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WENDY’S: capitalizING on emerging social media trends[[1]](#endnote-1)

Fabrizio Di Muro wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The author does not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The author may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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By November 2020, Wendy’s was an iconic North American fast-food chain that had a history of doing things differently. From its Frosty dessert, square patties, and early adoption of a value menu, the company had its own take on what a fast-food restaurant should offer.[[2]](#endnote-2) Wendy’s innovative approach throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and the early 2000s extended to such creative campaigns as “Where’s the beef?”[[3]](#endnote-3) and the “Dave” advertisements. More recently, Wendy’s had developed a unique Twitter strategy. While the company used Twitter to promote its own products and respond to customer complaints, it also regularly mocked users, insulted competitors, and responded to teasing and other playful challenges from Twitter users.[[4]](#endnote-4) Evaluating the company’s success with its social media strategy was difficult. How could Todd A. Penegor, Wendy’s chief executive officer (CEO), determine whether the company’s approach on Twitter positively impacted sales and profits? How could he improve the company’s future social media strategy?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WENDY’S

Wendy’s was founded by Dave Thomas in Columbus, Ohio, in 1969. The company’s name and logo were inspired by Thomas’s eight-year-old daughter, Melinda, who was nicknamed Wendy. By 2020, Wendy’s, with more than 6,500 locations, was the world’s third-largest fast-food chain (behind McDonald’s and Burger King). Wendy’s had always been an innovative company in many aspects of its operations. While the company offered the traditional fare that one expected from a fast-food chain—burgers, fries, and soft drinks—Wendy’s always seemed to do things a little differently. For instance, since the company’s inception in 1969, it had always served a dessert called a Frosty, “a cross between a milk shake and soft-serve ice cream.” For years, the company had featured square patties (by 2020, they had been discontinued), and it was the first to introduce a value menu in 1989. By 2020, Wendy’s had developed a secret menu, a rarity for a fast-food company, which featured the Meat Cube burger, the Barnyard Burger (beef, chicken, and bacon), and the Valley Crispy Chicken Club sandwich.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Wendy’s also had a unique approach to promotion during its history. In the mid-1980s, Wendy’s launched the memorable “Where’s the beef?” advertising campaign, which starred actress Clara Peller. This campaign was very successful, and the phrase “Where’s the beef?” even entered into the American pop culture lexicon. Following this campaign, Wendy’s featured its founder in its “Dave” ads. This unique approach lasted from 1989 until Thomas’s death in 2002.[[6]](#endnote-6) From 2012 to 2016, Wendy’s used a variation of this unique family theme to promotion when it featured the character “Wendy” Thomas (often played by Morgan Smith Goodwin)[[7]](#endnote-7) in a series of advertisements with the tagline “Now that’s better.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE MAJOR SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Facebook

Facebook was the largest social media platform, with approximately 2.7 billion users as of November 2020.[[9]](#endnote-9) Among all Internet users, 72 per cent reported that they were on Facebook. While Facebook was well represented across all genders, races, ages, and social economic statuses, some important usage differences remained. Facebook attracted more women than men, as 77 per cent of female Internet users reported being on Facebook, compared with 66 per cent of male Internet users. Furthermore, while people of all ages tended to use Facebook, usage was more prevalent among younger people: 82 per cent of Internet users in the 18–29 age category and 79 per cent of Internet users in the 30–49 age category were on Facebook. In contrast, Facebook users represented only 64 per cent of Internet users in the 50–64 age category and only 48 per cent of Internet users who were 65 and older. Facebook’s culture centred on friendship. Everyone you knew was probably on the platform—parents, grandparents, friends, co-workers, and former classmates. Facebook users shared personal photos, videos, news, and often checked the website on lunch breaks and in the evenings.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Twitter

Twitter had 340 million users as of October 2020.[[11]](#endnote-11) Among all Internet users, 23 per cent reported that they used Twitter. Twitter’s demographics were not as well balanced as Facebook’s. Twitter was most popular with young adults and with people who identified as Black or Hispanic. In particular, about 39 per cent of Internet users in the 18–49 age range were on Twitter (32 per cent of Internet users in the 18–29 age category and 29 per cent of Internet users in the 30–49 age category), while only 13 per cent of Internet users in the 50–64 age category used Twitter, and only a mere 6 per cent of Internet users 65 and older were on Twitter. In terms of ethnicity, 28 per cent of Black Internet users were on Twitter, and 28 per cent of Hispanic Internet users were also on Twitter, compared with 20 per cent of White Internet users. Twitter tended to be used by people who were wealthier: 25 per cent of Internet users who used Twitter earned between $50,000[[12]](#endnote-12) and $75,000, while 26 per cent earned over $75,000. In contrast, only 21 per cent of Internet users who were on Twitter earned less than $30,000, and 19 per cent earned between $30,000 and $49,999. Twitter was an especially popular place to talk about brands: approximately 49 per cent of Twitter users followed companies and brands, compared with 16 per cent of social media users overall. Furthermore, 42 per cent of users used the platform to learn about products and services, 41 per cent provided opinions about products and services, and 19 per cent had used Twitter for customer support at least once.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Instagram

