Storytelling

Techniques and tips
for more effective communication
Hack-Pack

Interreg Europe

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Introducing the MSLGROUP storytelling hack-pack

The word 'hack' has come to mean many things. Some less savoury than others! The sense in which we wish to use it here is more traditional. A hack, historically, was a technique used by writers when facing the blank white sheet of paper on which they had to craft a new, engaging story for publication. This is a daunting task even for the most seasoned writers so hacks were developed by individuals as techniques and 'ways-in' to beginning the task of writing. Of getting something down, that could be polished later.

The MSLGROUP storytelling hack-pack is intended for use as a guide to using the best storytelling techniques and tips to improve long-form communications such as press-releases, web-copy and the introductions to reports as well as medium and short form communications such as e-mails and brief social synopses - and to help you get into the construction of the communication faster, with greater confidence.

Storytelling is a useful way to think about conveying communications because as humans we have evolved functionally and emotionally to prefer information conveyed in this way. It makes communications more appealing, easier to consume and understand. And by using a few simple methods outlined here most communications can be improved.

This pack has been created Dominic Payling of MSLGROUP. MSLGROUP is the largest communications agency within the media conglomerate Publicis which has over 100 offices worldwide serving governments, NGOs and some of the worlds biggest brands.

Dominic has been exploring the power of storytelling for many years for some of the worlds biggest brands now culminating in the techniques you will find here.

We hope you find this document useful

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Contents

1. Hack-Pack overview

How to use this Hack-Pack
A story telling check-list

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How to use this Hack-Pack

The pack is split into four chapters. Chapters two, three and four are concerned with writing your story. Chapter two sets out how to plan your story, chapter three how to develop the focus for your story, and chapter four how to write it

This pack is designed to be self-explanatory. Each component of the pack has an explanation slide. Each explanation slide has three elements:

1. Why the component exists
2. What the component does
3. How to use the component

A Storytelling Checklist

1. The Story Plan – This is about preparing to tell your story and ensuring that all relevant factors have been considered before you write.

3. The Narrative – This is the central trunk of your story, the adaptability of which can allow the same story to flourish and be told in many ways for different audiences thus keeping the story relevant.

2. The Contract – This is the single point that roots a story in the world and remains constant however the same story is told.

2. Planning for storytelling

Determine the story context
Consider the audience for your story
How to tell your story
Defining the purpose of your story
Story planning overview

Defining the purpose of your story

Why? Every story needs a reason why. Why do I want all of these people to hear what I'm saying, read what I'm writing, see what I'm performing? If there is no pre-determined objective for our communication then we should be satisfied with any outcome that results. The purpose we choose before we write our story should direct the content, tone, voice and structure we wish to incorporate and follow.

What? Research shows that there are only six possible objectives for your story. They are shown on the following document complete with inspiring click-throughs for you to see how others have communicated their purpose (and the style they have done it in). The story purpose tool describes the six possible outcomes you may want to achieve with your communication.

How? Use the purpose tool as a simple aide memoir and checklist to make sure you are clear about the objective for your communication.

Planning your story 1
Purpose makes your communication dynamic

Who I am
announce, state, introduce

Awareness

Check-out:
http://www.ted.com/talks/rory_sutherland_life_lessons_from_an_ad_man?language=en#t-77288

Why I'm here
explain, comprehend, relate

Relevance

Check-out:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d_2jR2qNIoY

I have a dream
inspire, excite, galvanise

Vision

Check-out:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqsOl80VR6Q
&
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RmqY6zY_jek

I'll show you how
demonstrate, teach, describe

Education

Check out:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4WNcjkZ6d0w

I do therefore I am
participate, join, compete

Principles in action

Check out:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rhcp0w3oiok

I know what you're thinking
provoke, challenge, surprise

Dealing with the elephant in the room

Check out:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88nYFHN9C3U

Understand your motive for telling the story

Why? Every story needs a reason why. Motive provides context (see subsequent slides). The more people understand why you're acting, the more likely they are to be receptive to the story when you tell it to them. Think of motive and purpose as two sides of a coin. Motive is especially important for government communication, as government impacts the life of each and every citizen.

What? A motive is a reason for doing something. For example, is there a problem you're trying to solve? Will your action create a more fair outcome? Your audience will certainly have an view of your motive (e.g. "busybody EU trying to stick their nose into our affairs") so be clear to state your motive for acting (e.g. we're concerned about X, that's why we're doing Y".

