

MARKETING

Populist Online Marketing 101

by David Salisbury



To the dismay of many, political populism has returned. This is the era where the loudest, most irreverent characters get the most likes, shares, and attention online.

✔ **INSIGHT** | NOTE 24 Jan 2019

This is the era where the loudest, most irreverent characters get the most likes, shares, and attention online. Where jokes at someone else's expense or memes referencing pop culture or the latest fodder gets you an audience. It's those whose delivery is most cavalier and disregarding of traditional candor that get the brightest spotlight. Or as the kids and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) calls it: "Giving zero f***s."

Depending on where your politics lie, President Donald Trump and Ocasio-Cortez have made the best uses of social media to galvanize a loyal base of supporters who hang on every word, slam, or narrative they serve up on Twitter. Trump's ultra-right Twitter campaign questioning President Obama's American citizenship, riling up immigration concerns, and degrading sacred leftist leaders and issues, dates back to the early 2010s. The fruits of his digital labor paid off with his populist ascent to the presidency in 2016. On the flipside, Ocasio-Cortez has proven a formidable far-leftist firebrand online in recent years, fighting all comers and trolls with the wit and charisma of the smart funny kid at the back of the classroom shooting spitballs at the front. Becoming the youngest woman to be elected to the United States Congress in 2019, the 29-year-old known affectionately as AOC even flicks off establishment Democrats challenging her fiery brand of progressivism. When former Democratic senator Joe Lieberman stated his disapproval of the direction she's leading the traditionally-centrist Democrats, she shut down the 76-year-old on Twitter with four dismissive and endlessly Millennial words, "New party, who dis?"

Establishment Democrats now understand they need to know AOC's secrets to connecting in the digital age. In January, the House Democratic Policy and Communication Committee hosted a session with her "on the most effective ways to engage constituents on Twitter and the importance of digital storytelling." But it's not just politics where AOC and Trump's online marketing style is essential. Businesses and companies looking to stay relevant in key demographics whose media consumption is primarily online could take a look at what both have done to connect successfully with their audiences.

Talking the Talk

Ocasio-Cortez's "New party, who dis?" slam on Sen. Lieberman is one of her most exemplary uses of modern slang and humor to diffuse dissent and bolster her image as a Millennial hero. In case you're confused why it was a good line, the tweet refers to when a person gets a mystery text from a new or deleted number. Whether the mystery texter is an unknown person or a person you know but you deleted them from your list of contacts (perhaps an undesirable former suitor?), responding "new phone, who dis" is a polite but terse way of letting them know "I don't know you, or I know you but you're not important to me so I deleted your number." It was a line every Millennial who has removed unwanted

people from their lives and phones related to immediately. "Mic Drop," as the kids would say. Trump also knows how to market to his base by creating slogans for every opponent that comes his way (Crooked Hillary, Lying Ted (Cruz), Cheatin' Obama, etc.).

Fashion brand Wholesome Culture are a group of young adults who know how to market to other young adults with viral memes and pop culture trends. The cruelty-free clothing and environmentalist company uses surrealist humor and timely pop culture events to advertise their wears and message. In order to capitalize on the momentum they get from these posts, they typically sandwich them in between content that's more directly related to the products they sell. So on their Instagram account, you'll see a picture of a fluffy bunny, a dog walker falling over with an over-excited dog, and then a slogan "My only regret about going vegan is not doing it sooner" tweet. Followed by a recipe for avocado toast, and then a model showing their latest t-shirts. By posting content that is both relevant to their brand and entertaining for the audience, they are building trust with their customers by entertaining them with laughs and cute animals. They come for the entertainment and the advertising for clothes seems secondary. This makes a personal investment with the brand possible because Wholesome Culture knows how to please their audience rather than just let them know what they have for sale.

Unafraid Personas

Perhaps the link that binds Trump and AOC the most is they both share a "tells it like it is" persona among their base. Their followers love that neither are afraid to verbally slap around political rivals. Saturday Night Live makes a skit at his expense? Trump responds, calling it "unfair news coverage" and suggesting the besmirchment should be "illegal". CNN questions his treatment of the press? Trump responds, spouting his go-to "fake news" slogan and tweeting the media is "the enemy of the American people." A magazine suggests maybe his hands look like little turtle feet? Trump sends the magazine numerous pictures of his hands circled with the note "See, not so short!" While this constant rebuttal to any criticism seems petty and thin-skinned to his critics, he appears strong and ready to take on all comers to his loyal followers. AOC also enjoys an image of a strong warrior against opposition. When detractors tried to smear her as a "nitwit" and childish flibbertigibbet by unearthing an old college video of her dancing with friends on a rooftop,

she responded by releasing a new video of her dancing into her new office as a Congresswoman. Her base rejoiced as her critics dropped the diffused smear attempt altogether.

Though it might not be a good idea for a business to directly combat critics, businesses can create fast effective dialogue that diffuses criticism and complaints effectively. Starbucks is very quick to address complaints by directly answering to conflicts or complaints on Twitter with meaningful responses. They also have a separate Twitter account, @MyStarbucksIdeas, where customers can submit suggestions for improvements, as well as, join discussions and offer feedback to other people's ideas. By creating and maintaining direct contact and reactions with their critics, Starbucks effectively diffuses negative feedback by addressing it outright and staying in touch with their customers.

The Human Touch

However, Trump's brand of rhetoric tends to rely heavily on blunt force trauma: Attack, vilify and besmirch his detractors and enemies. His narratives are usually a straight point-and-shoot tactic with little deviation, innovation, or emotion. Whereas AOC can be artful with her promotions, using poems and storytelling to sell her ideas and platforms. Many attribute her stunning defeat of 10-term incumbent Congressman Joe Crowley in the 2018 election to her self-written short film "The Courage To Change". With images of the Bronx native's daily routine intercut with footage of the New York City she knows and wants to represent, the two-minute spot stresses repeatedly how the city's working class has been slowly left behind amid the towering skyscrapers being built amid increasingly-gentrified lower class communities. Despite being out-fundraised 10-to-1 and outspent 18-to-1 on the campaign trail, AOC's short, honest film connected on a level no amount of campaign ad bombardment could compete with.

This human angle has also lead to the successful invigoration of shipping container company Maersk Line who turned their innocuous low-profile company into a social media titan with over 1 million fans. The Berkeley Haas Case Series paper "Maersk Line: B2B Social Media – 'It's Communication, Not Marketing'" details how Maersk began engaging with customers and the online community at large with stories of the company's

history and place in connecting the world at large. They post photos and videos of their containers being shipped with stories about their clients and their humanity. When founder Maersk Mc-Kinney Moller died there was a desire to find out more about the beginnings of the company. Users from around the world were able to see pictures from the archives posted on Instagram. Users were clearly fascinated and showed great interest in the legend and myth. This made a company website that by all means shouldn't be visited by anyone other than industry insiders into a site that many go to for world history.

People don't like to feel like they're being sold something. They want you to communicate with them. By speaking their language, standing for their beliefs, entertaining them, and connecting on a human level, your audience will be loyal and looking forward to hearing whatever you have to say or sell. If two big mouths with Twitter accounts can assume substantial power with such simple tactics, truly anyone can.



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