

Taking The Relationship To The Next Level: A Comparison Of How Supporters Converse With Charities On Facebook and Twitter

Christopher Phethean
Web Science Doctoral Training
Centre
University of Southampton
Southampton, UK
C.J.Phethean@soton.ac.uk

Thanassis Tiropanis
Faculty of Physical Sciences
and Engineering
University of Southampton
Southampton, UK
tt2@ecs.soton.ac.uk

Lisa Harris
Faculty of Business and Law
University of Southampton
Southampton, UK
L.J.Harris@soton.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Social media provide a unique opportunity for charities to reach a large audience with whom they can engage in productive two-way conversations. This abstract reports findings from a study that seeks to determine the extent to which these conversations occur, and whether they differ between Facebook and Twitter. Differences arise showing that Facebook receives more conversations in response to the charities' own posts. However, on Twitter more comments are made per each engaged supporter, which could represent more unsolicited discussion that provides an alternative type of value.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.0 [COMPUTERS AND SOCIETY]: General

Keywords

Social media, charities, marketing, communication, web science

1. INTRODUCTION

The current popularity of social media makes it easy to assume that the numbers of people interacting online provide a plentiful resource of brand advocates, supporters and critics for an organisation. There is the hope—perhaps even belief—that when analysed at scale, this will allow the organisation to determine the current perception of their product or service, respond, drive more engagement, and ultimately lead to a more devoted audience who become co-creators of a successful brand presence. The organisation would subsequently be driven towards their goals, becoming one step closer to success. For charitable organisations,

knowing that this is the case is of vital importance when allocating limited funds to maintaining a social presence. However, there is currently a lack of understanding as to how effective these sites are for developing any sort of relationship with their supporter-base. It is commonly perceived that social media provide platforms for user engagement, co-creation and activism, but equally there is also extensive research to suggest that the proportion of any online community that is actually engaging is low, and that the majority of users are lurkers or listeners [3]. If this is the case, then to what extent is this apparent for charities on social media? This paper, therefore, seeks to assess what evidence there is on social media of relationships between charity and supporter developing.

2. BACKGROUND

Social media can produce various forms of results through spreading awareness of a new product or campaign, increasing referral traffic and building relationships with audience members. Additionally, social media can be used in contrasting ways—each site offers unique features that may make one aim a more reasonable target given the engagement options available. However, sometimes the use of these sites does not match their perceived value. Twitter, for example, is often discussed as a great platform for rapid customer service and two-way engagement with customers or charitable supporters. USA-based nonprofits appear to be missing this, however, and instead a content analysis of their tweets indicates that their focus is on sending one-way messages in order to broadcast information [5], while similar studies have also suggested a reluctance to move away from primarily information spreading behaviour [2]. However, interactivity through two-way communication on social media is said to be essential in allowing productive relationships to develop with supporters, as it can increase trust [1].

Previous research by the current authors has investigated the area of social media aims for charities. Through interviewing members of charities, recurring themes about why social media was used, and what they hoped to get out of using it, were discovered [4]. Developing relationships was seen as one of the most important aspects of using social media, and that achieving 'action' through donations was seen as a side-effect of doing this. There was a slight favouring towards Facebook for achieving this [4]. Where there was less clarity was regarding the success of these sites in achieving

relationship building. For the purposes of this paper, replies and mentions on both Facebook and Twitter will be used as a representation of engagement and developed relationships. We seek to answer the following question:

- Does either Twitter or Facebook show evidence of more sustained relationships between supporters and charity, and do posts by a charity on either site tend to generate more engagement than on the other?

3. METHODOLOGY

A sample of 7 UK charities was used for this study (Diabetes UK, The Dogs Trust, Help for Heroes, Jeans for Genes, The Woodland Trust, The National Trust and Wessex Heartbeat). For each charity, a dataset of 6-months worth of data was collected for each site: on Twitter, a variation of the University of Southampton Tweet Harvester¹ was used to collect tweets over the course of the study, whereas the Facebook dataset was collected retrospectively using a combination of the Facebook Graph API and Facebook FQL. For both sites, the data covered the period June–December 2013. Custom scripts were then written in Python to process each of the datasets and extract quantitative data on posts, replies and conversations, and then statistics were carried out to provide insights around the research question. Furthermore, the top 5 commented on posts from each network for each charity were extracted so that qualitative content analysis could be carried out in order to determine whether there were any charity-specific or overall themes that appeared to cause the highest levels of conversation.