Instagram was a social media platform that centred on sharing photos and short videos. Instagram was particularly popular for posting photos because users could filter and modify their pictures to improve personal appearance. Among all Internet users, 28 per cent reported using Instagram. The platform appealed more to younger people, to females, and to those who identified as Black or Hispanic. A whopping 55 per cent of adult Internet users in the 18–29 age category used Instagram, while only 11 per cent of Internet users in the 50–64 age range were on Instagram, and a mere 4 per cent of Internet users aged 65 and older used Instagram. Furthermore, 32 per cent of US teens listed Instagram as their favourite social media network, meaning that Instagram was a platform with a young audience. Women slightly outnumbered men on the platform, as 31 per cent of female Internet users were on Instagram, compared with 24 per cent of male Internet users. In terms of ethnicity, 47 per cent of Black Internet users and 38 per cent of Hispanic Internet users were on Instagram, outnumbering the 21 per cent of White Internet users on the platform. Instagram offered an attraction similar to Twitter, as a significant percentage of Instagram users (53 per cent) used the platform to follow their favourite brands. Furthermore, 44 per cent of Instagram users relied on the platform for doing research on a brand.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Pinterest

Pinterest was a photo-sharing social media platform where it was possible to also share short videos. While this platform was similar to Instagram, a significant difference was that Pinterest viewed itself as more of a visual search engine than a traditional social media platform. Posts on Pinterest (called pins) were usually just a picture with a link directing a user to the website where the information was pulled from. This platform did not emphasize communication between users. Pinterest was popular: among all Internet users, 31 per cent indicated that they were on Pinterest. It was a highly popular platform for female users, as a whopping 44 per cent of female Internet users reported being on Pinterest, compared with 16 per cent of male Internet users. Unlike the majority of social media platforms, Pinterest was not overly popular with teenagers. In fact, the Pinterest crowd trended older: 50 per cent of Pinterest users had kids, and the platform had a reputation for attracting stay-at-home moms. Furthermore, an older crowd seemed to appreciate the topics of interest. For instance, the most shared topics were food, home, and do-it-yourself, and the most popular searches were fashion and recipes. Unlike other social media platforms, Pinterest seemed to play a larger role in purchasing. Millward Brown, a market research company, uncovered that 93 per cent of Pinterest users relied on the platform to plan purchases. Other research revealed that Pinterest users spent more money than users of other major social media platforms. For example, when Shopify users were referred by Pinterest, they spent $80 on average, compared with $40 on average when Shopify users were referred by Facebook.[[15]](#endnote-15)

LinkedIn

LinkedIn differed from the other four major social media platforms because of its focus on professional networking. Among all Internet users, 25 per cent reported being on LinkedIn; as of October 2020, LinkedIn had approximately 766 million users.[[16]](#endnote-16) This platform had balanced demographics across both genders and across various ethnic groups. Users on LinkedIn tended to be middle-aged, college-educated, and wealthy. As expected, LinkedIn was predominantly used in the business-to-business (B2B) world. In fact, 94 per cent of B2B marketers used LinkedIn to distribute content, and 80 per cent of B2B social media leads were generated from LinkedIn. Working professionals used this platform to post résumés and connect with businesses and potential employers.[[17]](#endnote-17)

AN ANALYSIS OF WENDY’S TWITTER STRATEGY

By 2020, most businesses used social media as part of their operations, and many used social media in their attempt to improve sales and develop loyal followers.[[18]](#endnote-18) On Twitter, Wendy’s engaged in traditional promotional activities by posting videos and advertisements of its products. However, the company also engaged in activities that many businesses often ignored, such as responding to customer complaints,[[19]](#endnote-19) general banter with Twitter users who were seeking a reaction from the company, and shots at competitors.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Responding to Customer Complaints

