

# Nike builds mobile-messaging muscle

Stephen Whiteside

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This event report outlines how Nike, the sporting goods group, is using messaging apps to engage consumers.

- Brands in the company's portfolio have offered "stickers", as well as personalised content, via this channel.
- Challenges remain in various areas, including the tone of voice to be used, discovery, distribution and measurement.
- The US and Western Europe lag behind Asia in terms of app usage and the functionality on offer to marketers.

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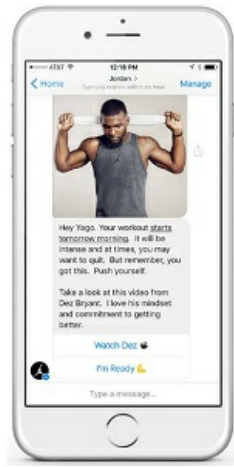
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Nike's focus on athletes now extends right down to their fingertips – and, more specifically, connecting with them through a range of mobile-messaging apps.

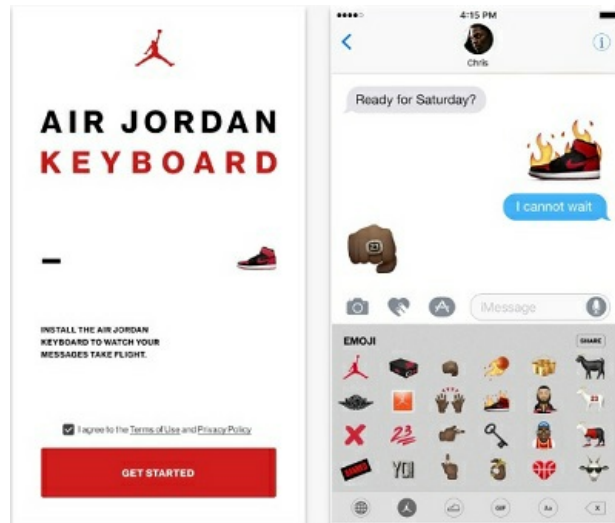
"We are spending so much time in messaging," Kelly McCarthy, Nike's Senior Director/Global Marketing, told delegates at the 2017 South by Southwest (SXSW) Conference. "This is not just a millennial conversation. Most of your users now, if they have anything past a feature phone, are using messaging at scale."

In exploring this fast-growing component of the digital ecosystem, Nike has run tests including:

- **Jordan Breakfast Club:** Athletes [joined this exercise program](#) on platforms like Facebook Messenger and Nike+, then tailored the daily content they received to match their personal fitness goals.

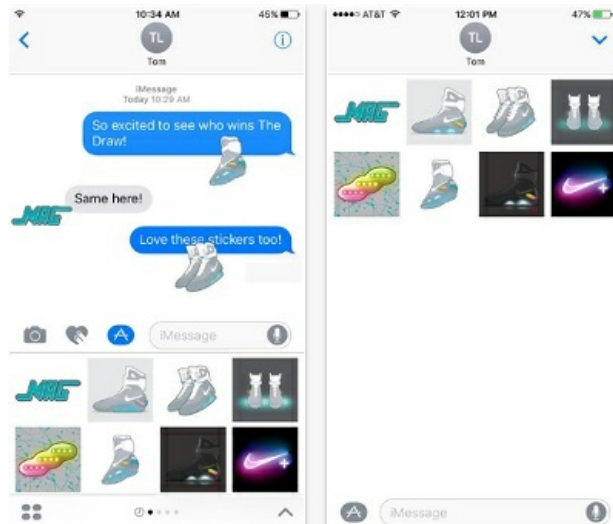


- **Emoji Keyboard:** This offering, for Apple's iMessage service, provided a set of "stickers" – virtual signs and symbols similar to emojis – inspired by Michael Jordan and his namesake brand, such as its slam-dunking logo and images of popular sneakers.



- **Nike Mag:** In October 2016, Nike held a "digital draw" for 80-plus pairs of boots boasting self-tying "power laces", as first featured in the film "Back to the Future". Consumers paid \$10 to enter this contest, with the proceeds going to the Michael J. Fox Foundation, a non-profit established by the film's star to help fight Parkinson's Disease.

At the same time, the Portland, Oregon-based brand released iMessage stickers letting people spread the word and incorporate this iconic piece of cinematic footwear into their messages.



The logic behind these efforts, McCarthy reported, resulted from the discovery that consumers typically prefer undertaking basic tasks on platforms they already use. The alternative – installing countless apps that promise, at best, a limited amount of valued functions – didn't have the same kind of positive connections.

The conclusion: Marketers seeking to engage their mobile audience must follow them onto third-party properties.

"I think it's very hard now to create an app and then a significant enough user base that signs in every day," McCarthy said. "It's part of why we're skewing towards the platforms, because those are natural places where people are going."

Building on the theme of too much of too many good things, she suggested marketers and publishers have "flooded" one-to-many social outlets like Facebook and Twitter with content. But when people see material that is especially entertaining, useful or relevant, they turn to messaging apps and share it among a handful of friends with a particular interest in common, or who may find it compelling.

