

Data Drives Social Performance

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**The Benchmark Study on Organic
Publishing to Social Networks**

August 2014

OVERVIEW

Companies face stiff competition in getting their messages into the social feeds of consumers. The number of users and posts being published continues to rise¹, while the number of hours users have to consume content remains relatively fixed.

It is against this backdrop that SocialFlow analyzed trends from a database of more than 1.6 million organic social posts from leading publishers, marketers, and agencies. We found that even with the competition, companies continue to achieve significant reach and generate substantial engagement with organic (non-paid) social posts.

The 1.6 million posts analyzed were published through the SocialFlow platform to Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus between April 1 and July 31 of this year. These posts reached more than 361 million unique users and generated nearly 1.5 billion social actions.

For the purposes of this study, performance was measured in terms of reach (impressions) and engagements (the sum of clicks and all other social actions). More direct measures of marketing success, such as brand awareness, purchase consideration, and actual conversion, would be desirable but were beyond the scope of this study.

The results of this publishing clearly demonstrate the continued potential of social media to reach large audiences, and they run counter to an emerging belief that organic reach on social networks can no longer be effective.

We also found substantial differences between the types of companies and the methods by which the posts are made.

These findings suggest that companies significantly alter the way they approach organic publishing. As social networks continue to see growth in usage and volume, the competition for consumer attention will only become more intense.

Companies that take advantage of smarter, Data-Driven approaches will likely outperform competitors that do not embrace such tactics.

Key Findings

- 1. Organic social posting can still deliver substantial reach and engagement, but there is a steep drop-off from the best-performing posts to the “long tail.”**
- 2. Data-Driven posts deliver 91% greater reach and 25% greater engagement than Scheduled posts.**
- 3. Real-Time posts provide substantial benefit to Media and Entertainment companies, but do not benefit marketers in Technology, Retail, Fashion, Healthcare, and Non-Profit verticals.**

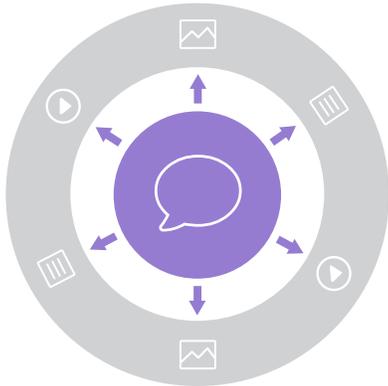
¹ See <http://trib.al/l7ocxXS> and <http://trib.al/lnKRjk7> for indicators of user and message growth on Facebook and Twitter, respectively.

² Reach is readily available on Facebook but generally can only be estimated on Twitter.

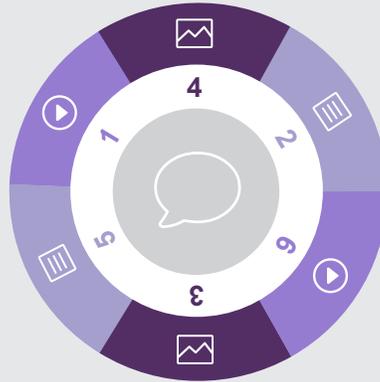
How Data-Driven Social Posting Works

Shifting from Scheduling posts to a Data-Driven approach requires a different mindset. It's a bit like moving from meals every day at a fixed time, to instead eating meals when you're actually hungry. Only in this case, it's when your audience is hungry for content.

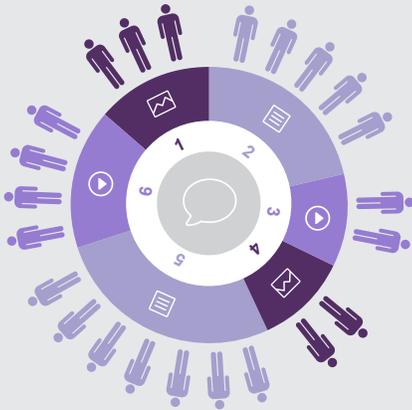
- 1** Create multiple pieces of social content.