How? Along with writing about your actions (e.g. "we contributed to 43 separate cross border infrastructure projects"), describe the reasons for those actions (e.g. "Poor infrastructure limits our ability to grow the economy and create jobs; that's why we're investing in 43 job-creating infrastructure projects.")

Planning your story 2
Every action has a motive?

"

Every action needs to be prompted by a motive
        - Leonardo da Vinci

- A motive is a reason for doing something

- If you don't ascribe motive to your action, other people can ascribe a less-favourable motive to your action

- In government, there are often different reasons for acting. What might be a noble attempt to fix a problem can be misinterpreted if people don't trust, or don't know the reason for your action

Gov't says: "A number of studies have shown that a simplified tax system, with a lower base rate, will bring in more revenue to fund the valuable social programs we all care about. That's why we're lowering taxes for job-creating businesses."

Opposition says: "The government has cut taxes for their friends in business at a time when families are struggling."

By including motive, the government will let fair-minded observers determine their motive is valid, versus the motive that has been ascribed to them by their opposition.

TOP TIP: Motive matters. Address motive in your communications. Tell them why you want to solve the problem

An example:

Consider the audience for your story

Why? Too many people write to relieve themselves of the responsibility of having to write. It is something that has to be done, not something that is enjoyed. Many organisational environments are very technical and bureaucratic. Too often, people write for their colleagues, who have an insider's knowledge of the language of the business, and not for the target audience, who rarely think about the organisation.

What? A story is written for an audience, not for the author. The audience for most organisation's communications is broad, diverse and growing. All the more reason, then, to take the time to properly consider who the specific audience is for your intended communication.

How? Research. Research. Research. The more you know about your audience, the better your approach to them will be. This includes more than knowing who they are. In today's digital age, you also have to know where they consume their information. Younger audiences prefer social media, where a writer's real estate is more limited. Older audiences, on the other hand, might prefer a longer version of your story, similar to an essay.

Planning your story 3
Know your audience

- What language does your audience speak?

- What do they care about? What motivates *them*?

- What's their/the problem?

- How much do they know? Where do they typically get their information?

- What do they need (from you) to act?

✓ Research– find out everything you can about your audience

✓ Make your audience real – give them a name and a face (personalisation helps bring examples home)

✓ Write for them, not for you (or your colleagues);

✓ Think about channel (off-line vs online; print vs. TV; social vs. digital)

✓ Remember outcome: what do they need from you to act?

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Determine the story context

Why? Before you put 'pen to paper' or finger to keyboard you need to think about the context of the story you are writing. The way your communication will be received will be determined by the mood and perceptions of your audience as determined by recent events that have affected their lives. Consider the mood of your audience for instance as Lehmann brothers collapsed or the Berlin Wall was pulled down?

What? No communication exists in a vacuum. Part of being an effective storyteller is knowing the best time to launch your story. There might be an unrelated event or announcement that gives your story more resonance. Conversely, the best story in the world on the morning of 9/11, didn't matter after the Twin Towers fell. Sometimes you have no choice but to launch at a specified time, but a little flexibility can help get you noticed.

How? Understanding context means doing a little bit of research each day, and of being aware of your surroundings. For example, is there history that will give your current communication more resonance? Look for news hooks that will make your area or responsibility more relevant for stories. Work with your colleagues to ensure your planned communications events aren't going to be crowded out by competing events.

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Planning your story 4
Understand your context

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To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world

- Tony Robbins

- Is there history behind your decision to act? (Compare "Europe was torn asunder by war twice in the 20th century, hence the need for closer cooperation today" with "We need to cooperate closely".

- Is your action in response to current events? (Compare "In response to this months' episodes of street violence, the government will be bringing in new legislation to toughen penalties for looting" with "the government will be changing the laws for looting."

Describe the problem you are trying to solve (Compare "Foreign investment in Canada creates jobs for Canadians right across our country. Unfortunately, there is too little foreign investment coming into our country. That's why the government is making changes to its foreign investment review program that will increase the amount of investment into job-creating industries" with "The government today made changes to its foreign investment review program."

TOP TIP: Context matters. Survey the external landscape and incorporate relevant context into your communication. Describe the **problem** you're trying to solve, describe why it's **important** that you solve that problem, and tell them your **solution**.

Plan your story content

Why? What material do you have available with which to write your story? In the narrative section we cover a useful structure to put your content into but first you need to bring together the salient information. There will be facts/figures, objectives KPIs and budgetary content available to you but if you are going to make a story with a human component that engages and rewards reading then you will also require some other content too.

