

# The Participation Playbook



**How do you become a global talking point – for the right reasons?**

**Contagious' James Swift and Twitter's Alex Josephson look at some of the best Twitter-led campaigns from Cannes, and speak to the brands and agencies behind the work, to find out what it takes to make content worth talking about.**

In June 2018 IHOP (International House of Pancakes) Tweeted that it was changing its name to IHOb and invited people to guess what it meant.

'In our wildest dreams, we wouldn't have imagined it would be the phenomenon that it became,' says the brand's CMO, Brad Haley, about the campaign to highlight the US restaurant chain's burger menu.

There's no false modesty at IHOP. You'd have to be delusional to expect a few cryptic Tweets to attract 42 billion earned media impressions, occupy the first, second and fourth spots on Twitter's trending topics list (crowding out even US President Donald Trump's summit with North Korea) and quadruple burger sales.

But that's the nature of Twitter, where the audience is in charge. Some ideas sink without a trace, but those that hit the sweet spot are elevated and shared,

becoming entwined with culture. Occasionally people will spread an idea or message with such force and heat that it catches even the most optimistic marketers off guard.

And while it may feel like audiences exercise their power capriciously, success is rarely a case of dumb luck on the part of the brand. The best marketers understand what makes people want to participate with an idea or message and they put that knowledge to work to give themselves the best shot at success.

Ahead of the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity, we went through the 1,856 Twitter-centric entries submitted to the competition between 2014 and 2018, and then picked the brains of the people behind the most innovative and awarded work from that dataset, to pass some of that knowledge on to you.

### Finding the thread

Analysing the data, it is clear that Twitter is not the same place today that it was in 2014, let alone when it was created in 2006.

Just like punk emerged as the antithesis to the overwrought odysseys of the prog-rock movement, Twitter first flourished as a pared-back alternative to blogging that compelled people to be succinct with their thoughts.

But as more people joined the platform it evolved beyond its microblogging origins; conversation became more important, and communities sprang up around shared identities and interests. And the addition of images and video also gave users a richer canvas to express themselves.

Brands were forced to evolve in step with these changes. 'In the early days, brands were using Twitter like

IHOP's name-change guessing game Tweet attracted 42 billion earned media impressions



they were broadcasting on TV,' says Bao Tu-Ngoc, head of digital and activations at BETC Paris. 'But now they understand the value of interactions, so they've started designing "real conversations" on social media.'

As luck would have it, this shift to conversations is conducive to more effective work. Les Binet and Peter Field in their *Media in Focus* paper for The Institute of Practitioners in Advertising (IPA) reiterate that the strategies that get people talking about a brand are powerful and efficient because 'brand effects are enhanced by social amplification and herd behaviour', and they calculate that earned media boosts effectiveness by 26%.

But as brands have become more sophisticated conversationalists, it has led them to some unexpected places. Fast food chain Wendy's, for instance, now uses Twitter to host a National Roast Day each year on 4 January, when it delivers withering put-downs to anyone who asks for one. In 2018 this festival of insults received a Silver and Gold Lion in the Social & Influencer category at Cannes, and in 2019 it resulted in more than 100 million earned media impressions and a 737% increase in brand mentions.

Brand conversation lurched to another extreme in February when the Twitter account belonging to drink brand Sunny Delight Tweeted: 'I can't do this anymore.' The despairing message may have just been a reaction to the

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Bao Tu-Ngoc, BETC Paris

lacklustre Super Bowl game, but it sparked an impassioned conversation thread about mental health with almost 5,000 replies (some other brands joined in by offering advice; Pornhub offered tissues) and also became a news item in the wider media.

Not only did @SunnyD's depressive episode show how brands on Twitter are experimenting with how they communicate, it also highlighted how things that happen on the platform reverberate in other media.

While Twitter once offered people a forum to discuss what was happening in the news or on TV, it is now just as likely that people on TV will be discussing what they've seen on Twitter. If you're not sure what we mean, think about Jimmy Kimmel's widely imitated Mean Tweets segment, or how in 2015 #TheDress (you know: the white and gold or blue and black one) transcended Twitter and entered the global news cycle.

