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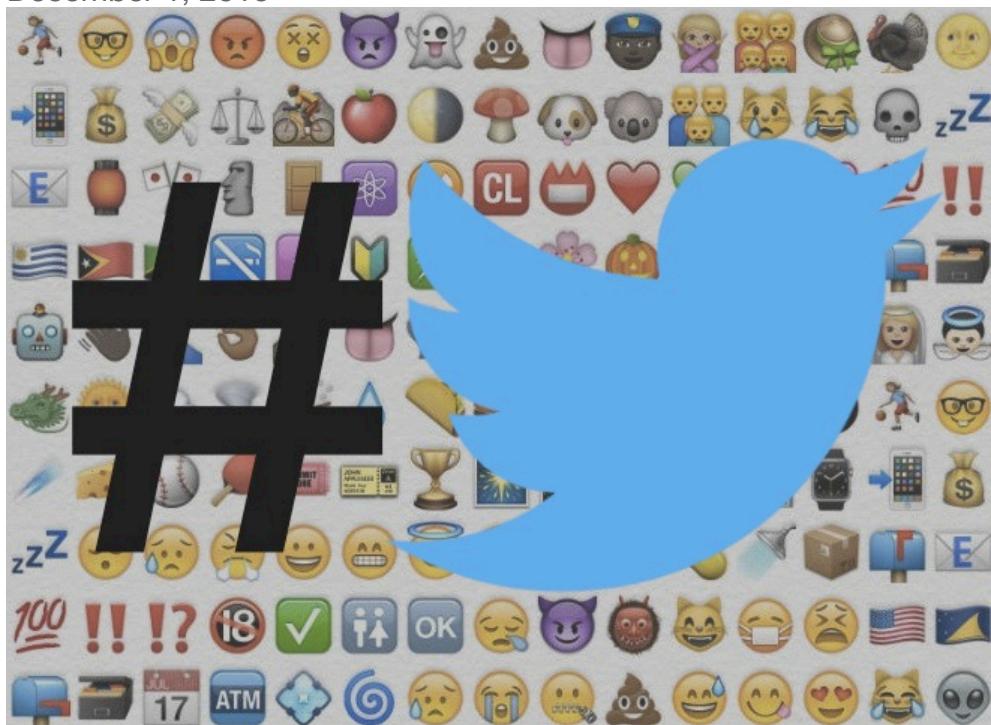
How the Branded Hashtag Emoji Is Taking Over Twitter

What started off as a "hashflag" for World Cup fans has become a key marketing strategy for brands such as Coca-Cola, Dove, Star Wars, Toyota and Starbucks.

By Justin Lafferty

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The hottest marketing technique on Twitter isn't a viral cat video or a funny tweet from a celebrity endorser.

It's something found on pretty much any mobile keyboard: [an emoji](#).

Brands, in an effort to relate to their younger and more mobile-savvy consumers, have been increasingly [using emojis in tweets](#). This gave Twitter an idea: the branded hashtag emoji. For select hashtags, an emoji will automatically appear when tweeted.

What started off as a “[hashflag](#)” for World Cup fans has become a key marketing strategy for brands such as Coca-Cola, Dove, Star Wars, Toyota and Starbucks. Twitter has also added emojis to event hashtags — recently evidenced by #Postseason or #AMAs.

Bridget Harvey, a senior manager on Twitter’s brand strategy team, has been a major force in helping the branded hashtag emojis gain prominence. She told SocialTimes that the branded emojis started through experimentation:

“We saw a lot of excitement around the Star Wars emojis. That drove quite a bit of interest from our partners around the possibility of creating an emoji for a brand. From there, we decided to explore this further. We really do believe in innovation through experimentation. That’s something that my group holds near and dear to our hearts. We believe that when you do experimentation in any campaign, the best campaigns start with insight.

It’s pretty clear that people love emojis. From that insight, we felt that this is a clear opportunity.”

