How to Improve the Reach and Impact of Social Media Content

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Abstract. The growing relevance of social media for the communication strategies of public entities – like governmental, political, commercial and NGOs, and public personalities – has been widely accepted in recent years. It is plausible that the lack of a method for delivering content to the general public diminishes the reach and impact of the communication strategies of any such entities. It is commonly accepted that the general public decides which contents to interact with, mostly on an emotional basis. Thus, such a method should be more effective if common psychological factors are taken into account. The method proposed in this paper has been developed and tested empirically working with nineteen public entities. The method has been applied on different entities achieving improvements in content reach on every case, this suggests that the application of a method that guides the entity through this process is effective in improving the reach and engagement of the public with the content. Because of the empirical methodology used to develop and test this method, it is in a very precarious and early state. Still, having shown promise, plans to increase its robustness include research in the areas of AI automation, neuromarketing and systems analysis, as well as the development of falsifiable tests for application.

Keywords: Content creation, content reach, neuromarketing, social media, social networks.

1 Introduction

Social networks have been a subject of great interest for well over a century now. Sociology, mathematics, computer science, ethnography and other disciplines have been applied to understand and develop advanced theories on the subject. In the information age social networks have evolved from the physical realm to the virtual; social networking platforms emerged and now span a major share of the Internet's usage [1,2].

Social networking platforms running on the Internet such as websites and apps (software applications) are commonly referred as social networks. Since this term might cause confusion with the homonymous networks this paper favors the

widely accepted term social media when referring to the aforementioned social networking platforms [3].

Governmental, political, commercial and non-profit organizations, as well as personalities -which as a group will be referred as entities in this paper- are adopting social media at an accelerating rate [4], yet the lack of a method for creating content that has reach and impact is notorious and widespread. For the purposes of this document the general population with access to social media will be regarded as public or general public. Also the terms reach and impact can be used as similar, likewise relevance and engagement even when their meanings have semantic differences, because of their relation in the context they will be used.

It can be frequently observed that said entities' social media content is: disperse, self-promoting and posted without a sense of timing. It is also common to observe such a content to raise poor reactions from the public [5].

2   Methodology

This method was developed by the author of this paper empirically, through trial and error, and incorporating previous and on-the-go acquired knowledge in the fields of social networks, viral vectors, motivators, dynamics of power, psychology, neuromarketing and journalism. The subjects of such trial have been over twenty entities which include politically active personalities, political parties local wings, NGOs, small companies, PR consultancies, and local governments from the central region of Mexico, better known as "Valle de Mexico" (Valley of Mexico) between of the years 2009 and 2015.

Different techniques were used in an iterative process, starting with a few entities and moving progressively to the addition of techniques from different areas, as well as the incremental addition of subjects to study. As the method gained robustness and complexity, ideas or techniques that didn't provide improvements within certain time were deprecated. Additionally when new knowledge was acquired recommendations regarding it were added to the method and applied accordingly. Every new recommendation was tested for improvements and subject to permanence according to the results obtained.

The process is not finished at the moment of the writing of this article since new knowledge is continuously acquired and tested, and plans to move the methodology from the purely empirical towards more robust methodologies are described in the future developments section.

The diagram in Fig. 1 represents the proposed methodology.

3   Context

The context for the development of this method can be traced to the remarkable success of the POTUS Barack Obama in 2008, both in the primaries of his party and in the general elections, mostly attributed to his tactical use of grassroot movement and social media for fundraising and support.
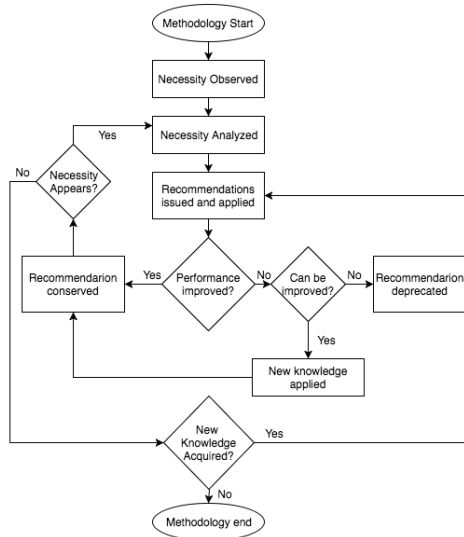
Fig. 1. Diagram of methodology.

