

What's with the long hashtags?

Published: April 4, 2014 - 5:21AM

Sitting on my couch one Saturday night obsessing about work – yes, I know, I should have better things to do – I sent a message to a client using the hashtag #it'ssaturdaynightwhythehellamithinkingofwork?!

She sent one back that read #iwasaskingmyselfthatat2am.

It got me thinking, what's the point of hashtags? And what does this phenomenon of really long hashtags tell us?

Megan Iemma from Tech Coach HQ says the problem is the longer they are, the more you confuse the message.

“It's become a competition to come up with a hashtag that hasn't already been taken. But this creates a problem when you are trying to re-tweet a message,” she says.

This is because with Twitter, you only have 140 characters to play with. So long hashtags mean you have less space to say something in a tweet.

Andy Crestodina, principal of digital agency Orbit Media, says: “I think people who use super-long hashtags are just goofing off. If you put #obviouslyridiculouslylong into a tweet, you really aren't expecting people to click on it or for people to discover your tweet through the hashtag.”

Of course, the main reason people use hashtags is to find the information they want online.

“Twitter describes itself as the world's largest sofa, which sounds cozy but it's a sofa that seats 200 million. So you need ways to find where the right people are sitting. By using a hashtag, a Twitter user has applied a label to themselves that says ‘I am interested in this topic,’” says Steven Lewis from digital business Taleist.

“If your business has something to say about that topic, using the hashtag puts you in the conversation with the right people. But be aware that using a hashtag without something to add other than self-promotion will have an effect you don't want,” he says.

According to Daniel Schlagwein, a lecturer at the Australian School of Business, who studies databases and who knows an awful lot about them, hashtags rose to prominence during the Iranian election in 2009.

They became valuable because people could use them to search for and post information about the election, which prompted a spate of violence in the country, at a time when mainstream media struggled to keep on top of the situation.

According to Schlagwein, they also became popular after Twitter endorsed them (interestingly another social media platform, LinkedIn, discourages their use).

He believes hashtags will remain important, especially in a business context. He can even see a time when they may be used alongside ratings to measure the success of TV or radio shows. For instance, instead of simply using the number of people who watch a show as a measure of its success, in the future, broadcasters might look at the number of people who include a show's hashtag in a social media post to determine a show's popularity.

For smaller businesses, it's easy to measure the success of campaigns that include a hashtag component with tools such as HootSuite or Google Analytics.

According to Roger Christie from Social2Business, the hashtag itself is incredibly important. Tagging posts with the name of your business is probably not the way to join a conversation you want to be in, because people are unlikely to be searching for, say, #MyDog (a popular brand of pet food) when they're looking for cute shots of pooches. They are more likely to use a hashtag such as #cutepuppy.

“Brands often fall into the trap of wanting to get their name out there under users' noses, but, particularly in a

Twitter environment, often it makes more sense to understand what the community is already talking about and how you can add value,” Christie explains.

For instance, consumer brand Jell-O ran a campaign last year that attempted to change the meaning of the acronym FML (generally accepted to mean f@#k my life) to ‘fun my life’. I guess the idea was that Jell-O and its new meaning for FML would appear when people searched for #fml.

I’m not sure how successful they were, but at least they understood that people are probably not going to tag their posts with #Jell-O.

Christie says the lesson for businesses whose hashtags are hijacked is never run away from the conversation. A famous example of a hashtag hijacking was when McDonald’s encouraged people to share their favourite stories involving the fast food chain with the hashtag #McDonaldsStories. But many people weren’t posting cute shots of their Happy Meal toys. Instead consumers posted photos criticising food safety standards at their restaurants or of their boyfriends or girlfriends drunk outside the golden arches after a big night.

“If your hashtag has been hijacked it is usually due to a perceived failing in your product or service,” says Christie.

“If people are complaining about you on social media don't ignore this, don't take it personally, don't shut them out and never attack them. Use social media channels to update followers on the steps you are taking to right a wrong and thank followers for bringing an issue to your attention.”

What do you think? Are hashtags – especially long ones – useful in social media? How can you ensure your posts stand out from the crowd?

This story was found at: <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/small-business/trends/blogs/the-big-idea/whats-with-the-long-hashtags-20140403-360v7.html>