Such is Twitter's influence that when Crock-Pot suffered a PR disaster (a slow cooker was responsible for the death of a beloved character on a popular TV show... it's a long story), Ashley Mowrey, the cooking appliance brand's director of global social media marketing, tells us she made Twitter her priority: 'We knew if we won over the conversation on social, primarily Twitter, that would help to inform and impact traditional media coverage as well.'

Twitter has become a self-sufficient water cooler medium – one that generates discussions as well as hosting them. And as its influence has grown so too have brands' ambitions for the platform. The early days when all you needed was a clever hashtag or a funny character account to win on Twitter are long gone. Our research shows that now the most forward-thinking brands treat Twitter as a Petri dish where ideas and messages are dropped in the hope of (ahem) creating culture.

Around 2014 some of the more daring brands used Twitter to effect small-scale changes in the real world,



Wendy's chart-topping album *We Beefin?* was conceived on Twitter

such as Sky Television's 2014 #BringDownTheKing campaign, which encouraged people to Tweet using a hashtag to bring down a statue of a hated *Game of Thrones* character in real life.

But by 2018 we saw campaigns that made real global cultural impact. Wendy's released an album on Twitter that reached number 34 in the iTunes charts and number one in Spotify's Global Viral 50 chart. Athlete and activist Colin Kaepernick sparked one of the biggest news stories across the globe that day when he Tweeted his new Nike campaign, created by Wieden+Kennedy Portland, which ended up boosting the brand's market cap by \$6bn in less than three weeks.

From what we've seen, it's clear that conversation and culture underpin the best Twitter campaigns today. In fact, we'd go further and say they are the foundation of any great campaign that seeks to elicit a response from its audience. So we have developed six pillars based on conversation and culture that we believe lead to this kind of work. This is the Participation Playbook.

### Pillar 1 / Take out your Air Pods

'Twitter is the best platform for real-time conversations on topics you need to think about right now,' says Ron Amram, global media lead at The Heineken Company. 'It's great for keeping track of what you're passionate about or what you're interested in.' But you'd only know that if you're really tuning in.

Anywhere people go to talk, brands should go to listen, and Twitter is a powerful resource for marketers that want to know what their audience thinks, without relying on claimed data from surveys or stilted focus-group conversations. We asked agencies for some advanced listening tips.

Droga5, New York, created the Behind The Scenes Of The Mega Huge Football Ad We Almost Made campaign for Heineken's Newcastle Brown Ale in 2014, which won a Silver Cyber Lion at Cannes in 2014. It was also short-listed in the Mobile category at Cannes in 2017 for its #BreakTheGame work with Under Armour. The agency's head of media, Colleen Leddy, tells us, 'We have a community manager and a data strategist do a lot of social listening to understand what the community's saying.'

The thing to note here is that it is not interns let loose to find out what's trending; the job is taken seriously and staffed accordingly. As in any field, inexperienced researchers can contaminate results with their own bias, which means inaccurate insights. But when you know how to listen to your audience and make time to do so, you can create more than just better marketing. Glossier founder Emily Weiss represents the apotheosis of the practice, building a unicorn company (worth \$1.2bn) by listening to the ideas of passionate make-up fans and then giving them what they wanted.

Taking a leaf out of Glossier's book, Burger King in 2017 introduced spicy chicken nuggets to its menu after seeing people on Twitter complain about Wendy's ditching

its own. It then went a step further and used those angry Tweets to launch its new product, turning them into ads on Twitter. The campaign helped sell three months worth of crispy golden nuggets in just four weeks and was short-listed for a Social & Influencer Lion at Cannes in 2018.

Michael Cassell, former VP of strategy at MullenLowe Miami, which created the campaign, says the agency devised an informal strategy to decide whether to respond to audience chatter.

'There are big, huge moments that everyone tries to get on top of,' he says, 'but then there are a lot of little moments that a good chunk of people care about. When we're looking up conversations, we start by looking at those little moments. We create clusters of different passion points and we monitor them, and when something is sparking within that passion point we try to have an opinion there.' Cassell adds that it is much more striking for consumers to see 'a brand join a niche conversation than that national hashtag holiday that everyone is trying to talk about'.