What? A journalist always seeks to answer the five questions: **who** (is the story about), **what** (happened), **when** (did it take place), **where** (did it take place), and **why** (did it happen). These are essential components of any human story and whatever you are writing about - cross-border initiatives/bridge building/local community action – you will require these components.

How? A journalist leads with the most important fact (the "news") and then supports that fact with explanation and argument. To engage your audiences attention it is important to achieve this.

Planning your story 5
What content can you work with?

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Think like a journalist.
- media truism

A journalist always seeks to answer the five questions: **who** (is it about), **what** (happened), **when** (did it take place), **where** (did it take place), and **why** (did it happen)?

A journalist leads with the most important fact (the "news") and then supports that fact with explanation and argument.

How to tell your story

Why? It's not what you say it's what people hear is a useful truism. If you don't think about your audience, the language and tone in which they communicate then no matter how clear your message and how simply it is put across then they may well not hear it.

What? In this technique we set out some simple rules to follow that will help you speak to your audience.

How? We don't advocate that you adopt the patois, slang or dialect of the audience you are addressing, after all there is a formality to adhere to in terms of writing on behalf of the EU, but we do advocate that you think about being specific, being authentic, engaging and appropriate.

Planning your story 6
Try the voice of a politician!

Thinking like a (good) politician will help you with your communication. Good politicians:

- Understand context before they act

- Talk a lot about problems – before they get to solutions

- Think about their audience (who elect them!)

- Use real world examples, and don't over-rely on statistics

- Are disciplined communicators and will repeat key messages.

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Communications
How to get it right: remember these techniques

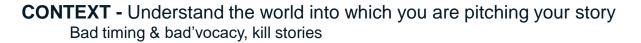**PURPOSE -** Tell them what you want to achieve
> Be sure to include a "call to action" so the impacted parties can participate in solution (e.g. where they can find more information, sign a petition, contact official)

MOTIVE - Tell them why you care, and why they should too
> Highlight your motive for action (e.g. people want safe streets and communities, and so we want to crack down on crime)

AUDIENCE - Describe <u>their</u> problem <u>you're</u> trying to fix
> Only once a problem is identified will people accept action (e.g. violent crime is too high)

CONTEXT - Understand the world into which you are pitching your story
> Bad timing & bad'vocacy, kill stories

CONTENT - Think like a journalist and concentrate on who, what, when, where and why

VOICE - Use language that the general population will understand
> Limit the use of jargon, acronym, and statistics

Planning worksheet

What is the purpose of my story?

What is the motive that lies behind it?

Bring your audience to life

Brief overview of context

Story content

How do I tell my story?

3. Getting to your contract

Logical scoping
Proposition development

Contract development overview

Why? Our story must have a focus. Something that is true now and will remain so whichever way we tell the same story to different audiences at different times. So how do we get to that focus?

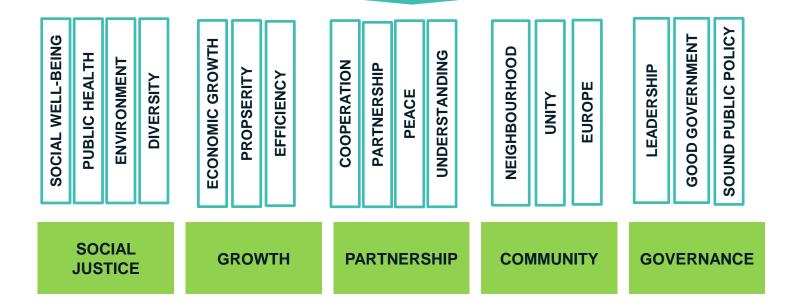Contract is a way we find particularly useful to help you achieve this.

