGo)? Is it something people are already talking about, or are you starting the conversation from scratch? These things all matter when you're deciding on a hashtag. Every use case is unique, and every event doesn't call for a branded hashtag. Some don't need a hashtag at all, some have a well-established hashtag, and sometimes using two hashtags can get you into the conversation and brand your tweets at the same time.

Creating your own hashtag

Striking out on your own with a hashtag tends to make more sense for newsroom branded initiatives (KSAT 12 in San Antonio used #KSATFiesta for their Fiesta coverage, for example) as long as you are also acknowledging that there are other hashtags about the same topic (for instance, everyone in San Antonio is probably using #Fiesta more than anything else). Create your own when it makes sense, and also include hashtags for the conversation that's already going on. You don't want to wind up with hashtag soup, but two or even three hashtags can be fine, especially if you work them into the body of your tweet. Twitter has some great best practice recommendations.

Hopping on other hashtags

While creating a hashtag can help differentiate your coverage on social media from the other outlets in town, you also don't want to miss out on bigger conversations that are happening. Including popular hashtags on big stories can help more people see your posts, and make you part of the overall thread of the story. Stories like #Ferguson and #Baltimore stand out, but looking at what other hashtags are bubbling up about a story can inform which hashtags you choose to include.

While covering the San Antonio Spurs in the 2014 NBA Finals, KSAT used four hashtags – which seems like a lot, but they were able to write them into the body of most of their posts. The branded hashtag was #DriveforFive (as the Spurs were on the chase for their fifth championship), plus they included #NBAFinals (ABC's network hashtag), #GoSpursGo (the Spurs' own hashtag) as well as #Spurs (of course). They also added #NBAChamps into the mix after the Spurs sealed the deal. KSAT earned over 2 million Twitter impressions over the course of the Finals.

Facebook hashtags

Hashtags are really starting to take off on Facebook, with the News Feed algorithm grouping posts about similar topics together. This feature can help your posts show up in a block if you're using a newsroom hashtag on ALL of your posts. It would show up something like "Tampa Bay Times posted about #TBTimes" with 3 of your posts grouped together. It can make brands stand out a little more if they're consistent about using Facebook hashtags all the time.

If you're concerned about people seeing posts way later in the day, don't worry – that will happen regardless of whether or not you're including a hashtag. It's just the way Facebook works now.

A few things to watch out for

Be sure you check out your hashtags in advance if you are creating one – a simple Twitter search can uncover any tweets that you might not want to be associated with. Also, consider how easy it is for people to spell, and look for hidden words in your hashtag that alternative capitalization might reveal (see this @nerdist #letitsnow tweet from a few years back for an example of what I mean).

Have some great examples of how your newspaper is using #hashtags?

Or social media questions we can answer? That's our speciality, along with great software tools to move your team forward and help you master these and other social media best practices! Contact us today.