Regional and national levels of the political parties in Mexico started hiring renowned public relations (PR) agencies, which started migrating their regular campaigns to the social media. Discussion on their methods and success rate is beyond the scope of this paper, but the fact that the parties at national level started paying attention to social media prompted local parties and politically active personalities seeking election posts known to the author to take action in the same direction.

Similarly other entities such as NGOs and small businesses that had previously worked with the author started noticing declines in the traffic and contacts received through their traditional websites. Having worked with those entities previously in journalistic and web projects the author was hired to either set up, manage or consult on social media, and eventually to train personnel on social media usage and to develop strategies to improve their statistics on this media, poorly known by most of them at the time.

Starting in 2009 with the regular campaigns already going on development of a solution was rushed with only user level knowledge on social media but with professional experience in web design and web newscasting – dating back to 1999 – first approaches were commonsense; improving the organization, graphic design and quality of the texts and videos shared through the social media. This increased the interaction of the public with the contents slightly and helped attract likes and views, but was clearly not a strong enough improvement.

Methods and strategies for ecommerce and social media marketing have been developed by authors like Fazlollahi [6] and Evans [7] their contributions are exhaustive and technical in the descriptions of the social media platforms, but elusive in the details of how to create engaging content. This could alienate the

less technical people or have them go through an extensive and steep learning curve just to find themselves without practical knowledge that can be applied,

Attempting to address these issues the method proposed incorporates basic knowledge from several areas and is aimed to be usable almost immediately, produce improvements within a few days of implementation, and improve over time.

4 Development

The method started developing formally for the pre-campaigns of 2012 where increased social media awareness prompted even more local entities to look for the author's services, on this occasion there was enough time before the campaigns. On the first version of the method the following recommendations were included.

The first step was to define upgrades to regular websites from the entities towards social friendly versions, with linkable contents and social media widgets. Graphic aspects should also be taken into account by preferring images and styles consistent with the ones to be used in the social media accounts.

Instructions were included for standardizing social media pages and accounts by using visually consistent styles in the headers and account pictures, links back to the regular website and sharing contents that were updated there.

It had also been observed that the contents that engaged the public better had the characteristic of attractive and superlative titles and included images that were colorful and, in the case of videos, the thumbnails had those characteristics. So an initial suggestion was made to create titles with those attributes. As suggested by neuromarketing principles. An example of these can be seen in Fig. 2.
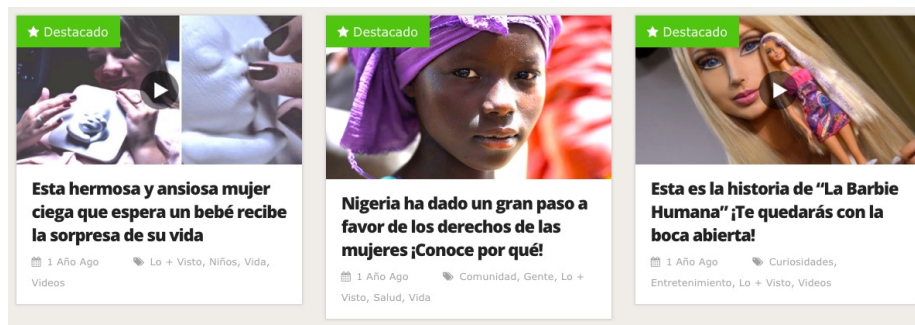

Fig. 2. Example of contents with high impact (screenshot in Spanish). Source: http://viralistas.com.

Observing that within the most used social media platforms response rate was mentioned or measured, the initial version of the method also included the

instruction to answer each comment, reply, repost, sharing and message received from the public.