When companies had a social media presence, consumers used these channels to air their complaints or issues with the company. As a result, customer service was an important part of companies’ social media utilization.[[21]](#endnote-21) Most consumers expected to receive a response to a query or complaint on social media within an hour. Thus, responding to customers’ issues in a timely manner was an extremely important element of social media usage. Regardless of this expectation, only 17 per cent of businesses actually responded within an hour, and 21 per cent of businesses did not respond at all. This lack of response could have detrimental effects on a company’s brand.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Wendy’s tried to respond to as many user tweets and customer complaints as possible, as the company took complaints seriously and moved quickly to resolve any customer issues. If the company’s response was delayed, it apologized for the delay. A typical example of a Wendy’s customer complaint response occurred on April 1, 2017, when a user then named dj tweeted, “@Wendys does the asiago chicken club sandwich come with bacon on it.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Wendy’s replied back with “Yes,”[[24]](#endnote-24) to which dj said “Well, the last two times I’ve ordered it there was no bacon there.”[[25]](#endnote-25) Wendy’s quickly tweeted back, “Oh no! Please DM [direct message] us with info on this location, along with your number, and we’ll make it up to you.”[[26]](#endnote-26) In this interaction, Wendy’s responded quickly, expressed concern over the customer’s issue and resolved the matter quickly and professionally.[[27]](#endnote-27)

Portraying Authenticity

By 2020, it was important for companies to be authentic on social media. “People use social media because they want to interact with other people, not with some unnamed, personality-free company rep,” noted Jenna Woodul, the executive vice-president and chief community officer for LiveWorld, a social content marketing company.[[28]](#endnote-28) Stephanie Petelos, a media representative for ProctorU, noted that “a personal touch makes a significant impact. It annoys people when responses are automated or sound too robotic—and [that can cost you] followers. Making the extra effort to respond with a little wit can put a smile on someone’s face and leave a positive impression.”[[29]](#endnote-29) While there was no specific formula or method that achieved authenticity, it seemed that humour, wit, and a general human touch with posts went a long way. Furthermore, it was helpful when companies avoided endless promotional spots, as such constant promotion gave the impression to consumers that companies’ sole purpose on social media was to sell more products. Instead, it was recommended that companies share relevant user-generated content (UGC).[[30]](#endnote-30)

Wendy’s tried to feature clever and witty posts in an attempt to portray authenticity. For instance, on March 7, 2017, *The Square Deal*, Wendy’s blog, posted a break-up letter to Wendy’s Spicy Chicken Nuggets on Twitter. Wendy’s replied with “Gone, but never forgotten. Let’s talk Spicy Chicken Nuggets.”[[31]](#endnote-31) Wendy’s managed to be clever and witty even when promoting its own products. On April 3, 2017, Wendy’s tweeted the following message for promotion of its “4 for $4” deal: “It can be hard to stay grounded with an impossibly good deal like having the Double Stack in the 4 for $4.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Wendy’s also shared a lot of UGC. This was probably the best way to be authentic, as Wendy’s did not create the content itself in an attempt to sway users to buy its products. Instead, the company simply shared content that users had made that put the company, brand, or its products in a positive light. Wendy’s even shared content that it was not tagged on when the company thought that the content was witty and on point. For example, a user named “a chicken nugget” tweeted “Blood type: nuggets,”[[33]](#endnote-33) which Wendy’s retweeted.[[34]](#endnote-34)

Lampooning Users

A unique element of Wendy’s Twitter usage was its continued lampooning of competitors and users alike. This trend began on January 2, 2017, when a Twitter user then-named Thuggy-D (@NHride) questioned the company’s “fresh, never frozen” motto when he tweeted, “@Wendys so you deliver it raw on a hot truck?”[[35]](#endnote-35) Wendy’s replied with “@NHride Where do you store cold things that aren’t frozen?”[[36]](#endnote-36) Thuggy-D became defensive and lashed out at Wendy’s: “@Wendys y’all should give up. @McDonalds got you guys beat with the dope ass breakfast.”[[37]](#endnote-37) Wendy’s snarky response roasted (made fun of) Thuggy-D: “@NHride You don’t have to bring them into this just because you forgot refrigerators existed for a second there.”[[38]](#endnote-38) This response went viral. Amy Brown, the Wendy’s social media manager who composed the tweet, commented that this exposure happened after a writer from Upworthy with a large Twitter following took a screenshot of the conversation between Wendy’s and Thuggy-D and posted it on his personal Twitter account. Many users retweeted the conversation, and high-profile people eventually started to pay attention. Brown reported that Anderson Cooper re-enacted the conversation on air. Furthermore, two popular YouTube personalities made a skit of the conversation, which included people reacting to Wendy’s tweets. Wendy’s received significant attention from this incident, as Brown reported that the company received more tweets in a 24-hour period shortly after the conversation than it had received in the prior month (December 2016).[[39]](#endnote-39)