What? Organisations make promises to their stakeholders that they must keep - it is what they **say** This promise is underpinned by a contract. This is strongest when it is made to one party or principle – it is what we **do** But. We know that simply asserting something will not change behaviour (or be believable). To change behaviour we must deliver against our contract and tell people about that - they can then change their minds about us, because they have evidence of our behaviour
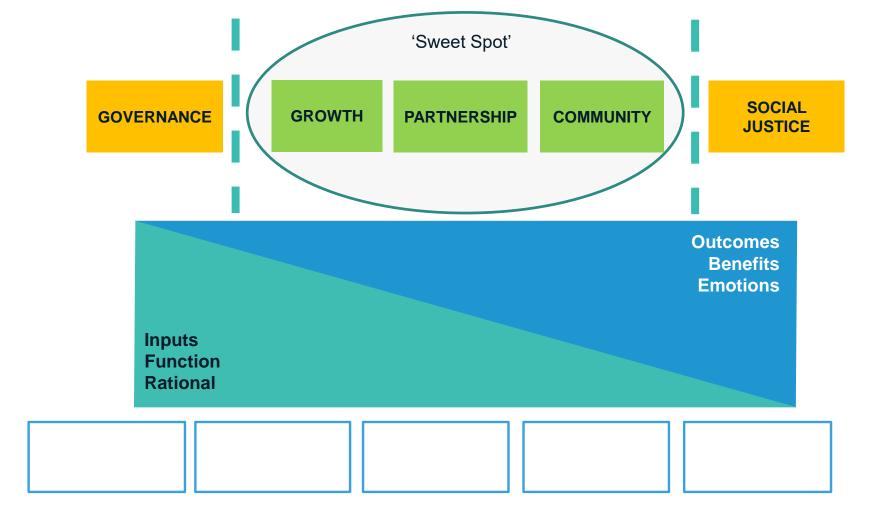
How? Essentially Contract development is part research process and part creative writing. Our process isolates all the possible parties for making that contract and produces the strongest candidates for building communications that will command the trust and respect of the widest possible group of stakeholders and best build your reputation
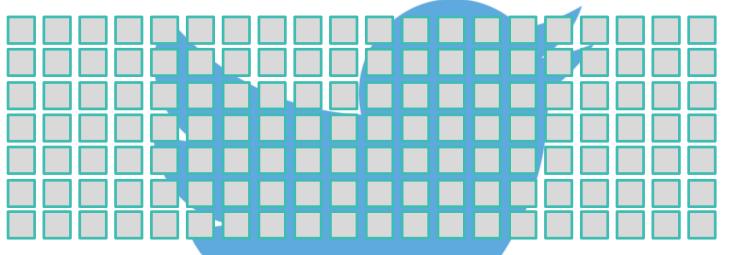`

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Contract – logical scoping

'Sweet Spot'

GOVERNANCE

GROWTH **PARTNERSHIP** **COMMUNITY**

SOCIAL JUSTICE

Outcomes
Benefits
Emotions

Inputs
Function
Rational

Developing the contract

"Our contract is with… ……………………………because…"

The proposition is rarely more the 25-50 words. It expresses why this is the area you won't compromise on and captures why this should drive trust amongst your key target groups outlined in your communication strategies, i.e. potential and actual project beneficiaries (those entities that will potentially and do receive funding from the programmes), stakeholders (national, regional, national and European government level authorities), mass media, network institutions and organisations (euroregions, umbrella organisations, academia etc), wider public.

For the projects themselves your target groups will depend on the theme of your project (environment, health, culture etc) but can include local or regional authorities, European institutions, doctors, children, businesses etc.

Think of the things that matter most to you.

Think of why you protect and promote these values for yourself and others.

Think of why this purpose should inspire trust and loyalty in your audiences

Think of why this purpose should earn respect from stakeholders and competitors

4. Writing your narrative

A guided narrative template
A narrative worksheet

Narrative planning overview

Why? It can be really tough to 'get into' what you want to write. Where do you start? What is the content you should include and what structure should it follow? How do you ensure that there is sufficient tension in the story you tell such that your audience is pulled through it without making the content melodramatic?

What? This is a tried and tested guided narrative template that provides your way-in, your structure and the type of content you should consider (gathered from your story planning process).

How? This is a very useful starter for developing the art of storytelling. In our experience, over time and with growing confidence people who have developed their skills using this structure continue to use it to draft initial content for their communications and then adapt, modify and re-order that content to better meet their needs. This guide is not intended to be prescriptive and slavishly followed.

A guided narrative template

Before arriving at a fully polished narrative we work on a checklist template to help guide out thinking.

- We believe in a world where…

- (This is the focus of the story expressed as a belief about the world, e.g. We believe in a world where play is as sacred a human right as education, food or water)

- We know in that world that….

- (This is what you know about the world that brings tension, e.g. We know that not every child can play as they deserve and that not everything that is called a toy is really worth playing with)

- So we make sure…

- (This is what you do to resolve the tension, e.g. So we make sure our products are perfect for stimulating play for all children at all times)

- Which is why we…

- (This is what you do in terms of product, services and overall behaviour, e.g. Which is why we make Duplo, LEGO, Technics, Mindstorms in sets of all sizes suitable for all ages.)