These four areas – website improvement, social media standardization, content creation, and response management – conform the core of the method, and simple as they are they proved to be effective in improving the reach of the contents; views and click through in social media contents surged with increases in the order of 20 percent from the traffic previous to the application of the method, with a side-effect increase in traffic to the regular websites. Interactions with the social media content (including likes, shares, reposts, retweets and similar actions) showed slight improvements, from near-zero to around four interactions per item on average.

Improvement was noticeable but still not enough, statistics showed that people bounced -clicking a link but staying for less than 20 seconds- in the traditional websites. Looking for possible causes, but finding difficult to know third parties content bounce bounce rate, social media contents with high numbers of interactions were sought for and analyzed.

Around 100 items with over one thousand (1000+) interactions each from Facebook, Twitter and Youtube presented by the social media platforms in the main pages of brand-new accounts were observed, looking for similarities. It was inferred from the contents analyzed that most of them did not come from an entity but from single users. Thus, it was decided to look for content items with around one hundred (90-110) interactions to find a more realistic model to analyze taken that the entities that were applying the method were much more local.

Similarly about 100 items were examined and it was noticed that within this range of interactions, still about three quarters of the items were produced by regular users, but more entities produced content started showing success at this level. Within this set it was observed that the titles of the items fell within five categories: surprising, salacious, funny, gossipy and useful. Also the posts did not attempt to sell products or services, but were mostly informative. Over 70 percent had too the qualitative characteristics of being colloquial and informal in nature.

This was taken into account for improvements to the core of the method in the content area. With the previous editorial knowledge a model of four paragraphs for the written content was devised to prevent the content from being stiff, aloof, technical or appearing institutional and promotional. This four paragraph model will also be described in the next section. From the few conversations with the general public that started to arise, it was observed that the public contacted the entities for three main purposes: support/congratulate, complain/criticize and to ask for information/help. Of the three groups the most numerous by far was the one that asked for information/help -grossly two thirds- of the total messages.

It was also observed that the teams tasked with managing responses, did so inconsistently and confusing in terms of style and frequency -they answered everything as instructed but sometimes took too long- and also tended to engage

in arguments with the public of the group that complained/criticized, that their responses often lacked clarity and were not always useful or didn't provide the requested information.

Also, noticing the majority of requests wanted information, help or complained about something it was inferred that the public perceives the entities as capable of providing solutions, therefore, as wielders of power lacked by themselves. Thus, it was derived that answers and contents that offered power or the illusion of power to the public would have more chances to engage the public. The concepts of Kenneth Galbraith regarding the types of power were included and paired to the types of entities that could offer them to the public: compensatory for commercial, condign for governmental, and conditioned for political and NGO [8].

During the years the development took place, some of the teams that managed the social media started to incur into practices that ended up in sanctions or closing of the social media accounts these included spamming, indiscriminate tagging, usage of services with fake accounts to bulk massive interactions (bots), and creating multiple accounts to add positive comments and likes to their own social media. These problems were addressed too.

Finally starting 2015, experiments to apply this method to small-business start-ups in the context of an e-commerce university course proved useful, this led to the inclusion of steps going back to the creation and setup of the entity, selection of the model -such as B2B, B2C, C2C, etc- that applies better, selection of requirements and setup of the website. The latest additions come in the form of optimizations in the creation of a single content -text (with images) or video- that can be automatically replicated in the different social media platforms from the entity.

5   Overview of the method

An overview of the method will be described general terms using mainly an infographic (Fig. 1) specially developed for the purpose and going into more depth in some aspects. In-detail instructions are out of the scope of this paper and are planned for future articles.