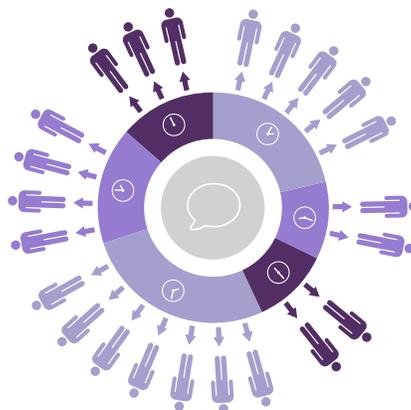
- 2** Feed the posts into software that predictively scores and ranks them.



- 3** The posts are sorted in real-time based on your business rules and the activity of your specific social audiences.

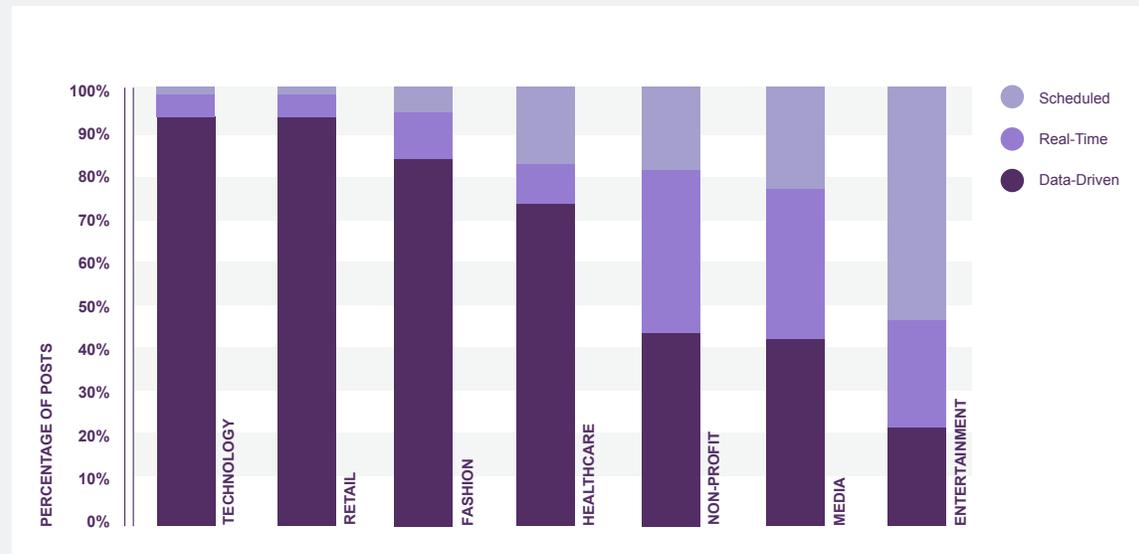


- 4** The right message is automatically published to the right audience at the right time.



How Industries Currently Publish

This chart illustrates, by industry vertical, how companies in the data set publish their social messages. Technology and Retail companies publish more than 90% of their posts using Data-Driven optimization; Media and Entertainment companies use more Scheduled and Real-Time posting.



Glossary

Data-Driven Post: A post whose time of publication is determined by predictive algorithms. (Business rules, such as publishing minimums and frequency caps, can be used to calibrate the Data-Driven approach to specific business needs.)

Real-Time Post: A post that is published immediately upon completion. Real-Time posts are typically thought of in the context of Real-Time Marketing.

Scheduled Post: A post that is scheduled to go out at a specific time.

Organic Reach: The impressions a post receives without any paid advertising dollars. Also referred to as Owned Reach.

Paid Reach: The impressions a post receives resulting from paid advertising.

Earned Reach: The result of users sharing your content. Also known as *Viral Reach* or *Word of Mouth*. Both Owned and Paid posts can generate Earned Reach.

BACKGROUND AND APPROACH

SocialFlow provides technology that powers the distribution of content to social networks. Marketers, agencies, and publishers use our platform to more effectively distribute their content to social networks, and we power the distribution of millions of posts to Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus.⁴ This provided us with the data on which this analysis is based.

Analysis of Data

The data set consisted of 1,628,150 social posts, published from April 1, 2014 to July 31, 2014. For the purposes of this study, performance was measured in terms of reach (impressions) and Engagements (the sum of clicks and all other social actions).