Crystal Rix, chief strategy officer at BBDO New York, looks for 'judo' moments at the 'intersection of where culture is going and what your brand stands for'. In the same way that practitioners of the martial art throw their opponents by redirecting their momentum, marketers should look for cultural conversations that can be directed into their brand stories, says Rix.

When a Chevrolet spokesman got tongue-tied during the Most Valuable Player trophy presentation at the Major League Baseball World Series, blurting out that his brand's trucks boasted class-leading 'technology and stuff', he became a laughing stock on Twitter. Rather than fight or ignore the brouhaha, Chevrolet, working with FleishmanHillard in St Louis, used judo and joined in with the joke, incorporating #TechnologyAndStuff into its online and traditional media advertising. This nifty manoeuvre delivered 63 million

impressions for the brand and increased pre-release purchase interest for the Chevrolet Colorado truck by 350%. The campaign also won a Gold PR Lion at Cannes in 2015.

True judo masters also understand that the maturity of a cultural conversation should dictate the response. 'Some conversations are nascent and they need brands to help drive awareness behind them,' says Rix. More mature conversations require a more considered approach: brands need to show up with solutions, or risk looking like opportunistic bandwagon jumpers.

Rix says BBDO uses Omnicom's proprietary insights platform Omni to track conversations: 'We have a semantic tool that helps you understand the level of conversation and who's having that conversation. And once something peaks, it won't pop anymore [...] because it's not relevant to your audience anymore, it's just in the mainstream.'

It's critical, adds Rix, that brands understand 'where the curve of a conversation is and what people need from brands at that [point in the] curve'.

Burger King used Twitter complaints about Wendy's ditching spicy nuggets to promote its own



## Pillar 2 / Communication beats consumption

Creating content is one thing. But brands that really make an impact become conduits for communication. Ze Frank, BuzzFeed's former chief of research and development, hit the nail on the head when he said: 'Repurposing [...] media not for consumption but for communication is, I think, the underpinning of this social age.'

Put less philosophically, that means people will share something if they can use it to either express themselves or to communicate with someone else. That can be because a piece of content tells someone that you know how they are feeling (what Frank calls emotional content), tells someone that you know something about who they are (identity content), or because sharing something implies some kind of insider knowledge or status on your part (informational content).

These rules may have been developed in the context of BuzzFeed videos, but they contain kernels of insight that can be applied more widely.

For example, REI and Venables Bell & Partners' #OptOutside campaign was one of the few instances where a brand can claim to have created a movement, not just a conversation, and it can be explained with reference to the identity principle.

When the outdoor retailer posted on Twitter in 2015 that it was shutting its stores on Black Friday to encourage people to explore the wilderness, more than 1.4 million people used the brand's hashtag and that year REI signed up a record number of new members to its co-operative. People shared and participated with the campaign because it was an easy shorthand for signaling disapproval of rabid consumerism and an affinity with REI's aims.

If you can combine intrinsic motivators (like #OptOutside) with extrinsic motivators (like prizes and rewards) so much the better. Volvo demonstrated the power of checking

both boxes with its 2015 Interception campaign. Any time another car commercial aired on TV during the Super Bowl, people could Tweet at Volvo and nominate someone they thought deserved to win one of its cars. As well as offering intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, Volvo also gave us a 'judo' masterclass, redirecting momentum and hijacking the stage that other brands had paid dearly to occupy. Volvo and Grey New York were rewarded for this nifty flip with a 70% sales lift and a Grand Prix in the

People latched on to REI's #OptOutside as a means of self-identifying, while Volvo added a reward motive into the mix



Direct category at Cannes in 2015.

But if we had to recommend one motivator over the other it would be intrinsic. Neuroscience has shown how often emotions rule our decision-making processes and, in their effectiveness research for the IPA, Binet and Field demonstrate that emotional advertising is needed in greater proportions than rational messaging over the long term. 'In the long run,' Binet has been quoted as saying, 'emotion is where the really big profits lie.'



**Repurposing media not for consumption but for communication is the underpinning of this social age**

Ze Frank, former BuzzFeed chief of research and development



Verizon cheekily (and helpfully) responded to people's frustrated Tweets about rival broadband suppliers

### Pillar 3 / Get beyond first impressions

As Twitter has evolved, so too have the metrics that brands and agencies measure to determine success. Brands and agencies originally coveted impressions but the brand safety scares and revelations about bots and click farms that have plagued certain platforms soured the guilty pleasure of chasing cheap reach for marketers more generally.

