



Organizational Voice 101

What it is, why your sports organization needs it and some tips on how to get it



Right now, actor [George Takei](#) has 5.7 million Facebook followers and is considered such a social media legend that he's published a book about his online success. Very few of these followers were even alive in 1965 when he was cast as Sulu in Star Trek, and many are not even Star Trek fans. So why do they follow him? It all comes down to his engaging social media presence. Takei has become beloved for his witticisms, his poignant social commentary on LGBTQ issues, and his discerning eye in reposting clever social media content. In short, his followers love his online voice. Whether intentional or accidental, George Takei has developed a voice that speaks to a wide range of fans. He has just the right combination of political commentary, wittiness and nerd credibility to win the Internet.

The fact that organizations have distinct voices and that these voices are aligned with brand images is not new. It's also not a new idea that organizations must alter their voices depending on their medium of communication. You probably do this all the time without even thinking about it.

Here's a quick exercise: Go through your email's sent folder and see how your written voice changes depending on who you're talking to and what you're talking about. You might, for example, adopt a warm and friendly tone when emailing a parent wanting information on registering a child in your sport, but use complete paragraphs and longer sentences when emailing someone else about an important matter. You probably pay more attention to your grammar when emailing your boss versus emailing a coworker. The point: you are already good at varying your written voice depending on the context.

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How communications via social media differs from other forms of communication

Thanks to social media, business communication is now unfiltered and immediate to an unprecedented degree. Before the Internet, you probably relied on print material like a brochure to share your organization's message. The brochure would be drafted by one person, edited by several others, laid out by another person and approved by the Executive Director. By the time it reached the public, its message had been finely honed to make sure that it was correct, clear and relevant. When the Internet came along, your organization developed a website, but you still posted content



that was edited, proofread and probably approved by an Executive Director.

Social media, however, greatly reduces the filter between you and the general public. Your Executive Director does not approve every Facebook post or tweet and you cannot control how people respond to your content. You may be posting while tired, distracted or under pressure. You may even post accidentally. (My cat has unintentionally shared her thoughts with the BC Wheelchair Sports community a few times by walking across the keyboard and pressing enter).

Online communication also strips a message of its tone and so can cause many miscommunications. Though all social media platforms permit you to delete your posts, someone can easily screencap what you write before it's deleted, allowing it to live on the Internet forever. (Remember how well it went when the singer Beyonce had her lawyers try to remove an unflattering photo from the Internet?)

With so much at stake, it makes sense to think in advance about the voice you're using online to communicate with your audience.

What is voice?

In essence, voice is the way in which you communicate to your audience: what you say, what you don't say, how you say it, and what attitude you take towards it.

There are two components of a written 'voice:'

1. Style: Your style is *how* you write on a nuts-and-bolts level. It's what words you choose, your grammar, the length of your sentences, your use of emoticons or exclamation marks, the rhythm of your sentences and even what words you don't use (i.e. curse words). Literary authors are particularly known for their distinct styles. You would never, for example, mix Hemingway up with Faulkner. 

2. Tone: Your tone is the attitude you take towards your subject matter. A person's tone can be grumpy, cheerful, nostalgic, angry, hopeful...the list goes on and on. The tone you intend can often get lost online, so it's important to think carefully about it. While your tone will obviously vary based on your subject matter, it helps to have an overall tone for your social media voice. For example, some social media brands pride themselves on having a quirky, funny social media voice.

Tone and style work together. To adopt an angry tone, for example, you might use long, rambling sentences filled with exclamation points. Your organization's voice is also tied into your brand identity, which will be the subject of a future social media module.

Finding your organization's voice online

So, how do you develop an online voice that gets results? It starts with considering what image you want to project.

To start, go to your own social media accounts and explore some social media brands, celebrities or personal Facebook friends whose social media presence you admire. Take a moment to jot down what appeals to you about each. Maybe one person's



posts are always relevant to your interests and she never posts too much. Maybe another always has a witty way of phrasing her Facebook statuses. Pay special attention to sports-related social media accounts. Why do you think organizations like the Canucks have so much success on social media?

Now, brainstorm words that you associate with the image you want your organization to project. How do you want visitors to see your organization? Try to list 10 - 20 words (see examples on page 7). By now, you should be able to spot some trends that will help you come up with guidelines for your organization's social media voice. If you're still having trouble, here are some characteristics of successful organizational voices on social media.

Seven characteristics of successful social media voices



1. Positive: In a world where people's Facebook walls are often filled with other people

complaining, positivity is a breath of fresh air. This doesn't mean that you can't post about controversial or negative topics, but it helps to frame them in a positive manner. For example, if you want to post an article about how amateur sports don't get much television coverage, you'd be better off framing the article by saying "How do you think we can increase the television coverage our sport gets?" rather than saying "This sucks! Mainstream media is the worst!!" Bottom line: researchers have found that positive messages spread faster on social media than negative ones, so you have a strong incentive to put on a happy face.²

2. Authentic: On social media, people gravitate towards voices that sound like "real people." A Facebook account that's heavily edited, approved by your Executive Director and filled with language ripped out of an annual report comes off as hollow and wooden. Read your posts as if they were dialogue in a book or play. Could you imagine an average person saying what you wrote?