Following this incident, Wendy’s received many tweets wherein users requested that Wendy’s roast them! Wendy’s obliged, as it provided a vast array of snarky replies. For instance, a user named “i need Christmas socks” tweeted, “Waiting for the @Wendys roast to happen to me.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Wendy’s delivered: “Turn your hat around, you aren’t Bart Simpson and it isn’t 1997.”[[41]](#endnote-41) Wendy’s roast was based on the user’s Twitter picture.[[42]](#endnote-42) Another user who had a picture of himself sitting on weights, tweeted, “I set a notification for this moment. DO YOUR WORST!”[[43]](#endnote-43) Wendy’s roasted him with “Most people lift weights. They don’t just sit on them.”[[44]](#endnote-44) Wendy’s received countless similar requests. One day, a user named Luis Sanchez asked to be roasted by Wendy’s, and the social media manager responded with “Get one of your 51 followers to roast you.”[[45]](#endnote-45)

Posting Witty Retorts

While some users asked to be roasted, other users trolled (made intentionally provocative statements to) Wendy’s with playful comments and queries. Furthermore, some users teased Wendy’s about other fast-food chains. Wendy’s tried to respond with snarky and humorous replies to these retorts.[[46]](#endnote-46)

Retorts to Playful Comments and Playful Queries

Wendy’s received many playful questions, such as when a user named “Non-Applicable” tweeted, “@Wendys I don’t have a Wendy’s where I live, what should I do?”[[47]](#endnote-47) Wendy’s tweeted back, “You might consider moving.”[[48]](#endnote-48) Another user tweeted, “@Wendys My friends like Wendy’s, but i don’t, what do I tell them?”[[49]](#endnote-49) Wendy’s reply was clever and funny: “Apologize for being wrong.”[[50]](#endnote-50) Another playful query came from the user “NATIVE,” who tweeted, “Why’s your beef square?”[[51]](#endnote-51) Wendy’s responded with “Because we don’t cut corners.”[[52]](#endnote-52) Salah Abbas asked Wendy’s on Twitter, “whos running this savage page?”[[53]](#endnote-53) Once again, Wendy’s replied with “Three dogs in a trenchcoat pretending to be human.”[[54]](#endnote-54) Wendy’s often received playful tweets about relationships. A user named “Kai Lawns” tweeted, “@Wendys can you give me relationship advice.”[[55]](#endnote-55) Wendy’s responded with “If you’re asking a fast food Twitter, this relationship might be doomed.”[[56]](#endnote-56)

On April 5, 2017, Wendy’s received a playful query from a Nevada teenager named Carter Wilkerson: “Yo @Wendys how many retweets for a year of free chicken nuggets?”[[57]](#endnote-57) Wendy’s quickly set the target at 18 million retweets. Wendy’s response seemed to motivate the Nevada teenager, who created the hashtag #NuggsForCarter in an effort to achieve 18 million retweets. Wilkerson’s campaign went viral—even such corporate behemoths as Apple Music and Microsoft Corporation, and celebrity Ellen DeGeneres publicly supported Wilkerson’s efforts. All of this talk generated significant positive publicity for Wendy’s. Although Wilkerson did not reach the 18 million retweet mark, he did amass 3.6 million retweets, a world record for a single tweet. Wendy’s decided to give him free nuggets for a year anyways. Typically, conversations on social media were quickly forgotten, but this particular conversation lived on in infamy, which allowed Wendy’s to experience positive publicity and high brand engagement long after the initial conversation. In fact, the conversation was still relevant one year later when Wendy’s tweeted, “Had a whole year and still didn’t get to 18 million? smdh [shaking my damn head],”[[58]](#endnote-58) along with a snapshot of the original conversation. Wendy’s also tweeted, “Hey @carterjwm, Happy One Year Anniversary! Thanks for helping make this year extra weird. Just how many nuggets did you end up eating?”[[59]](#endnote-59)

Retorts to Challenges

Users sometimes teased Wendy’s about other fast-food restaurants. Wendy’s typically replied with snarkiness and humour. On December 18, 2017, a Twitter user named Anthony Marinilli tweeted, “@Wendys McDonald’s is better.”[[60]](#endnote-60) Within a minute, Wendy’s replied: “At freezing beef.”[[61]](#endnote-61) Wendy’s comment received approximately 112,000 social media interactions (defined as the total number of retweets, likes, and comments). Another user named Gabriel Rodriguez tweeted, “@Wendys BK [Burger King] for the win,”[[62]](#endnote-62) to which Wendy’s replied with “what’d they win? A participation trophy?”[[63]](#endnote-63) On February 13, 2017, a user named “Kimm” tweeted, “@Wendys I just ate BK. What you gunna do about it?”[[64]](#endnote-64) Wendy’s promptly responded with “Feel sorry for you.”[[65]](#endnote-65)