4. RESULTS

For the first part of the question, it was necessary to examine the behaviours of commenters towards each charity. Calculations were made to assess how many posts each user made, and a Wilcoxon signed-rank test was then carried out on these values to determine whether one site produced significantly higher values. Twitter produced the higher scores here ($z=-2.366$, $p<0.05$, $r=-0.63$) and suggests that more interactions are made per interacting supporter on this site.

The second part of the question focused more on how the audience responded to the charities' posts. Looking at the data from the perspective of the *posts*, rather than the posters, calculations were made to find the number of replies per charity-authored post on the two networks. Again, a Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were carried out on the results. For the average number of comments per post per like (or follower), this time Facebook was consistently higher ($z=-2.366$, $p<0.05$, $r=-0.63$), meaning that per supporter on each site, Facebook produced a higher number of comments or replies on each of the charities' posts than Twitter. This was shown again when looking at the average number of *commenters* or posters per like or follower on each site, with Facebook again consistently higher ($z=-2.366$, $p<0.05$, $r=-0.63$), indicating that Facebook provides a higher proportion of interacting or engaged supporters than Twitter.

Looking qualitatively at the content of the messages that received the highest number of comments highlighted several recurring types of message. On Facebook, posts asking informal questions (12/35 posts) and promoting competitions (10/35) were common. On Twitter, informal ques-

tions (16/35) and informational messages (14/35) tended to be popular. There are indications here that these categories are more effective at generating responses from the audience.

5. DISCUSSION

This study set out to investigate conversations on social media as a method of ascertaining the extent to which supporters were engaging with charities in a way that reflected that they had a strong relationship. It is interesting to discover that for the sample of charities in this study, Twitter appeared to accommodate supporters who made more interactions each, compared to Facebook. Yet when looking at the data from the point of view of responses to the charities' own posts and in relation to the number of likes or followers each charity possessed, Facebook posts received both more comments, and more commenters than Twitter. The difference in post response rate could be down to the fact that charities don't see Twitter as a channel for relationship building and conversation in the way that they do with Facebook, supporting the views presented in the current authors' previous study [4]. However it appears from the qualitative aspects of this study that there is some evidence to suggest that tweets attempting to elicit a reaction—primarily asking informal questions—are still the most popular on Twitter in terms of replies received, and that engagement in this way is still possible on the site. Further qualitative analysis could provide much richer insights in to what it is people are actually conversing about on social media—this is seen as the main opportunity for future research.

To conclude, this paper has shown that social media does appear to facilitate relationship development, and there is a portion of charities' supporter-base that is keen to respond and communicate on social media. Twitter and Facebook each appear to contribute to this in differing ways, and it would seem that to effectively take advantage of social media as a whole, each of these sites must be mastered individually in order to achieve the best possible outcomes.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was funded by the Research Councils UK Digital Economy Programme, Web Science Doctoral Training Centre, University of Southampton. EP/G036926/1.

7. REFERENCES

- [1] S. Jo and Y. Kim. The effect of web characteristics on relationship building. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 15(3):199–223, 2003.
- [2] K. Lovejoy and G. D. Saxton. Information, community, and action: How nonprofit organizations use social media. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(3):337–353, 2012.
- [3] J. Nielsen. Participation inequality: Encouraging more users to contribute. http://www.useit.com/alertbox/participation_inequality.html, Oct 2006.
- [4] C. Phethean, T. Tiropanis, and L. Harris. Rethinking measurements of social media use by charities: A mixed methods approach. In *Web Science 2013*, Paris, France, May 2013.
- [5] R. D. Waters and J. Y. Jamal. Tweet, tweet, tweet: A content analysis of nonprofit organizations' twitter updates. *Public Relations Review*, 37(3):321–324, Sept. 2011.

¹<http://tweets.soton.ac.uk>