SOCIAL NETWORK	TYPE OF POST: DATA-DRIVEN	REAL-TIME	SCHEDULED	TOTAL
Facebook	192,790	109,760	59,130	361,680
Twitter	541,940	235,700	371,080	1,148,720
Google Plus	43,470	22,770	51,510	117,750
Total	778,200	368,230	481,720	1,628,150

Dates: April 1, 2014 – July 31, 2014
Unique Users Reached: 361 million
Clicks and Social Actions: 1.45 billion

About the Feed

SocialFlow provides technology that enables the publishing of content into the feeds of users who Like your Page (Facebook), Follow your Handle (Twitter), or +1 your Page (Google Plus). We do this both organically and with paid advertising dollars.

The feed is differentiated from Left Rail / Right Rail advertisements, landing pages, and “Tabs” that were hallmarks of the first generation of social platforms.

More than 78% of Facebook and 76% of Twitter users are consuming content from mobile devices,⁴ and for mobile users, the feed is the extent of their experience. Even desktop users spend the vast majority of their time on social networks consuming the feed.

³ We launched the ability to Publish to LinkedIn late in Q2, and as such did not have enough data to include in this study. We expect to include LinkedIn in future reports.

⁴ Facebook mobile users (<http://trib.al/F7rq2cp>); Twitter mobile users (<http://trib.al/2sazvGC>).

Types of Companies Included In Our Industry Verticals

Entertainment: Movie studios, professional sports leagues, and gaming companies

Fashion: Clothing, cosmetics, and luxury brands

Healthcare: Hospitals, health maintenance organizations, and specialty medical organizations

Media: Television networks, magazine and newspaper publishers, digital-only publishers, and portals

Non-Profit: Foundations, educational institutions, and non-governmental not-for-profit organizations

Retail: Companies with brick-and-mortar locations

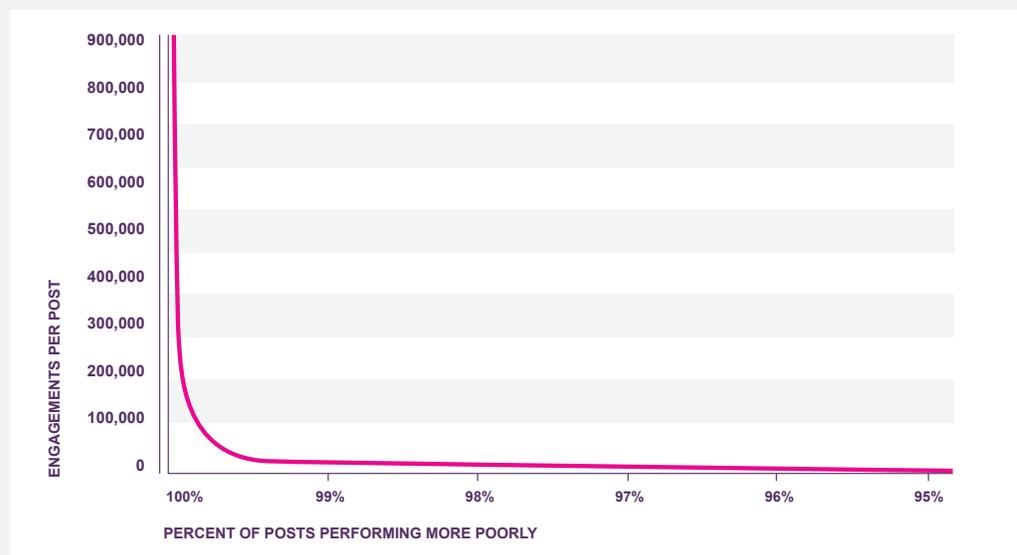
Technology: Software, hardware, and system integration companies

FINDINGS

Finding #1: Organic social posting can still deliver substantial reach and engagement, but there is a steep drop from the best-performing posts to the “long tail.”⁵

Engagement of social posts

As you can see from this image showing the ranking of post performance across all three social networks, a small percentage of posts generate disproportionately large engagement.



The level of engagement with nearly 1.4 million posts exhibits classic “long tail” behavior: a few posts generate enormous engagement, and the rest generate more modest levels of engagement. It is very difficult for anyone other than Media and Entertainment companies to generate these “blockbuster” posts.

⁵ See <http://trib.al/GvJjSUC> for an overview of the long tail phenomenon.

Media and Entertainment companies tend to dominate the “head” of this long tail, which is not surprising given that their core businesses are centered around informing, engaging, and entertaining consumers, and they have vast quantities of content.