Given Wendy’s propensity to respond to challenges from users, the company continued to receive numerous tweets that teased and challenged them. One day, Wendy’s received a tweet from a user named Jacoby Byerly, who tweeted, “@Wendys IF YOU DON’T REPLY BY 6 IM GOING TO MCDONALDS AND EATING 30 CHICKEN NUGGETS”[[66]](#endnote-66) Wendy’s tweeted back, “Don’t do that to yourself.”[[67]](#endnote-67) Another user named Justin tweeted, “Going to In n Out what should I get? @Wendys.”[[68]](#endnote-68) Wendy’s promptly replied: “Out.”[[69]](#endnote-69) A user by the name of “lady door misses fob” asked Wendy’s on Twitter what Subway was good at, and Wendy’s replied with “underground transportation.”[[70]](#endnote-70) Someone else named “Exeat” asked, “@Wendys what’s your second favourite fast food restaurant”[[71]](#endnote-71) Wendy’s replied with “the next closest Wendy’s.”[[72]](#endnote-72) On another occasion, the company received a tweet from a user called “The Irrelevant Streamer,” which said, “I want Wendy’s But My Girlfriend wants McDonald’s what do I do.”[[73]](#endnote-73) Wendy’s offered up some interesting relationship advice: “There are plenty of fish in the sea.”[[74]](#endnote-74)

Shots at Competitors

Wendy’s also used Twitter to take shots at its competitors. Sometimes Wendy’s initiated the veiled insults, while other times competitors initiated the showdown. For example, on March 30, 2017, McDonald’s tweeted, “Today we’ve announced that by mid-2018, all Quarter Pounder burgers at the majority of our restaurants will be stocked with fresh beef.” [[75]](#endnote-75)Wendy’s saw this and responded, “@McDonalds So you’ll still use frozen beef in MOST of your restaurants? Asking for a friend.”[[76]](#endnote-76) Wendy’s response received 249,200 interactions while McDonald’s post received only 14,400 interactions. This imbalance suggested both that Wendy’s response generated greater engagement among consumers and that Wendy’s was able to shift the conversation from McDonald’s to itself.[[77]](#endnote-77) Wendy’s targeted McDonald’s on other occasions—for example, on March 6, 2018, Wendy’s tweeted a picture of a Big Mac, along with the phrase “Poor Big Mac, stuck with frozen beef.”[[78]](#endnote-78) Wendy’s accompanied this tweet with a second tweet that said, “Some people are going to use fresh beef in SOME cheeseburgers, SOME of the time. We believe in using fresh, never frozen beef in every cheeseburger everyday.”[[79]](#endnote-79) Another time, McDonald’s accidentally tweeted, “Black Friday \*\*\*\*Need copy and link\*\*\*\*.”[[80]](#endnote-80) Wendy’s responded with, “When the tweets are as broken as the ice cream machine.”[[81]](#endnote-81) Wendy’s reply received approximately 1,060,000 social media interactions, while McDonald’s original post generated only approximately 97,000 social media interactions. These numbers suggested that Wendy’s response generated high levels of engagement and also intensified attention on McDonald’s silly tweet.[[82]](#endnote-82)

Wendy’s had also taken shots at other fast-food chains. On December 19, 2017, a user named Gina tweeted that she wanted to go on a date with Wendy’s and take her to Burger King. Burger King saw this tweet and replied with “treat her like the princess she deserves to be.”[[83]](#endnote-83) Wendy’s snarkily replied to Burger King with the following tweet: “If you are looking for a princess, you might want to let it go. Not interested in the frozen beef kingdom.”[[84]](#endnote-84) While Burger King’s response received approximately 1,000 interactions, Wendy’s response received approximately 35,000 interactions. Once again, it seemed that Wendy’s was able to shift the focus and conversation away from a competitor and toward itself. A similar situation occurred with Carl’s Jr. when a user named Andrew Morgan asked Wendy’s how they compared to Carl’s Jr. on Twitter. Before Wendy’s could reply, Carl’s Jr. stepped in and responded with “LOL [laugh out loud] they don’t.”[[85]](#endnote-85) Wendy’s waited a while and eventually responded with “Yeah, for one, if we were going to diss another restaurant we’d have more than zero likes and RTs [retweets] after 13 hours.”[[86]](#endnote-86) Carl’s Jr. eventually received some interactions, but only about 1,600. In contrast, Wendy’s received about 83,000 interactions, meaning that Wendy’s had likely again shifted the conversation and focus away from Carl’s Jr. and toward itself.[[87]](#endnote-87)