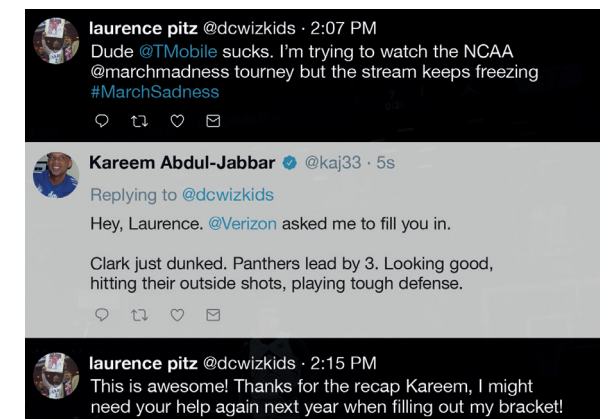
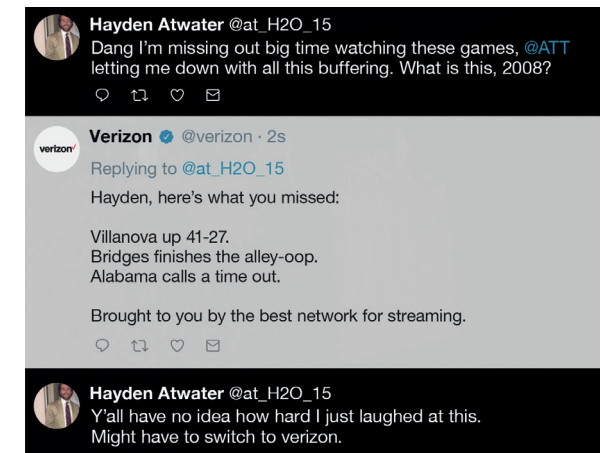
In place of impressions, engagements took root as the favoured metric of marketers but this too passed. Subsequently, more and more brands put stock in sentiment as the best indication that a campaign was succeeding, but Jen McDonald, chief client officer at VMLY&R, North America, says her agency now advocates a more holistic view. It still looks at the interplay of impressions, engagement and sentiment, but changing people's attitudes and making sales are better goals. 'If someone sees, interacts or comes in contact with this, are they more likely to feel better about the brand or purchase the brand?' she says. 'That's super important to us.'

Accordingly, the Twitter-led work winning at Cannes over the years has increasingly hinged on real-world outcomes and deeper connections with consumers. In 2018, Verizon used Twitter to find rivals' customers who were complaining that their network provider kept dropping signal, making it hard for them to stream college basketball games. Verizon responded by sending them written reports of what they had just missed (and hired NBA legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to help). The campaign, which was shortlisted at Cannes Lions in 2018, spread because it was cheeky and innovative, but it also answered individual user frustrations with a useful service that demonstrated why Verizon was better than its rivals.

'[Often] when you look at case studies in Cannes they talk about a million of these and six thousand that,' says Corel Theuma, group creative director at R/GA New

York, the agency behind the Verizon campaign. 'But I think that once you have a customer that you serviced well one-to-one through a campaign, I think you will have that customer for a while.'

You can't put the cart (the results) before the horse (the idea), but ask yourself: what will you measure or how will you define success next time you create something on Twitter? If all you can think of is retweets and comments, then you're likely thinking too small.



**Pillar 4 / Think small to launch big**

Still, there are times when thinking small is the right thing to do. VMLY&R's Jen McDonald knows a thing or two about success on Twitter (her agency works with Wendy's) and she says: 'If you're trying to hit a home run every single time, you're going to strike out.'

If you have the mindset that everything you do must spread to the far corners of the platform and break out into culture, you will likely paralyse yourself with anxiety, or try only a narrow range of ideas. Some of the biggest successes on Twitter come from ideas that were unburdened by great expectations.