Marketers in other industry verticals tend to have content that falls somewhere on the long tail. Their posts generally have lower engagement levels, and as such, these marketers need a solution that optimizes the social content in these sectors. Success in the long tail can come from creating many posts that are modestly successful.

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Finding #2: Data-Driven posts deliver 91% greater reach and 25% greater engagement than Scheduled posts.

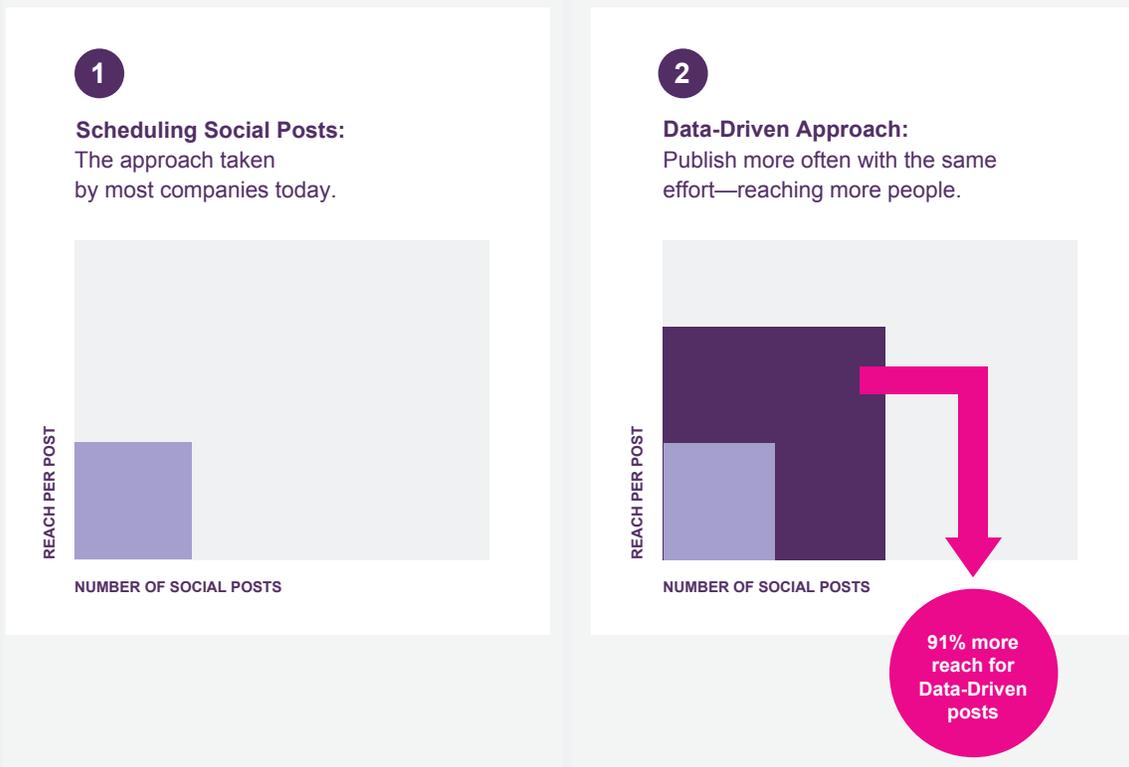
Companies that take a Data-Driven approach to their social publishing improve their effectiveness in two significant ways:

- They are able to publish more content to social networks—with little corresponding increase in overall effort.