Frequency and Consistency of Twitter Posts

For many businesses, one social media issue was that they either posted too little or too much. Both behaviours were problematic. When a company did not post frequently enough, it likely hurt the company’s ability to generate brand engagement and sales. While it was difficult to determine how frequently to post, people seemed to expect companies to post daily. According to Gloria Rand, a social media consultant,

You can’t just post once a week—or less—and expect people to come flocking to your door to buy your product/services. If you don’t have the time or commitment to devote to posting five to seven days a week, you might as well not bother and focus on more traditional advertising methods such as direct mail or pay-per-click ads.[[88]](#endnote-88)

While companies were expected to post often, they also needed to ensure that they did not post too frequently, which could lead to user disengagement and would likely hurt sales. According to Nicolle Hiddleston, a social media manager, “Although it’s important to get your message across on social media, too many posts can lead to ‘unlikes’ and ‘unfollows.’”[[89]](#endnote-89) There was no consensus on how often companies needed to post, but it was generally accepted that posting daily was fine but that posting several times an hour every hour was probably too much.[[90]](#endnote-90)

Wendy’s seemed to strike the right balance with regard to the frequency of its posts. The company was active on Twitter every day, but it did not initiate posts every hour. The company had a high volume of posts, but it was not excessive, given the large volume of tweets that the company received. Perhaps more importantly, Wendy’s was consistent in its tone and message when it interacted with users on Twitter. Wendy’s communication with users and competitors alike consistently revealed a snarky and humorous tone. It seemed that each roast and each remark was written in the same clever, funny, and snarky style. Furthermore, Wendy’s message was also remarkably consistent. When Wendy’s trolled McDonald’s, the company also highlighted key differences between the two companies—namely, that Wendy’s used fresh, never frozen, beef, while McDonald’s used frozen beef. It was likely that Wendy’s consistent tone and message led to both high brand engagement and a distinct identity. A distinct identity was very difficult for companies to achieve; although many companies had great promotional campaigns, they often failed to maintain the same tone and message in subsequent campaigns, which had happened to Old Spice.[[91]](#endnote-91)

TWITTER STRATEGIES OF THE MAJOR FAST-FOOD COMPANIES

McDonald’s

McDonald’s had an approach on Twitter that was very different from Wendy’s approach. To begin with, McDonald’s was significantly less active than Wendy’s on Twitter; McDonald’s generally tweeted once a day and usually had five to seven tweets per week, while Wendy’s tended to tweet more often. The nature of McDonald’s tweets also differed from the nature of Wendy’s tweets. McDonald’s used Twitter mostly to feature formal promotional materials and to remind consumers about current and upcoming promotions. McDonald’s also used Twitter to generate excitement around both the return of seasonal products (e.g., the Shamrock Shake) and the arrival of new products.[[92]](#endnote-92) McDonald’s did not take shots at competitors on Twitter or tease users with sharp and witty comments, as Wendy’s often did. By February 2021, McDonald’s had 3.7 million followers on Twitter, and most of its tweets included numerous comments, likes, and retweets, which suggested that McDonalds’ tweets had generated significant engagement.[[93]](#endnote-93)

Burger King

Burger King’s approach on Twitter was similar to both McDonald’s approach and Wendy’s approach. Similar to McDonald’s, Burger King tweeted on a daily basis and generally had five to seven tweets a week. Burger King used Twitter to promote the company’s products and deals that it was offering. In addition, the company also made a significant effort to retweet its customers’ comments and compliments, including the gratitude and affection shown by its most loyal customers.[[94]](#endnote-94) Similar to Wendy’s, Burger King teased users on Twitter. One day, a user named Jules Cabigon tweeted, “I’m in love with Burger King Onion Rings. Y’all invited to the wedding.”[[95]](#endnote-95) Burger King replied with “next time ask for our blessing first.”[[96]](#endnote-96) Another user named Miami heat fan (derogatory) tweeted, “you walk into the burger king, you have the power. You have the power to have it your way. In essence, you are the burger king.”[[97]](#endnote-97) Burger King responded with “identity theft is not a joke, Nat.”[[98]](#endnote-98) By February 2021, Burger King had 1.9 million followers (significantly fewer than McDonald’s and Wendy’s), and the majority of its tweets had attracted numerous comments, like, and retweets. Despite having fewer followers, Burger King was still able to generate significant engagement.[[99]](#endnote-99)