"What's happening is you have so much coming at you in the social world ... that now you're much more prone to interact with a piece of content and then send it to a small group of people to whom it's relevant," McCarthy said.

And, drawing on Nike's experience to date, she highlighted several factors which brands should consider when moving into this space:

- **Tone**
- **Focus**
- **Discovery**
- **Distribution**
- **Measurement**

### **Tone**

Although social media effectively has become a mass-marketing channel that provides substantial reach, messaging apps require a truly personal tone, as they are intended for intimate conversations between individuals.

"The brands that do best in social [content] look and feel like your friend posted it. Getting into messaging is

going to be hard for brands. It's going to be hard because you can screw it up really easily. Most brands can't be humanized in a way that's really natural," McCarthy said

"When you get into one-to-one messaging – and when you are starting to share content that you want a group of people to interact around – you're going to have to nail that."

## **Focus**

Nike, the global marketer continued, has "a lot of reasons to talk to consumers" – be it encouraging people before they go running, delivering training tips, or celebrating sponsored athletes. On messaging apps, though, it wants to fill a niche where it has authority to speak, and is perceived as an authentic source of insight, expression or expertise.

"You're going to have to get into a place where the demographic you're talking to not only has context and cares, but also is going to put their stamp of approval on an individual level and share it among themselves," McCarthy said.

In pursuing this objective, she asserted, introducing "campaign-based content" – say, emojis related to the annual "Air Max Day" held on March 26th – generally supplies fleeting value for consumers, meaning Nike's investment would only yield short-term engagement.

To avoid that sub-optimal outcome, McCarthy reminded the SXSW delegates that stickers, emojis and GIFs normally are employed to convey emotions and "give deeper context" about a user's opinions or mood. Meeting this need might, therefore, have longer-term appeal and prompt people to download branded stickers, keyboards, and so on.

"For us, this is much more of an evergreen play. We can 'hot swap' creative in, but getting someone to download the keyboard remains the biggest hurdle," she said.

## **Discovery**

Reflecting this obstacle, branded messaging tools face the same problem as apps – namely, standing out in a cluttered content marketplace. "Unfortunately, within the discovery of both sticker packs and also keyboards: It's hard. It's hard to find them. It's hard as a user," McCarthy said.

Being selected as a "featured" offering by platform owners, she explained, is the best driver of uptake – although this can never be taken for granted. "Once it's downloaded, they use it. But actually getting someone to download remains a pretty heavy lift," McCarthy said. "Even with paid and other discovery mechanisms, it still is campaign-based."

## **Distribution**

Against that backdrop, marketers developing message-led content ought to make strategic use of paid media to generate consumer interest. "This is a pay-to-play, and you need to get into production and distribution concurrently. You can't just create something and hope people find it," McCarthy said.

"I think brands are getting into a place right now where they are over-producing content and under-distributing it ... Getting into a place where you're dedicating media money so that the discovery is immediate and then word of mouth takes hold is key."

## **Measurement**

Most messaging platforms, at present, possess comparatively modest tracking tools. Brands with emoji keyboards, for instance, receive metrics including total downloads and content shares, but usually lack insight into sharing behavior beyond that – an issue known as "**dark social**".

"I think messaging is, when we really look at it and step back, dark social," McCarthy said. "The hard part for us is that's going to be very hard to track ... We're getting into a place where we have you take a piece of content and share it among your friends. We know it's important and it's shared but we don't know who it's going to and where it's going."

Looking forward, she predicted that some enhanced indices could become available in the not too distant future. The reasoning behind this argument? Many social-media platforms began life with moderate measurement capabilities, but Facebook today represents a "targeting machine" that enables highly granular audience-identification tools for advertisers.

Further evidence comes from Asia, where the usage and functionality of messaging apps is currently more sophisticated than in North America. WeChat, a Chinese app with nearly a billion users, is a case in point, and has been used by companies to supply a broad suite of financial services, alongside selling everything from cups of coffee to houses.

"I would say we've seen a tipping point already reached in Asia: messaging gets so ubiquitous you can pay your rent that way; you can order a car that way," said McCarthy. "We'll start to see that in North America and in Europe, but we haven't seen it. No one really can compete with WeChat yet."

It might take 24 to 36 months for equivalent solutions to be built into mainstream messaging apps in North America and Europe, according to McCarthy. Until then, messaging apps will largely remain an upper-funnel engagement tool. "I think for the Western world, especially North America, you're looking at pure awareness," she said.

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#### About the author



**Stephen Whiteside** is Warc's Reports Editor.

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Americas: 229 West 43rd Street, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10036, United States - Tel: +1 212 201 2800

APAC: OUE Downtown 1, #44-03, 6 Shenton Way, 068809, Singapore - Tel: +65 3157 6200

EMEA: 33 Kingsway, London, WC2B 6UF, United Kingdom - Tel: +44 (0)20 7467 8100

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