

Exploring the Social Media Conversation in Response to peta2's Blog Post about the National FFA Organization

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Introduction

As the prevalence of social media tools has increased so too has the public's ability to share their perspectives about whatever, whenever they like (Smith, 2012). Organizations should recognize this development and leverage these tools to build relationships with stakeholders (Briones, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011). Because conversations are happening online every second, organizations need to monitor these discussions so they know when and how to engage audience members. Social media analytics technology allow organizations to identify, track, listen and participate in these conversations (Sheldrake, 2012). Monitoring the online conversation allows organizations to gain immediate "insight into the thoughts, views, and feelings of stakeholder audiences" (Smith, 2012, p. 158).

On Monday, Jan. 25, a blogger for peta2.com posted an article titled "FFA is Lame AF" (Rohr, 2016). "AF" is a derogatory term and the article was written to disparage the National FFA Organization. Peta2 is an organization associated with PETA that presents itself as the "largest youth animal rights group in the world" (peta2, para. 3). On Tuesday, Jan. 26, the National FFA Organization distributed an email to state leaders in response to this blog post and provided suggestions on how to share accurate information and positive experiences. This email also encouraged use of the #FFAproud hashtag. Because what is said on social media can have far-reaching implications, it is essential organizations monitor the conversation to know how to respond or enable others to do so. This particular case presents an opportunity to research how this issue played out in online communication channels.

Framework

Sheldrake (2012) said the "real-time social Web brings an unprecedented and radical transparency" (p. 150) that encourages public relations practitioners to adopt the Excellence model of public relations. Grunig and Hunt (1984) stated this model was the most desirable public relations model because it emphasizes two-way, symmetric communication to encourage reciprocal relationships between the organization and its public, which continues to have application in a digital environment (Grunig, 2009).

Purpose and RQs

The purpose of this research was to explore the social media conversation regarding the peta2 blog post about the National FFA Organization published on Jan. 25, 2016. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. How many mentions did the keywords of PETA + FFA garner in the study's time frame?
2. What was the spread and reach of those mentions?
3. What were the trending hashtags used in the mentions?
4. What social media platforms were used in this conversation?
5. Who were the influential individuals in this conversation?

Methods

Nuvi, a social media monitoring platform, was used to monitor this issue's conversation. This program was available through The Outpost Social Media Lab @ [university]. Within Nuvi, a monitor was established for the keywords of PETA + FFA. This search would return any mentions that included both these search terms in publicly available online content. The monitor also pulled historical data, if available, to determine if these terms had appeared together before the monitoring began on Jan. 25. Monitoring concluded two weeks later on Feb. 9 when the conversation had tapered off. Nuvi provides a wealth of information, but the variables of interest in this study were total mentions, reach, spread, trending hashtags, platforms, and influential users. The data were available directly in Nuvi as summary reports.

Results

During a two-week time frame from Monday, Jan. 25 at 5 p.m. to Tuesday, Feb. 9 at 12 a.m., the monitor for PETA + FFA resulted in 811 mentions. These mentions had the potential reach to 256,365 people. Via re-tweets and shared, these original mentions had the potential to an additional 312,543 people. The hashtag #FFAProud was the most popular with 245 occurrences, followed by #agchat ($n = 17$), #ans211 ($n = 13$), #ffa ($n = 10$) and #ga_ffa ($n = 8$). Twitter was the source for 782 (96.4%) of the mentions followed by news sources ($n = 9$), blog ($n = 8$), Tumbler ($n = 6$), Wordpress ($n = 5$), and Instagram ($n = 1$). Another interesting finding was the influence Twitter user, gregpeterson33, had on the conversation. He was the most mentioned ($n = 77$) with the most reshares ($n = 76$), and most spread ($n = 126,630$).

When looking at the timeline for this issue, the most mentions were concentrated from 6 p.m. on Jan. 26 to 12 a.m. on Jan. 28. During this 54-hour window, the monitor identified 521 mentions of PETA + FFA, which represented 64.2% of all mentions during the study's time frame.

Discussion/Implications/Recommendations

Monitoring social media conversations helps organizations know what is being said and identify appropriate strategies to engage with stakeholders (Sheldrake, 2012). Based on the Nuvi monitoring report, this issue seemed to encourage those with an FFA background to post their support using the promoted #FFAProud hashtag. The conversation was most active within three days of the original blog posting and tapered out over the next two weeks. The results of this study demonstrate the importance of encouraging stakeholders to use social media to engage, and perhaps redirect, the discussion. Having influential social media users, such as gregpeterson33, contribute to the conversation helped increase the spread on behalf of FFA. Practitioners and researchers should monitor issues via social media to gain a real-time understanding of how an issue may unfold and play out via these instantaneous and far-reaching platforms.

The results of this study are limited to the content shared in public-facing social media channels so this does not represent what was being said in private channels such as personal Facebook pages. The results are also limited to posts that mentioned both FFA and PETA, which may not capture the entire conversation. This technology presents opportunities to explore how other topics are being discussed online.

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