the impact of wendy’s Twitter strategy

Wendy’s Twitter strategy had an impact on the company’s social media following. Wendy’s saw a 125 per cent increase in the number of followers from January 2017 to December 2017. During this time period, the company increased its Twitter followers from approximately 1 million to approximately 2.24 million.[[100]](#endnote-100) By November 2020, the company had 3.7 million Twitter followers.[[101]](#endnote-101) These data suggested that Wendy’s funny and snarky voice on Twitter had resulted in significant brand engagement with current and potential customers.[[102]](#endnote-102) Industry experts had taken notice of Wendy’s high brand engagement. Jonathan Gardner, vice-president of marketing at ShareIQ, a company that helped brands optimize social media content, noted that Wendy’s “images, their videos and their text have high engagement. They get shared a lot. It gets retweeted and liked a lot. McDonald’s—that video heavy feed of theirs—basically product spots—gets watched a lot but they don’t get shared and liked a lot. So their engagement is a little different.”[[103]](#endnote-103)

The company’s use of humour had also helped it to create a more positive brand image, increase brand loyalty, and attract more and more followers who looked to Wendy’s for entertaining content. Wendy’s seemed well aware that it had become a destination on Twitter: “We believe that people are coming to us today on social to be entertained. That’s the commitment we have to deliver on,” commented Carl Loredo, Wendy’s vice-president of brand and advertising.[[104]](#endnote-104) One of the key ways that Wendy’s had developed greater brand loyalty was the company’s willingness to respond to as many tweets as possible, even if those tweets were challenges that were made simply to elicit a reaction from the company’s Twitter account. Wendy’s responses to these tweets essentially acted as a form of reward, as the user who made the tweet achieved greater status in the Twitter community, which in turn likely generated higher brand loyalty from that user. Wendy’s also created greater likability and higher brand loyalty because its humorous and snarky tweets were simply meant to foster greater engagement on Twitter, as opposed to act as a form of advertising. While some of Wendy’s tweets had an advertising function, they were executed in a subtle manner and still involved the use of humour. While Wendy’s trolling of McDonald’s was humorous, the purpose of those tweets seemed to be to highlight key differences between Wendy’s and McDonald’s.[[105]](#endnote-105) Loredo confirmed this: “A big component for us is making sure our customers do know there’s a difference. There’s a choice you’re making. McDonald’s became an opportunity for us to share the difference. This isn’t us versus McDonald’s.”[[106]](#endnote-106) While the tweets were meant to be instructional, their snarky and humorous tone probably helped to improve brand likability and brand loyalty.[[107]](#endnote-107)

While Wendy’s Twitter campaign increased the number of Wendy’s Twitter followers, improved the brand’s likability and image, and likely had a positive impact on brand loyalty,[[108]](#endnote-108) it was more difficult to determine the impact of the campaign on company sales.[[109]](#endnote-109) Wendy’s actually saw its revenues fall from $1.44 billion in 2016 to $1.22 billion in 2017. However, its revenue rose to $1.59 billion in 2018 and rose again in 2019 to $1.71 billion.[[110]](#endnote-110) Revenues fell and rose over the course of the campaign, which made it difficult to determine whether the Twitter campaign had a positive or negative impact on sales. Furthermore, other factors were likely at play. For example, Wendy’s had used other promotional materials, both on other social media platforms and in other avenues. Also, the actions of competitors and general economic conditions had likely affected sales. Overall, in 2021, there was still not a reliable method of determining the net financial impact of being highly active on social media.[[111]](#endnote-111) However, determining the costs of Wendy’s Twitter strategy was easier. The company relied on three social media managers to respond to tweets and to run Wendy’s account.[[112]](#endnote-112) Social media personnel made an average of $44,800 in 2021; Thus, the approximate cost of Wendy’s Twitter strategy was $134,400 per year.[[113]](#endnote-113)

emerging trends in social media

One trend that was emerging was the idea of social media as a shopping destination. This movement began in 2016 when Facebook launched Marketplace, a service for users to buy and sell items. Facebook did not receive any commission from sales, and users were responsible for arranging payment and delivery.[[114]](#endnote-114) Instagram built on this idea when it introduced Instagram shopping in March 2017. Users were able to click a “tap on products” button on picture or video posts that allowed users to see a brief product description and price for products featured in the post. Users could also click on the price, which linked them to the business’s website.[[115]](#endnote-115) Over time, Instagram continued to add shopping features. In 2018, Instagram allowed users to save products from photo or video posts into one shopping collection area.[[116]](#endnote-116) In 2019, Instagram introduced in-app purchases. After tapping on a product, users were able to buy that product on Instagram instead of being directed to the retailer’s website.[[117]](#endnote-117) More recently, Instagram introduced a stand-alone shopping page in July 2020. This page highlighted various products and brands, and made purchase recommendations.[[118]](#endnote-118)