McDonald says Wendy's best work was done by cultivating lots of little ideas. Take #NuggsForCarter, when Wendy's

**When you hit a nerve at the very centre of a community that is highly engaged, the people that you touch first have the most momentum and energy and that creates the ripple**

Crystal Rix, BBDO New York

challenged a fan to get 18 million retweets in return for a year of free chicken nuggets. This was the most retweeted Tweet of all time until earlier this year (when a Japanese billionaire offered cash prizes to people who spread his Tweet), and won a Silver PR Lion at Cannes in 2017.

People think about it as a lucky break for Wendy's but McDonald describes it as something that only came about because Wendy's had patiently built a base of fans, through fun little interactions that got people laughing and talking about the brand. This eventually inspired some 16-year-old kid in Reno to get in touch on Twitter. As well as being a helpful mindset that encourages brands and agencies to take risks, thinking small has other virtues. If you craft a message to appeal to lots of people, few will care. But if you create something that appeals to more specialised tastes and interests, they will be more inclined to spread it because they are passionate. Think of it like the ripple after a pebble is dropped into water.

'When you hit a nerve at the very centre of a community that is highly engaged, the people that you touch first have the most momentum and energy and that creates the rip-



ple,' says BBDO's Crystal Rix, who adds that messages can then spread far and wide due to people's overlapping membership of various groups and communities. Eventually social proof takes effect, and people share or participate with something simply because so many others have.

This may sound like advice that runs counter to the widely accepted theories of Professor Byron Sharp of the Ehrenberg-Bass Institute for Marketing Science. He argues that brands grow because they appeal to the widest possible audience and that targeting is largely pointless. But we believe there is a distinction here, and it's the difference between creating advertising messages and creating ideas that riff on – and fuel – the public conversation.

By steadily engaging a base of fans with fun interactions, Wendy's inspired #NuggsForCarter

## Pillar 5 / Parlez-vous Twitter?

Former copywriter and creativity pundit Dave Trott tells a story about George Patton to make a point about advertising language. The US general once told a journalist, 'When I want my men to remember something important, to really make it stick, I give it to them double dirty [...] You can't run an army without profanity.'

The point here is not that swearing is innately useful, it's that you need to speak the language of your audience and if that means getting a bit savage, do it.

The brands that we spoke to with the strongest voice on Twitter agreed that letting corporate tones or jargon leak into the messaging is the fastest way to ruin a conversation.

When Crock-Pot was blamed for the death of the beloved patriarch Jack Pearson on the TV show *This is Us*, the brand took to Twitter to conduct damage control. Social media director Ashley Mowrey had to convince her leadership team to abandon the brand's regular tone of voice.

'We used a lot of emojis,' explains Mowrey. 'We also used a lot of the same vernacular that they were using [...] One that sticks out in my mind said, "Our hearts are broken," and we used the broken heart emoji and said, "Jack was our BFF too." I think that was one of the Tweets that was most reposted.'

Professor Karen Nelson-Field, executive director at The Centre for Amplified Intelligence, who has written extensively on the science of sharing, told Contagious, 'Anything that's highly emotional [...] will get shared more.' That rule is true for content in any medium but Nelson-Field has found that, 'Not only do high arousal videos share more, but they cut through. They help you be remembered.'

The Crock-Pot campaign, created with agency Edelman, generated 3.7 billion impressions and won a Silver Lion in the PR category at Cannes, and Crock-Pot enjoyed a \$300,000 bump in its February sales. Looking back, Mowrey says the brand's only misstep at the time was

to issue a media statement in its usual corporate tone of voice: 'That would probably be my only regret.'

The most reliable way to avoid sounding like a corporation desperate to infiltrate the Twitter ranks is to demonstrate the two qualities that companies almost never display: self-awareness and self-deprecation.

VMLY&R's Jen McDonald believes one other quality is a prerequisite. She says fearlessness is necessary to get the Twitter tone right, 'because I think everything that we've done that's exploded has made some people a little uncomfortable at first, before it gets out into the world'.

If that wasn't anxiety-inducing enough for a brand, speed is a necessity, too. Take too long to diligently weigh the pros and cons of a message and you will have missed the moment of impact. As a result, we found that many agencies and brands like to set out clear and definitive guardrails for what cannot be said but allow anything in between those extremes.