The method starts with the Setup in which the first step is to define if the entity is already operating or has yet to be created and if so which stages need to be executed: Brick and mortar creation, if needed, -which is mentioned but doesn't prompt any action because is outside the scope of the method. Also if the online resources are already up, they might need adaptations which can reduce time by skipping steps. Finally if the online resources are not setup yet they will need to be developed from scratch. The online resources needed include a traditional website which can be commercial or informative in nature. This type of website serves as a support for the social media accounts and to host information in formats social media may not fully support, as well as institutional information that doesn't change over time (Fig. 3).
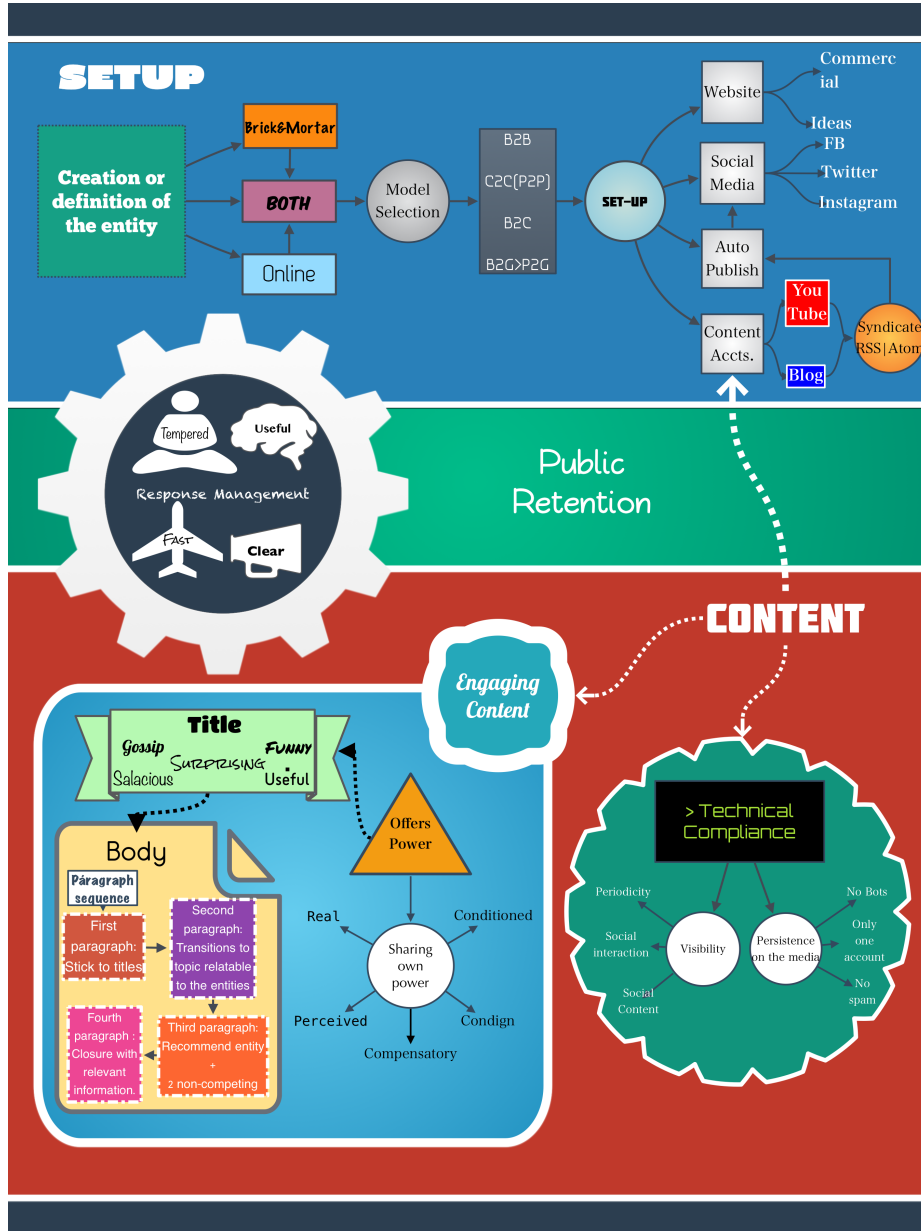
Fig. 3. Infographic of the method.

Social Media Accounts are also needed for the entity and the key players -noticeable leaders, PR deputies, and others- within the entity's structure. The method so far includes detailed instructions for Facebook, Twitter, and recently

Instagram.