In September, [Coca-Cola](#) (via ad agency Wieden+Kennedy) became the first company to use the branded hashtag emoji on Twitter as part of a marketing campaign: #ShareACoke. [It was wildly successful](#) as soon as it launched, with more than 170,500 mentions globally in the first 24 hours.

People continue to share images with the [#ShareACoke hashtag](#) into the holiday season. Harvey said that more and more companies are approaching Twitter to see if they could also run branded hashtags for their campaigns.

After Chevrolet wrote a press release entirely in emojis, celebrity-leaning social media platform [WhoSay](#), introduced a tongue-in-cheek campaign for an [Emoji Academy](#). WhoSay chief revenue officer **Rob Gregory** talked with SocialTimes about why you'll likely see more brands 100-ing and smiley facing their fans in the future:

“Emojis as a new form of global language are just beginning to flourish at the moment. Right now, they are more at the cave drawing stage than Shakespearean stage but they will eventually get there. The companies that are embracing branded emojis are the same forward thinkers that were the first to try Instagram, Snapchat and other social platforms. There’s a fair amount of experimentation going on and I would expect these companies to continue to push the envelope in new ways in order to brand on mobile. We will definitely see more brands follow suit.”

And yes, these emojis really do work. SocialTimes worked with [Brandwatch](#) and [ListenFirst Media](#) to track the activity around the main hashtags of two major events: the [Major League Baseball postseason](#) (#Postseason) and the American Music Awards (#AMAs). The #Postseason and #AMAs were emoji-free in 2014, but each event got a special trophy emoji with the hashtag this year.

The usage of the #AMAs hashtag with the emoji was even more impressive.

According to Brandwatch, in the day before, the day of and the day after the 2014 awards show (Nov. 22 through 24), the #AMAs hashtag was mentioned more than 2.6 million times, generating more than 14 billion impressions.

This year, in that same timeframe, Brandwatch found that the #AMAs hashtag emoji was used more than 5.4 million times and generated a staggering 42 billion impressions.

The #AMAs hashtag was most used, naturally, during the awards show. ListenFirst Media data for this year shows that just during the 3 hours of the 2015 program (8 p.m. to 11 p.m. ET on Nov. 22), #AMAs was mentioned 3.38 million times — almost 1 million more mentions than the 3-day period last year.

During the show, #AMAs mentions generated 9.9 billion potential impressions, according to ListenFirst Media.

The AMAs [also had a physical emoji wall](#) and created emojis for several performers, such as **Justin Bieber** and **5 Seconds of Summer**.

Harvey said that Twitter users should start to see more and more of these types of emoji (both branded and event) this month, especially as companies such as Beats by Dre incorporate them into their holiday marketing campaign.

Toyota, which recently wrapped up a [#LetsGoFans](#) branded emoji campaign, reached out to two kinds of fans: those of the auto brand and those who love sports. **Florence Drakton**, Toyota's social media marketing manager, was thrilled with the amount of engagement the campaign generated.



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23



38



Toyota also created emojis fans could download.

This was the first time Toyota used emojis in their social marketing plans, and Drakton said that they've become a new way for the brand to talk with their fans:

“We’re really excited about the amount of engagement. The fans took the cue. ... It definitely opened up a new style of communication between ourselves and our consumers. It’s another form of expression. Sometimes, it’s better shown in an image than with words.”

However, just because emojis are popular does not mean that your brand needs to fill all 140 characters with them. **Curalate CMO Matt Langie** offered some advice for companies wanting to make the jump, but not wanting to abuse emojis:

“The present-day consumer devours anything that enables them to share ideas and information visually. With that in mind, the popularity of hashtagged emojis on Twitter represents a much larger shift in the

way people communicate. By incorporating them into brand messaging on Twitter or any other channel, emojis offer marketers another way to engage image-driven consumers.

As with any marketing trend, however, do your homework. If you're considering bringing emojis into your mix, choose icons that are relevant to your brand and targeted customer. For instance, Curalate conducted research on the most hashtagged emojis on Instagram and found that positivity is highly valued; if you look at the top 20 most popular emojis, half are smileys."

Readers: How do you feel about brands using emojis?