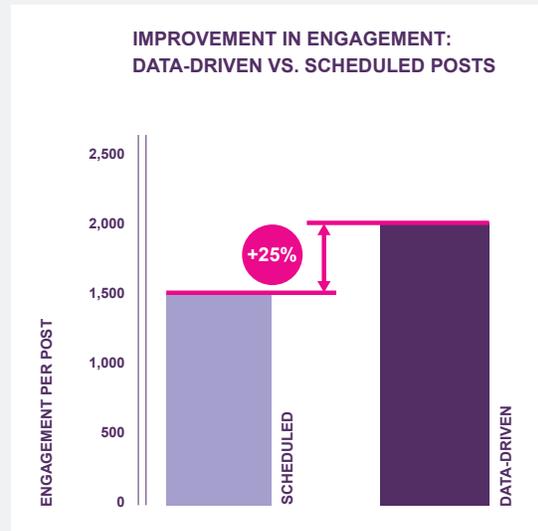
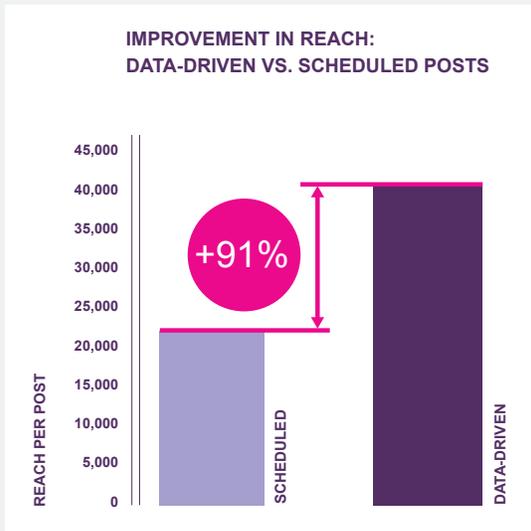
- Because there are more posts, companies are better able to match their posts to the types of content with which the audience is already engaging.

The combination of these two factors makes the Data-Driven social approach more effective than a Scheduled approach.

How Data-Driven social posting delivers better results

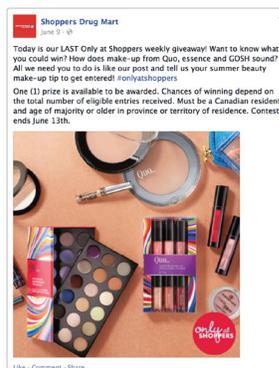


Reach and engagements per post for Scheduled and Data-Driven posts



Data-Driven social posting delivers 91% greater reach and 25% greater engagement than scheduled posting.

Examples of the types of content that marketers are distributing via Data-Driven social publishing



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Finding #3: Real-Time posts provide substantial benefit to Media and Entertainment companies but do not benefit marketers in Technology, Retail, Fashion, Healthcare, and Non-Profit verticals.

Media and Entertainment

Across the industry verticals we analyzed, Media and Entertainment companies were by far the most prolific content producers. And while only 10% of their Real-Time posts outperformed Data-Driven posts, the cumulative benefit for those 10% generated almost 90% of the total engagement.

For Media and Entertainment companies, successful Real-Time Twitter posts tended to be more time-sensitive (in particular with regard to breaking news), although Real-Time posts also included cute/funny animal stories, celebrity stories, and “news of the weird” updates. Successful Real-Time Facebook posts tended to have less breaking news.

Examples of Real-Time posts from Media and Entertainment companies that generated high levels of engagement.



Interestingly, the Entertainment vertical uses Scheduled posting far more often than either Real-Time or Data-Driven publishing, despite the fact that it generates the worst results. Our hypothesis is that the scheduled nature of much entertainment programming drives this behavior; there is an opportunity for these companies to revisit whether a portion of their Scheduled content would perform better as either Real-Time or Data-Driven.

Technology, Retail, Fashion, Healthcare, and Non-Profit

Marketers in these verticals did not see similar performance with Real-Time posts. This type of marketer fared much better when they allowed Data-Driven algorithms to maximize the value of their content.

Engagements per post for Real-Time and Data-Driven Posts in selected verticals



Marketers in Technology, Retail, Fashion, Healthcare, and Non-Profit verticals saw Data-Driven posts perform 55% better than Real-Time posts.

A Data-Driven approach won't turn bad content good, but it will help make sure that the content you do have reaches its potential.

The Technology and Retail verticals have been the most aggressive at embracing Data-Driven publishing. The eight companies with a substantial presence in our data set

- Scheduled only 1.5% of their content
- Published Real-Time 6.9% of the time
- Used Data-Driven optimization for the remaining 91.6% of posts

