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#facebook

In a move to position its web service as an important complement to television, sporting events and breaking news, Facebook has launched #hashtag. Hashtags should help brands and advertisers who have been looking for ways to connect to fans outside their sphere of influence.

Setting itself up against its younger rival Twitter, Facebook users will now be able to group comments on the same topic by typing the hashtag alongside a keyword - such as #election - at the end of a post. One of the first to use hashtags in their Facebook advertising is Dulux. On Monday 24th June, Day 1 at Wimbledon, they had the following post with #Wimbledon.

Whether conversations about events on Facebook will have the same level of activity and comments as on Twitter is not clear. Unlike tweets, which are public and viewable to all users, most comments posted on Facebook are only viewable to a user's circle of friends.

Companies often look to competitors to borrow ideas with Samsung and Apple being a high profile example of this. Facebook too has a record of looking to competing platforms including, Foursquare and Google+ Circles to borrow ideas. We now have Facebook Places and Smart List. It is no surprise that the popular hashtag is next.

It was 6 years ago, in 2007, that Twitter hashtags began. Their inventor, Chris Messina, had been inspired by similar tags on Flickr and channels on IRC (internet relay chat). In 2012, monthly worldwide active Twitter users grew 40% from Q2 to Q4, a nearly 288 million user increase. This means that 21% of the global worldwide population are active users. Hashtags really come into their own when there is breaking news, enabling Twitter users to see live updates from people on the ground. Thanks to the U.S Presidential elections, Olympics and sporting events, 2012 saw the most tweets in Twitter's young history.

Before he took the stage to affirm his election victory, President Obama marked his win via Twitter. Within hours, this Tweet simultaneously became the most retweeted of 2012 — and the most retweeted ever, sent by people in more than 200 countries around the world.

Last summer, the Olympics returned to London for the first time since 1948. British athletes performed extremely well, with a “home team” advantage resulting in more medals than expected. Fans followed their every move, joining in at the close of the Games to show their support for #OurGreatestTeam. We were also all immersed as @L2012PoolCam tweeted live images from underneath the water during the London Olympics swimming races. The swimmers dove, raced, flipped and crossed the finish line right in front of us.

So what separates the two? As the pulse of the moment, the hashtag on Twitter, takes thoughts, actions, and ideas and allows them to reach a global audience within seconds. Although privacy options exist, the platform is characteristically public, allowing conversation to be free to roam as it pleases.

Facebook does not follow this freedom. The complex privacy settings mean that the hashtag's very potency – its ability to aggregate and collate and continually track a conversation path – is seen by a few commentators as not having the ability to come to fruition. The lion's share of the conversation on the platform currently exists within the comments section of an update. None of this conversation, public or private, is currently being presented within hashtag searches. Could this be viewed as an opportunity missed?

It is doubtful that adding hashtags will make Facebook a destination for breaking news. Facebook is the place where you interact with friends. In contrast, Twitter is particularly well suited for hashtags that let you follow a topic. The move by Facebook to introduce hashtags is still a significant one, particularly for marketers, allowing on and offline adverts to be linked to online social media campaigns. When we consider that Facebook has over a billion active users and Twitter has around a fifth of this per month, we see prominent growth in the number of social-media participants who can easily search or click your hashtag and engage by repeating it in their posts.

Millions log into Facebook every night during prime time TV hours, which represents a significant opportunity for broadcasters and advertisers. At the end of the day the hashtag is a powerful tool to have in the corner of your advert for any social media marketing and this new tool may yet allow marketers to serve adverts of true relevance at the right time.

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