Narrative worksheet

XXX believe in a world where… (this is where you bring the contract to life)

In that world XXX know… (what do you know about the world which means something's at stake?)

So XXXX makes sure… (this is how the brand relates to the world of the focus of your story & grounds its 'quest')

Which is why XXXX… (this is what you are going to do to prove that you will keep your contract)

5. Content formats

Content formats best practice
Image / copy articles – short-form (80-300 words)

Top tips:

- Make your **headline enticing** for your target audience

- Keep it **punchy and succinct** – no long explanations

- Spend **90% of your time on the first 10%** (headline/first line/image)

- No fewer than **80 words** for SEO

Good for:

- **Providing a topic snapshot**

- **Topic where limited information is available**

- **Being well shared on social**

- **Mobile consumption**

- **SEO**

Bad for:

- **In-depth coverage**

- **Complex/multi-faceted topics**

- **Content with multiple visuals (or none!)**

Content formats best practice
Image / copy articles – long-form (800+ words)

Top tips:

- Your **headline** is still the most important part

- Space is unrestricted – but **audience attention span** is not

- Use **subheadings, images and pull-quotes** to break up text

- **Anchor points** are also useful

Good for:

- **Complex topics**

- **Bringing together multiple content strands (interviews, context, images, videos, etc)**

- **SEO (esp time on page)**

Bad for:

- **Quick consumption**

- **High-volume production**

- **Mobile audiences**

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Content formats best practice
Standard video

Top tips:

- Optimal length of 60-90 seconds

- Still needs a structured narrative (a beginning, middle, and end)

- Something to grab the attention within 5secs

- Definite conclusion/CTA that relates to video title/sell

Good for:

- **Anything heavily visual**

- **Something that requires demonstrating, rather than explaining**

- **Creating an immersive, emotional experience**

Bad for:

- **Non-visual content**

- **Complex content that cannot be simplified/structured**

- **Limited budgets (except social video and short-form amateur-style production)**

Content formats best practice
Social video

Top tips:

- Optimal length of 5-30 seconds (60secs max), depends on platform

- Less need for a structured narrative, more about a snapshot of your message

- Name of organisation/ project within opening 2s

- Include subtitles (in English) to ensure as many people as possible can understand and engage without audio

Good for:

- **Engagement metrics (shares, views)**

- **Using innovative new formats of video (e.g. FB 360) at low cost**

- **Targetting specific audiences using a variety of acceptable quality**

- **Teasing longer, more in-depth video content hosted elsewhere**

Bad for:

- **In-depth coverage**

- **Complex/multi-faceted topics**

- **Content with multiple visuals (or none!)**

Content formats best practice
Live video

Top tips:

- No **set length** BUT the longer it is there's a better chance your audience will find you

- **Interact** with your audience - live is a unique opportunity to do this

- Organisation/project name **throughout / at regular intervals**

Good for:

- **Engagement metrics (shares, views) – even more than regular social video**

- **Producing video content relatively cheaply and easily**

- **Quick turnaround from content idea to inception (within reason, see opposite)**

Bad for:

- **Risk-averse project leads**

- **Doing once and never again**

- **Releasing content unannounced**

Content formats best practice
Infographics

Top tips:

- You still need a **strong headline**

- Don't be tempted to make it **too long or complicated**

- Strike an **equal balance** between 'information' (copy) and 'graphic' (visuals)

- Ensure all your information is **accurate**

Good for:

- **Content with a balance of stats/facts and context/narrative**

- **Displaying a variety of disparate information clearly**

- **Condensing lots of information into one hit**

Bad for:

- **Mobile audiences**

- **Tight deadlines**

- **Easy amendments**

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Content formats best practice
Listicles

Top tips:

- Odd numbers are **better**, prime numbers are **best** (e.g. "11 things you didn't know...")

- List should be **at least 5, no more than 35 items**

- **Start and finish** with the best bits

- Keep items in the list **punchy** (one image or 50 words max)

Good for:

- **Making complex content more digestible**

- **Increasing readership**

- **Generating social shares**

- **Readers who like to scan information**

- **Using pictures and copy together**

Bad for:

- **Search ranking**

- **Explaining individual points in any depth**

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Content formats best practice
Stats-led / data visualisation content

Top tips:

- One identified **'killer' stat** to lead with (ideally two – "top and tail")

- At least **five stats** in total (unless 'killer' stat is incredible on its own), or

- Centred around **one topic**, not too disparate or varied

Good for:

- **When the best thing about your content is the numbers**

- **Inducing shock/surprise in your audience**

- **Sharing on social**

- **Creating debate**

Bad for:

- **Anything that needs more than a one-line explainer**

- **Search ranking**

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6. Social network content best practice

Facebook

Platform considerations

- Strong focus on the visual

- Positioning copy often there to offer a short CTA directive (research shows the 100 characters is the optimum post length to drive engagement).

