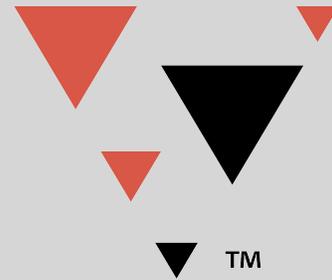


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YOUR BRAND + SMILEY FACES: THE SOCIAL VALUE OF EMOJI

Around 2:30 in the afternoon on Monday, April 15, I got an email from my boss.

"She looks happy to announce the bomb," he noted, and included a screenshot he had taken of a tweet. In it, a smiling woman's face peered out at me from the user icon, her cheerful expression belying the seriousness of her message:



"Just heard that bombs went off at the #boston marathon finish line."

In the Volacci office we'd all been breathlessly tracking each new scrap of information that trickled in over the course of the afternoon. Through it all, much of our news came in through Twitter, where cheery, professional, funny, or sexy user profile pictures stood in stark dichotomy against the grave messages that followed.

This led to a conversation between me and several of my coworkers (boss included) about emotions in social media. Would it be of any value for various social networks to begin including "mood" or "emoji" settings-- even those as simple as mere indicators of positive, negative, and neutral sentiment?

As a marketer, I would vault over a number of very large and potentially fiery objects to get my hands on that kind of consistently accurate information. Our natural language processing algorithms are

notoriously bad at analyzing sentiment-- sarcasm and irony is lost on our current generation of machines. But as a social media user in my own free time, I'm not sure that I would use emoticons or sentiment indicators. In fact, in some cases (especially when brands are involved) I resent them.

NPR had an interesting segment on this in October of 2012. Called "Social Media Advice: When Are Emoticons Ok?" the discussion clocks in at three minutes and five seconds as social media gurus Deanna Zandt and Baratunde Thurston discuss the function of emoticons in our digital discourse.

Said Thurston, "My take on it is [that] the emoticon is a response to a hyper focus on text communication. We've evolved to communicate in so many different ways. As human bodies and human people, we've got smell and facial expressions. And the Internet strips all that away from us... and forces us all to become writers. And not everybody is a writer."

Zandt agreed. "I think we're actually relying too much on the tools to do the work for us, that we need, you know, kind of digital literacy training and to train ourselves to stop and think: Did my cousin Betsy actually mean to say XYZ."

As both Thurston and Zandt point out, emoticons are often used passive aggressively, especially in text messages. "Way to behave at that party last night ;)" could mean a wide variety of different things. Is it congratulatory? Sarcastic? Flirtatious? Though all messages rely on context, including the context of sender and recipient, the context of social media gets even more ambiguous than the context of SMS text messages like in the example-- because social media often isn't a two-way conversation. It's a spiderweb of chatter, and one that can be devastating to brands.

Enter Facebook, Stage Left, Feeling Complacent

Facebook is testing out their own solution to this problem in the form of an emoticon system. Users now have the option of including their current emotions, or what they're watching or eating or listening to, in their statuses. As Josh Constine pointed out in January on Tech Crunch,

"By selecting your current activity instead of merely writing it out, you structure data for Facebook. That could eventually help it to connect you with advertisers who want to reach people who frequently watch TV and movies, or listen to music, or eat at restaurants.

"If you choose a particular pre-formatted emotion, piece of media, or food, Facebook could potentially use that behavior to pinpoint you with ads. If you listen to a Daft Punk song, it could target you with ads for their new album or nearby concert. Coffee shops might be able to pay to reach coffee drinkers, and Netflix would probably love to target sad users who could be primed to stay home and watch some videos. Going further, Facebook could even sell "Sponsored Activities," where advertisers could pay to have themselves suggested as what someone was up to in the category selector."

When the Facebook emoticons rolled out early this spring, I had several very amusing posts pop up on my newsfeed that indicated to me that perhaps the tool isn't being utilized in the way it was intended.