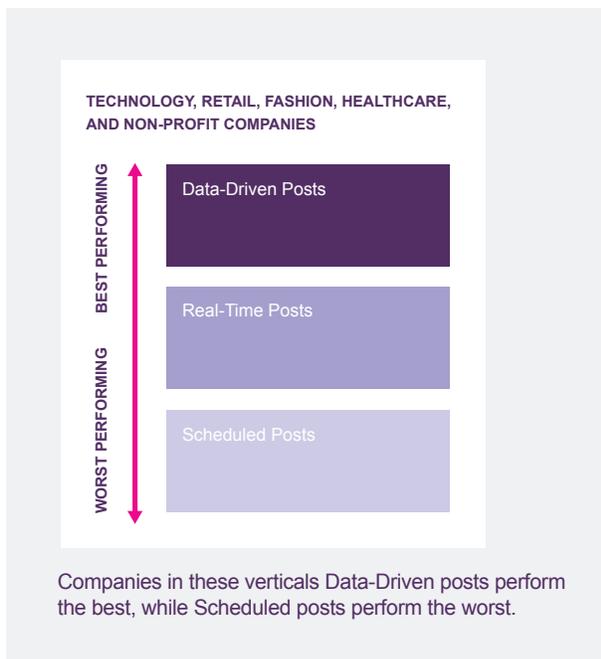
This perhaps suggests that marketers in these verticals display a greater receptiveness to Data-Driven approaches than marketers in other verticals.

IMPLICATIONS

Implication #1: The scheduling of social posts is an ineffective use of your content.

It is almost impossible for a human to predict the best time to post to a social network. Audiences shift in Real-Time, and the types of content they are seeing in their feed change just as quickly. The best time to post to a social network is when your audience is active on that social network and interacting with content that is like yours.

The data clearly show how ineffective it is to try to guess when your audiences are active and likely to pay attention to your message. But the scheduling of posts is a well-established practice in many companies, so this recommendation involves a change in mindset as much as a change in the actual timing of posts.



Regardless of company type, Scheduled posts perform the worst—both Data-Driven and Real-Time posts deliver better reach and engagement. There is simply no reason to schedule your posts. However, the best method to distribute your content on social varies depending on the type of company.

A Hidden Benefit

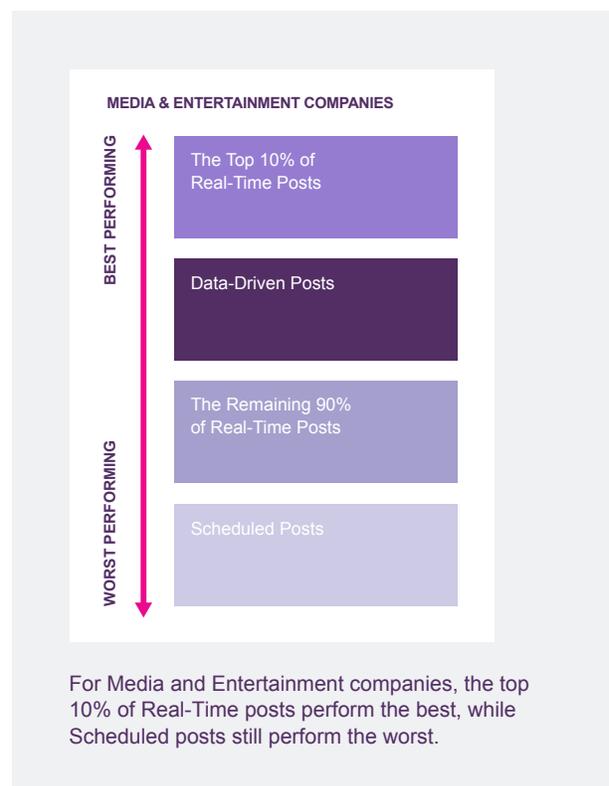
Most companies ask social media managers to determine how and when to publish content to social networks. Once you move to a Data-Driven approach, the time that was spent on the “how” and “when” can be reallocated back to content creation.

Implication #2: Unless you are a Media or Entertainment company, Real-Time posting is likely to be less effective than Data-Driven optimization.

For Media and Entertainment companies, the best performing Real-Time posts outperformed all other posts, including Data-Driven posts.

But this does not hold true for marketers in the other verticals we studied. If you are a marketer in a vertical other than Media or Entertainment, your best strategy is to use a Data-Driven approach to slot your posts into the windows when they are most likely to succeed.

If there is a notable cultural moment (e.g., a power outage during the Super Bowl, a player biting another player during a World Cup game) that can be meaningfully tied to your brand, then by all means try to capitalize on that “real-time” moment. But it’s illustrative that these two success stories tie to exceptional occurrences during game play at two of the most significant sporting events in the world.