**If brands can create something that will represent people's thoughts, then people will be interested and share those things**

Yasu Sasaki, Dentsu Tokyo

Inevitably, part of getting the tone right on Twitter comes down to talent; being too prescriptive about writing good Tweets is like trying to bottle lightning.

Back in 2017, when McDonald's Tweeted, 'All Quarter Pounder burgers at the majority of our restaurants will be cooked with fresh beef,' Wendy's replied, 'So you'll still use frozen beef in MOST of your burgers in ALL of your restaurants? Asking for a friend.'

The snappy reply was retweeted more than 175,000 times and started a chain of discussion with more than 7,000 replies. McDonald believes it was that last bit, the 'asking for a friend' that elevated the reply, by taking 'inspiration from how people were actually talking'.

The only other thing to remember is that talent, though important, is not enough on its own. No amount of clever phrasing is going to trick people into talking about your brand if your idea or campaign does not have their interests at heart. Which leads us nicely onto our final pillar...

Crock-Pot sought to clear its name after being implicated in the death of a much-loved TV character







Foot Locker's Horse With Harden upped the value exchange by offering unique access to a basketball star

### Pillar 6 / Remember – no one cares

In its 2019 Meaningful Brands survey, Havas reported that people would not care if 77% of brands disappeared tomorrow. This might make for dispiriting reading, but the audience's indifference is also the starting point for effective work.

Legendary adman Howard Luck Gossage knew the score when he wrote: 'The buying of time or space is not the taking out of a hunting license on someone else's private preserve but is the renting of a stage on which we may perform.'

Today, that message is more relevant than ever. The Heineken Company's Amram explains: 'As an old-time media person I used to say, "Give me enough media and I can make bad creative still work." But in the digital world with consumers in control, it's a harder thing to do [...] because it's not a lean-back experience. I can't force communication down people's throats like I used to be able to do in a linear world.'

If you want the attention of people on Twitter you have to say something that stops them from scrolling past, the platform can't do that for you. If you want your audience to actually participate with your brand, then you're going to have to think hard about what you're giving them in return.

Foot Locker's Horse With Harden, (Bronze Lion in the Direct category in 2015) and Play My Tweet (shortlisted in the Promo & Activation category in 2016) campaigns, for instance, secured participation by granting people access to basketball superstar James Harden – something people could never get otherwise.

Crystal Rix (whose agency BBDO created the Foot Locker campaigns) believes 'the consumer value exchange is at an all-time high'. 'Back in the day the exchange was: "We'll interrupt you and, for your attention, we'll give you some entertainment value," she says, adding that, today, that exchange is often no longer sufficient, and brands

should instead consider offering a service or some kind of utility.

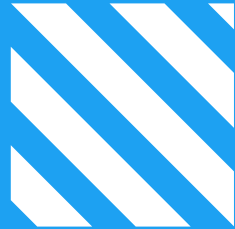
Even during Twitter's relatively short existence, Yasu Sasaki, Dentsu Tokyo's executive creative director, has noticed a raised threshold for getting people to participate and share brands' messages. 'Our strategy used to be to create something that would create a big buzz, something interesting that people would share,' he says. 'But in the past three or five years, Twitter accounts became very personal [...] So if brands can create something that will represent people's thoughts, or if brands can create something that speaks for the people, then people will be interested and share those things.' In other words, content for communication, not consumption.

Product-first messages and strategies based on unique selling points won't cut it and neither will lazily buying cheap impressions. We've left it this long to say it because it's become so hackneyed – but you must put the customer first.

### Pillars to post

So there you have it. Six pillars to help you craft campaigns that people will want to participate with. There are no guarantees, of course. When you put your ideas in the hands of your audience, it will always be a case of possibilities over certainties: that's just the trade-off you must accept when you pursue the kind of fame and resonance that cannot be bought. But these strategies should at least put you on your way to creating ideas that people want to share and elevate into culture, especially if you apply them with the overarching philosophy of marketer Seth Godin. He believes successful brands today must be generous, not selfish; that brands must ask themselves whether they showed up for their audience in such a way that they would be missed if they disappeared tomorrow.

'What that means,' says Godin, 'is that we get to do marketing with people, not to them.' 🦄



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