The first post (and subsequent comments) mirrors my own reaction. The "How are you feeling" icons

reminded me of the old school emoji found crawling around on the internet in the early 2000s, most specifically on LiveJournal and Myspace. A LiveJournal blog I kept when I was a young teenager was covered in custom-installed dragon emoji that helpfully informed my readers whether I was feeling hungry, disgruntled, quixotic.

I think there's a far better chance that people will appropriate the "how are you feeling?" section and reuse it in interesting and strange ways for as long as they can, much like they did with the "Religion" "Relationship status" and "Political beliefs" boxes on the "About" section of a user's profile. Users will doubtlessly exercise this creativity until the option is taken away from them and they are required to act within the parameters of tagging and naming brands and brands alone. After all, the value of emoticons is in the reward you receive for using them; as there is currently no conveyed reward for tagging brands, the likely rewards will come in the form of social approval for cleverly twisting emoticons back on themselves, as we saw in the posts above.

And, too, emoticons can seem trite when used sincerely in public. I'll use emoji when texting with family and close friends, but not with strangers, and the Facebook emoji seem to cross this line. For instance, if I'm really really sad about something, and I post on Facebook that I am sad, I'll hope that my words can convey my pain in such a way that I don't need a crying sadface to do it for me. It seems almost demeaning to have to resort to emoji to express myself. To paraphrase what Deanna Zandt said so articulately on NPR, we're letting our tools do the work for us.

Regarding Facebook's emoji, I think half the problem is in presentation. I don't want to use a tool that's going to force me to convey my emotions in the same manner that I did when I was a young teen. I will, however, use a tool that can provide value to me in my interactions with my peers and with brands.

To boil down my reaction in a nutshell, Facebook's emoji system allows for the tagging and promotion of pages with relatively little reward to the consumer, in what looks like a badly hatched mashup of overly simplistic emotional representation and brand pushing. This brings me back to the crux of the matter: how can emoji or other sentiment indicators be a point of value both for brands and for consumers?

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Tweets and Twerps

In spite of the hesitations and possible pitfalls that I outlined above, I have to say that there's something about being able to tie simple emotions to tweets that just makes sense, both from a personal standpoint and from a brand standpoint. The 140 characters in a tweet are precious; sometimes, emotions can't be completely expressed in such a small space. When it comes to complicated situations with complicated reactions, 140 characters just isn't enough space to convey information about what's going on, AND a description of the reaction it causes in you.

As a marketer, I would like to see users provided with a better channel for expressing the sum of their sentiment on Twitter. As a user of the platform, there have been times when I would have liked more clarity on what people were thinking or feeling-- or times when I haven't tweeted out something clever for fear that it might be misconstrued, and might negatively affect my online construction of my identity.

In spite of the hesitations and possible pitfalls that I outlined above, I have to say that there's something about being able to tie emotions to social media that just makes sense. However, I say this with the caveat that all emotional stamps on social interactions need to carry "identity fodder" for social users.

As both a Twitter and Facebook junkie, there have been times when I would have liked more clarity on

what people were thinking or feeling-- or times when I haven't posted something clever for fear that it might be misconstrued, and might negatively affect my online construction of my identity. This goes double for interacting with brands: some brand interactions appear fun in context, but when I stare at my decontextualized brand participation in the little white "post" box, I realize that I look (to put it bluntly) like a total tool.

So, if you're asking your consumers to publicly display emotional connections to your brand, either through hashtags or action tags on Facebook, make sure you've done your research. Know how to clearly demonstrate that engaging with your brand will positively impact your consumers' online identities. If you look like you're trying to get people to push your brand for you, there's a significant chance you'll receive negative backlash, thus modifying the symbolic meaning of your brand-- and thereby, your consumer base.

To tie it all back to marketing, if you ask your followers and consumers to display their emotional connections to your brand, bear in mind:

1. The less effort you ask of them, the better,
2. Don't be surprised if people twist it around-- if you're not providing as much value to them as they are to you by fulfilling the request, they will create their own value in the form of demonstrating their own wit, should they choose to participate at all, and
3. Be aware that the connotation of your brand will be modified by these users, and your customer base may change.

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