- Personal (rather than professional) platform and as such our CTA should reflect a potential hesitance amongst our audience to share professional views that would appear on their feeds (Polls sit outside of this).

- Facebook live and video content given preferential positions by algorithm, increasing organic reach.

Content Type

✓Static image

✓Video (standard video, GIF etc.)

✓Live Video

✓360

✓Polls

Instagram

Platform considerations

- Audience focus is on the quality of visual, above all else. The platform's three creative principles are "on brand, concept driven and well crafted"

- Inspirational and aspirational content takes precedence

- 47% of content in user feeds is from people they don't know (including organisations) so there is a great opportunity to build new relationships.

- 'Stories' feature provides a strong opportunity to play to the strengths of Instagram algorithm and increase your organic visibility. Best utilised by back-to-back content in a series.

Content Type

✓ Static image

✓ Video (standard video, GIF, boomerang etc.)

✓ Instagram Stories

Twitter

Platform considerations

- Visuals (images/video/gifs) still central to the success of content

- Conversational nature of platform is its greatest opportunity – influencer and community engagement. The combination of diligent community management (and the engagement in relevant conversations) and social listening/influencer identification provides brands with the opportunity to gain exposure amongst new audiences and increase authority through influential connections.

- With a soon to be implemented change to the Twitter feed algorithm, there will be an increased importance placed on engagement over volume. This will result in brands changing their strategy to fewer, higher quality assets – ABI have the opportunity to get head of this trend.

Content Type

✓ Image

✓ Video (gif etc.)

✓ Live Video via Periscope (played natively)

✓ Polls

Periscope

Platform considerations

- Periscopes outputs can be at varying levels of quality, ranging from shooting with the phone directly to shooting with a full high production set up (camera man, audio, lighting etc.) with the feeding being fed through the periscope platform.

- Periscope offers a large opportunity to generate unfiltered real time video insight into events that are taking place from across the world (where it is potentially challenging/expensive to send a full camera crew.

- Periscopes remain viewable for 24 hours after your live stream stops

- Periscopes can be promoted as via Twitter in order to reach a larger audience.

- Requires a clear and focused sign off process due to live nature of the content.

Content Type

✓Live Video only

YouTube

Platform considerations

- Playlists can be used in order to provide a clear on-platform journey for users.

- Aside from paid amplification, effective tagging of content is key to driving organic reach.

- Subtitled content ensures users can engage with content in environments not conducive to using speakers or headphones.

- YouTube often acts as a hosting solution for videos shared via other social networks i.e. on LinkedIn so the experience on this platform should match with that of the broader social ecosystem.

Content Type

✓ Image

✓ Video (inc. gif etc.)

✓ Live Video

✓ 360

LinkedIn

Platform considerations

- In a unique position as the only professional-focused social platform and as such communications can be focused on the professional mind-set, comparing with the varying mind-sets of users when they are on Twitter, FB, Youtube etc.

- Messages must always be on brand, creative and insightful.

- LinkedIn newsfeed is a competitive space and as such the value add for the end user must be clear.

- A wider range of content types can be used, from long-form native copy to videos and images

Content Type

✓ Long-form native content

✓ Image

✓ Video (inc. gif etc.)

✓ Live Video

✓ 360

Snapchat

Platform considerations

- Users have greater tolerance for lower production values

- The most gamified social network with youngest demographic (Average amount of time 18-29 year old use Snapchat daily is a <u>whopping 20 mins/day</u>).

- Heavily visual 'live', 'in the moment' nature to content sharing

- Ability to broadcast can be hampered by 'private' nature of comms on this channel

- Paid marketing on the channel has a minimum spend of £30K and as such reaching your beyond your organic audience requires cross platform promotion - promotion of your snap channel via other social routes, POS etc.

- Requires a clear and focused sign off process due to live nature of the content.

Content Type

✓Image

✓Video (inc. gif etc.)

✓Live Video

✓360

✓On demand Geo-filters

Storytelling
Techniques and tips for more effective communication
Hack-Pack

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