Apply Writing Skills to Social Media Copy

Step 10

Overview

Prepare for the surge in on-the-job social media writing.

Speak individually to each reader.

Craft compelling headlines and chunk your information.

Write engaging LinkedIn and Twitter posts.

If you’re a small business owner, independent contractor, freelancer, or public relations and marketing professional, you recognize the power of social media to achieve business goals. The rest of you have probably gotten fairly adept at using platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, and Yelp. And you may have posted your profile on LinkedIn, where you interact with workplace peers, friends, and acquaintances.

Over the next several years, get ready for more frequent and intensive workplace “socializing.’ Many companies have already expanded their use of social media platforms to connect with their staff, customers, potential hires, consultants, and others. That means you’ll need to build and continually fine-tune your professional presence on LinkedIn and become more adept at using other social media tools.

If you work for a major corporation, you may soon participate in “employee advocacy,” where organizations call upon workers at all levels—tapping the power of large numbers—to help build their brands and deliver key messages to target audiences on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and other platforms. These initiatives are apparently paying off. A study by Bambu (2017) revealed that companies with employee advocacy programs increased revenues by an average of 26 percent in the first year of implementation.

On top of this trend, an increasing number of organizations are creating their own social enterprise networks to enhance internal communication—beyond the scope of its corporate communication specialists. According to a study by Deloitte, business leaders use social enterprise networks to create a “highly engaged workforce to support them in achieving business goals faster.” These networks can enhance a company’s capability to share best practices, crowdsource for quicker answers, discover new technology solutions, recognize high-performing employees, and drive cross-functional collaboration.

Whatever the reason, you will likely be writing more social media copy related to your job or business. And all your Facebook experience crowing about your daughter’s gymnastics award or describing the bliss of your tropical vacation may not help you write the results-driven social media text required in the workplace.

To be an effective social media writer, hone the skills addressed in earlier steps, such as simplicity, brevity, flow, organization, persuasion, and tone.

Maximizing the impact of social media often requires strategies such as integrating images and videos, timing posts, linking to websites, inserting keywords for search engine optimization, creating hashtags, and more. For our discussion, we’ll stick with crafting copy that helps you achieve the desired results. Following are the most important social media writing skills to master, especially for LinkedIn and Facebook. (Plus, the final tips two address specific tips for LinkedIn profiles and Twitter posts).

Stop Readers With Compelling Headlines

If you don’t entice readers with an engaging headline, bid them farewell because they won’t stick around for the rest. Advertising legend David Ogilvy explains, “On the average, five times as many people read the headline as read the body copy” (Dahl 2007). As with email subject lines (see step 9), a compelling social media headline (such as for LinkedIn, Facebook, or a blog post) can dramatically increase readership.

Two of the best approaches for headline-writing are to be explicit (highlighting the message to follow), or to be intriguing (offering a small tease and impelling readers to stay with it and discover something valuable or fascinating). Here are two examples of each type of headline:

Explicit

To Write Persuasively, Address Readers’ Hot Buttons

Reduce Taxes: Fund an IRA

Intriguing

Drop Your Cable Plan?

5 Tips for Breakthrough Interviews

Speak One-on-One to Readers

Take the conversational style preferred in business writing (see step 1) to a more personal level. For example, if you’re talking with a friend about your frustration contacting a software provider for assistance with your new mobile platform, your dialogue—and social media post—could start like this: Do you ever feel like software companies hate talking to real customers?

To embrace this style, imagine yourself in a one-on-one conversation about the topic you’re writing about. Don’t be afraid to be a bit edgy, as in the previous example. Just keep it civil and professional.

Chunk It

The more we get overloaded with information from traditional and social media channels, the more our attention span shrinks. Most people prefer to process messages in brief “sound bites.” So keep paragraphs super short and, where appropriate, break up text with subheads (see more in step 4).