Successful Real-Time posts by marketers are rare. Unless you are a Media or Entertainment company, you are better off limiting your Real-Time posts.



One Real-Time tactic that we did see work for marketers: social posts during live events. If your company has a strong connection to the event or is actively participating, then a Real-Time social post can be an effective component of your overall event strategy.

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Implication #3: Organic social publishing should be as Data-Driven as the rest of your marketing.

The large majority of social posts for companies would benefit from a Data-Driven, predictive approach. An effective Data-Driven approach will:

1. Determine when your audience is available.
The audience for each of your social properties ebbs and flows in real time. It is important to identify audience windows and predictively and statistically judge when the maximum benefit will be realized from a post.
2. Identify the ever-changing mix of content that is competing for attention in the feeds of consumers that follow your properties. This "co-follower behavior" is important because if a substantial portion of a given audience over-indexes, for example on @NYTimes, @NFL, and @Yahoo, then insights can be gleaned into at least a portion of the content that is showing up in the feeds of your followers.
3. Judge whether the attention on a particular topic is gaining or declining. Trying to insert a message into a conversation that is on the

decline is not nearly as effective as inserting the message into a conversation that is on the rise.

4. Map posts to the available windows using these insights. The more content that is available, the better this works, as there are better chances to slot relevant content into available windows of attention.

This is very difficult to do manually, and even if you can execute it, the process is likely to be labor-intensive. That is why Data-Driven optimization software can add so much value.

We also have strong anecdotal evidence that a Data-Driven approach results in more posts with the same amount of effort. Rather than spending time analyzing audiences, predicting content windows, and trying to determine the best time to post, social media staff can instead spend their time creating more and better content.

AREAS FOR FUTURE STUDY

We identified a number of topics for further study, which we intend to cover in future reports.

Paid Advertising

A growing number of marketers are allocating paid dollars to the amplification of high-performing posts. By taking the top 15-20% of posts and quickly turning them into paid posts (Promoted Posts and/or Promoted Tweets), we are able to routinely generate outsized returns on paid advertising budgets. Areas of future study will include:

- The gain in advertising efficiency that comes from using organic publishing as a “click signal” to guide paid spending
- How organic metrics such as reach and engagement correlate to more tangible elements of marketing value (brand awareness, purchase consideration, and conversion)
- How media and entertainment companies can leverage paid promotion to generate revenue from their best-performing content.

Other Social Networks

Our findings are applicable across multiple social networks, and we did not segment the results by social network. We started supporting publishing to LinkedIn toward the end of this study period and, as such, did not have a comparable data set to include. A future study will include this LinkedIn.

Content Recycling

More than 1% of the posts in this study were “recycled,” meaning the exact post was published more than once. Some days saw as much as 3-4% of content being recycled. This tends to be more prevalent on Twitter than on Facebook.

This is an emerging trend, and we predict that content recycling will become more popular as marketers struggle with the cost and effort of content creation and the challenge of having their messages seen against an increasing amount of competition.

Areas of future study will include:

- Differences in content recycling practices across social networks
- The degradation or increase in performance associated with multiple posts

Languages

Our study included posts in 52 languages. These languages comprised 1% or more of the non-English posts in the data.

Arabic	Hindi	Russian
Croatian	Indonesian	Spanish
Danish	Italian	Tagalog
Estonian	Malay	Turkish
Finnish	Maltese	Urdu
French	Persian	
German	Portuguese	

81% of the posts in our sample were made in English; the remaining posts were made in 51 other languages, the most popular of which were Arabic, Spanish, and Turkish. A preliminary analysis of the data indicates that the benefits of a Data-Driven approach extend across languages. A future study will further examine the benefits of the Data-Driven approach across languages.



ABOUT US

SocialFlow's software uses Real-Time data, along with business rules you set, to determine what and when to publish to your social media properties. We allow you to manage both owned and paid social posts.

We take the guesswork out social media, replacing the scheduling of content with actionable data about when your audience is active and what they are engaging with on social right now.

Our algorithms are continuously sifting through millions of rows of social data, developing predictive recommendations in real time. The results are clear: increased engagement, increased click-through rates, and less time spent by your team.

We license our technology on a Software-as-a-Service (SaaS) basis. You and your extended team log in to our platform and manage your content from any web or mobile browser.