Content Accounts for text and/or video which already have syndication services or feeds. Youtube is recommended for the video, although alternatives can be selected if Youtube is not viable for any cause. For the text content no specific service is required, as long as it has a feed service. Auto Publishing services, free or paid, use feeds from the text and video contents as input and automatically publish them in the social media accounts. The second and main area is about content with two sub-areas first technical compliance, which are basic general rules to both promote content visibility in social media and prevent the social media accounts from being blocked for policy violation.

The most detailed area of the project has been named "Engaging Content" in this area we have the overview of the process of content creation that applies for both text and video, detailed application is out of the scope of this paper, but it is important to notice that the content will derive its engaging appeal from the offer of power or the illusion of it. Also of high importance is the creation of the title which should fall within one of the following categories: Gossip, Funny, Salacious, Useful or Surprising. Possible examples of these are in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of titles method by category.

Category	Example
Gossip	It is incredible how Serena Williams failed to see this!
Funny	5 things that happen when you mix tequila and girls!
Salacious	These irish girls will take your breath away...
Useful	You would have never imagined this simple trick can get you a flat stomach
Surprising	Is this the UGLIEST hairdo ever seen?

Finishing the content creation area we find the Paragraph sequence model for the body of the text or video which seeks to provide with a colloquial text that won't be rejected immediately and can capture the attention of the reader while hinting towards the social media of the entity. it is explained in Table 2.

Table 2. Structure of the paragraphs.

Category	Example
First	Completely consistent with the title, provides the information promised in it.
Second	Smoothly shifts the topic towards a setting more related to the entity.
Third	Recommend and link social media accounts of 3 entities that fall within the scope.
Fourth	Give more relevant information related to the main topic and thank the public.

The final area corresponds to the Response management this area outlines four principles to have in mind when answering comments and messages from the public. The responses should be clear and useful. Special care should be given to give the public tempered positive answers even -and specially- when the message is offensive or rude. The responses should be as immediate as resources allow and coherent in style. Also when not possible to solve the problem of the person, a route of possible solution should be presented.

6   Results

The application of the method in different types of entities showed noticeable improvements in every case. In terms of reach -views, clicks and traffic-, relative to figures before the application of the method, surges in the order of 20 to 50 percent were the norm, in two cases with increments of over 100 percent.

In terms of impact and engagement, most entities went from near zero interactions -likes, shares, replies, reposts- in the social media contents to 20-50 interactions and for two entities -one local political party and local political personality- achieving 60 to 200 interactions for most of the content. Likewise bounce rates diminished noticeably.

For the small companies created during the e-commerce course six out of six students successfully created small businesses from scratch which managed to generate contents that had modest reach and impact. Two of the businesses managed to sell products both through their traditional website and social media accounts and pages within the four months of the course and continue to operate and sell online and offline unassisted at the time of the writing of this paper.These results suggest that the method is effective for the purposes of improving reach and impact of social media contents and show promise as the startpoint for the further development of a more robust method with strict testing and research methodologies.

7   Future Developments

Using the current version of the method as a startpoint various areas of opportunity are perceived. First and foremost falsifiable tests need to be developed to make a robust assessment of the effectiveness of the method in controlled environments and to detect the influence of the different instructions and recommendations in place to robustify the more effective and avoid diluting resources in developing areas with little or no influence on an eventually positive outcome.

Future articles with specific details for different elements of the method and a systems Analysis on the entity-public communication issue are currently undergoing, it is expected that this will provide valuable insights for the design and development of the aforementioned tests. In order to improve the response rate, time and relevance, AI response automation using Google APIs for natural language recognition and processing is currently being examined in terms of feasibility.

Finally, neuromarketing is being assessed as perhaps the most promising area in terms of exponential improvement to the content impact, reach and engagement. Advances in neuromarketing in other areas and in similar applications have shown remarkable results and it is, thus, an exciting idea to improve the method using this knowledge area [9].

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