In her blog post offering advice on addressing workplace bullying, Catherine Mattice Zundel, president of Civility Partners, uses a colloquial and captivating lead-in followed by three simple subheads to explain why employees fail to act:

I’ve been thinking about WHY people don’t take action against workplace bullying lately, and I’ve come up with three reasons:

Fear

In the case of workplace bullying, taking action means standing up to the bully. It possibly means standing up to managers who aren’t willing to acknowledge it’s a problem. What happens if people don’t listen? Will the bully retaliate? What problems will taking action create? These questions are answered in the context of fear, so the answers lead people to avoid taking action.

Spotlight

Many people don’t want to be in the spotlight. Why would someone volunteer to be in the spotlight if it meant they will be punished by the bully? Or worse, by the organization?

Apathy

Some people just don’t care enough to take action. Maybe the bullying doesn’t bother them personally. Or maybe they think it’s normal to be treated that way, so they don’t feel compelled to take action against normalcy.

Ask Questions That Prompt Actual Responses

When writing website copy, a newsletter article, or an email blast, you might ask a rhetorical question like, Are you ready to enjoy higher returns on your IRA? But on social media sites like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter, you can engage your audiences by asking questions that seek out responses.

For example, as a realtor looking to build relationships with prospective sellers, you might pose this question: How satisfied are you with the choice of urgent care centers in your community? Many readers, especially those who believe these choices are limited, may take advantage of the voice you’ve given them to air their concerns and opinions. Getting readers to engage is more than half the battle with online business communications. Once you have their attention, try to convince them to take the desired action, such as signing up for a webcast, attending a conference, or purchasing a product.

Respond to Extend the Conversation

Typically, when replying to messages on social media, you want your comment to be meaningful, bettering the chances that the other party will engage with you. Say you’re a leadership development consultant and see a tweet from a prominent management consulting firm about a recent trend on managing Millennials. If you respond with a request to set up a meeting to discuss your expertise with Millennial workers, you may be perceived as too aggressive—and there go your chances of starting a relationship. Instead, embellish what was said, perhaps offering a different perspective. Let’s play out this scenario on Twitter:

ZY Management Consultants tweet

Over 50% of Millennials disappointed with communication from supervisors.

Your response as leadership consultant

@ZYMgmtConsult Millennial workers want more face-to-face communication from bosses, says study.

Through this thoughtful post, you’ve extended the conversation with the individual at ZY, who will likely view you as a valued source on this topic—and may reply or continue the online dialogue, which could help develop a meaningful relationship.

With LinkedIn Profiles, Immediately Convey Your Value

Anyone who wants to know more about you—recruiters, new business prospects, potential partners, and others—goes to your LinkedIn profile, probably your most important personal branding tool. Even as a small business owner with a dynamic website, you may find that those deciding whether to contact you go first to the LinkedIn profile.

Grab attention with a compelling headline followed by an engaging summary of what you can deliver and your approach—speaking directly to your reader. Use a conventional or off-beat style, depending on factors such as your industry, role, and target audience. For more on writing LinkedIn profiles, see Appendix B.

Write Short, Captivating Tweets

Twitter, the ultimate “sound-bite” channel, permits 140 characters to get your message across, but as with all business communication, if possible, strive to go shorter. With so few words to convey your idea, make each one count with simple, direct messages that spur responses.

Among the strategies for composing effective tweets—depending on the subject—are conveying a clear call to action, creating urgency, evoking an emotional response, and piggybacking on breaking news and trends. Some examples of engaging tweets:

HubSpot

72.6% of salespeople using social media outperformed their colleagues who were not on social media.

Maria Shriver

What do you do if you’re told you’re too aggressive?

YearUp (education provider)

Hiring a cookie-cutter team can stifle innovation. Why employers need to look outside the box.

Deloitte

Thirsty for a change: The untapped potential of women in urban water management

Your Turn

To get others to read your social media copy, you need to captivate them instantly with as few words as possible. Try this exercise to hone your skills in grabbing attention:

Imagine that you’re either applying for a new job or trying to land a new client. The decision maker has asked all candidates to tweet something compelling about yourself or your company. Compose a tweet that summarizes your most value-added quality (perhaps from information on your LinkedIn profile) to convince the individual to select you.