A second emerging trend was the notion of influencers on social media. Influencers generally had knowledge, expertise, or appeal in a certain area and large numbers of devoted followers. With 3.584 billion people active on social media—approximately 45 per cent of the world’s population—people relied on social media influencers to guide their decision-making.[[119]](#endnote-119) While celebrities were the original influencers, the emergence and continued growth of social media since 2010 led to the rise of online influencers. Social media influencers were most prominent on Instagram, particularly through the Instagram stories section of the platform. Influencers seemed to be effective, as 34 per cent of daily US Instagram users bought a product because of an influencer recommendation. Influencers were also effective on other platforms, as 25 per cent of daily Facebook users and 29 per cent of daily Twitter users made purchases due to influencer recommendations.[[120]](#endnote-120) Furthermore, research revealed that users trusted influencers as much as they trusted their own friends and that influencers had a strong effect on sales—the return on investment delivered by social influencers was as high as 600 per cent.[[121]](#endnote-121)

A third emerging trend was that newer social media platforms were gaining in popularity and had the potential to become major platforms in the future. Three platforms seemed to have significant potential. The first platform was TikTok, which was founded in 2016 and launched in 2017. By February 2020, TikTok had more than 500 million active monthly users, many of whom were under the age of 30. TikTok allowed users to create short videos along with the ability to add special effects such as text or musical overlays. TikTok was popular for challenges—users could create a challenge with a themed hashtag, and other users could respond to the challenge by posting videos to the same hashtag. By November 2020, brands such as the *Washington Post* and Guess had joined TikTok.

Another platform that had potential was Caffeine, which was founded in 2016 and launched in 2018. This platform allowed users to create live broadcasts and to stream their computer screen while playing video games, which enabled other users to comment on the content. Caffeine could be particularly useful for businesses by showcasing behind-the-scenes content or question-and-answer sessions.

A third platform that had potential was Lasso, which was launched by Facebook in 2018 and had more than 70,000 active monthly users in the United States as of February 2020. Lasso allowed users to create videos with numerous special effects, similar to TikTok. Lasso had potential because of potential adoption from Facebook’s user base, as well as access to Facebook’s financial and technological resources.[[122]](#endnote-122)

A fourth emerging trend was the increasing popularity of UGC. This movement was highlighted in October 2020 when a factory worker named Nathan Apodaca created a TikTok video of his commute to work. Apodaca’s truck had broken down that day, so he used his skateboard for his commute. In his 25-second TikTok video, Apodaca was coasting down an Idaho highway while he drank Ocean Spray Cran-Raspberry and lip-synched to Fleetwood Mac’s 1977 hit “Dreams.” Apodaca’s video became an instant sensation and garnered significant attention—as of October 11, 2020, the video had more than 35 million views.[[123]](#endnote-123) Furthermore, Apodaca’s video boosted sales for Fleetwood Mac, as “Dreams” reached number 14 on the *Rolling Stone* Top 100 Songs chart and entered into Spotify’s top 10 songs in Canadian, American, and global charts.[[124]](#endnote-124) In addition, Apodaca’s video also generated significant sales increases for Ocean Spray.[[125]](#endnote-125)

Social media influencers and brands were also becoming more involved in generating UGC. By May 2020, some companies (including TikTok) had sponsored “collab houses,” where groups of teenage social media influencers lived in mansions and created content for various brands. One example of a collab house was the Kids Next Door, a group of seven Generation Z influencers who lived in a mansion in Los Feliz. The group announced their formation through the creation of a group Instagram account. Individual members of the collab house typically created UGC content and content for various brands that they worked with, with all members of the house sometimes collaborating on certain projects.[[126]](#endnote-126)

The Next Step

Wendy’s was an iconic fast-food chain with a history of innovation.[[127]](#endnote-127) With regard to social media, Wendy’s had a unique approach on Twitter—the company roasted users and competitors on a regular basis, and it responded to teasing and challenges from Twitter users.[[128]](#endnote-128) Evaluating the company’s strategy was difficult. How could Penegor, Wendy’s CEO, determine whether the company’s approach on Twitter positively affected sales and profits? How could he improve the company’s future social media strategy?

ENDNOTES

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