3. Professional: Remember, however, that there is a fine line between sounding like a real person and sounding like a 14-year-old. Think of your social media voice as the written equivalent to business casual. It's you, just more polished. That means you should use good grammar, full sentences and adopt the basics of business etiquette.

4. Aware of Audience: Successful social media accounts know their audience. This means posting information in the way your audience wants to receive it. Discovering what your audience wants can involve trial and error.



Maybe you discover that no one 'likes' long posts, but love it when you frame an issue succinctly. Maybe they love witty captions to photographs, but not quotes from articles. Keep in mind that your audience is not just your athletes/coaches/staff, but also their friends and family, general fans of the sport, and even the media and granting organizations. If your posts are too technical, your fans may be turned off.

5. Accessible: While you certainly want to cater to your existing community, you should also be accessible to newcomers or those unfamiliar with your sport. This means not using any slang that an outsider might not use, or using too many inside jokes. Keep in mind that many new potential members (and even granting organizations) will lurk on your social media account to see what your community's like. If they feel left out, they may not take the chance of meeting you in person.

6. Consistent: Some organizations have more than one person managing social media accounts. By creating guidelines for your social media voice, you can ensure that your voice remains consistent no matter if Ingrid the Intern or Edna the Executive Director is behind the keys.

7. Concise: For better or worse, brevity is king on social media. Most people only devote a second or two to each social media post. If you want to capture your audience's attention, you better do it quickly.

A word about humour



When done well, humour can be an instant recipe for social media success. The problem is, however, that not everyone shares your sense of humour, and almost no one is as funny as they think they are. Some organizations use humour on social media very effectively because they are able to strike the appropriate tone of being funny without being offensive. (The Canucks and Whitecaps social media teams do this very well, and have occasionally made the news by trading friendly barbs). Puns, posts that are witty/clever and gentle humour are all effective if the humour doesn't target a particular person. Sarcasm, however, is one of the least successful forms of humour on social media.

The most important thing, however, is to be true to your own voice, to be organic, and to never be offensive. After all, your social media voice should be true to your personality and your organization's personality. If you're not a "funny person," don't try to be. Simply recruit someone whose sense of humour you admire to offer content suggestions, share funny content from other sources, or stay away from humour all together. If you think you're a funny person, run your post by a few brutally honest friends and colleagues to make sure your message translates to a wider audience.

Who should speak for your organization?

Sometimes, you won't have a choice about who helms your social media account. The person with the most social media savvy or the most time will be delegated the task, but this is not always the best choice. According to Danielle Brigada at National Wildlife Fund¹, the best social media delegates:

- are passionate about the cause;
- understand what your organization does;
- can speak clearly, calmly and simply;
- can be trusted to speak without prior authorization and use good judgment;
- will be respected by your followers.

In short, it will be easy to craft your organizational voice if you have a dedicated person (or team of people) who truly "get" your mission.

Organizational voice brainstorming questions

 These questions are designed to help you brainstorm the details of your organization's social media voice. Once you have finished it, review your answers and note the trends that emerge. What

words appeared most often? What themes are most prominent?

1. If your organization threw a party for all of your members and budget was no issue, what kind of party would it be? (Family BBQ? Black tie soiree?).
2. Look through your social media post history and list your three most successful posts of the past few months. What do they have in common?
3. What are your organization's values?
4. Go to your Facebook page's Insights and click on 'People.' What types of people make up your social media audience? (How old are they, what gender are they, where are they from, etc?)
5. Have you ever gotten into trouble online or upset your audience? If so, what happened?
6. What are the top 5 words you associate with your sport?
7. What are the top 5 words you associate with your organization?

Sample social media voice style sheet

Taking the time to jot down some do's and don'ts for your organization's social media accounts will help ensure a consistent social media presence no matter who posts or what they're posting about.

Below is a sample style sheet for an organization's social media voice. Depending on your organization's size and the number of people who post on your behalf, however, you may not need to go into this much depth. Many organizations build this information into their general social media policy.

SAMPLE ORGANIZATIONAL SOCIAL MEDIA VOICE STYLE SHEET

Organizational name: Sport Organization

Organizational voice key words: Positive, professional, friendly, warm, knowledgeable

Tones we use: friendly, welcoming, enthusiastic, proud, happy, authoritative on our sport, humble in victory, gracious in defeat.

Tones we'll avoid: sarcastic, pessimistic, angry, too chipper/young (i.e. lots of exclamation points), argumentative, combative (against other teams, etc), boastful.

Organizational style guide.

- All social media posters will use proper grammar, spelling and syntax. If you are unsure of a post's grammatical accuracy, please run it by a colleague or consult the Canadian Style Guide.
- Because our organization strives to appear friendly, we will use a casual voice that will sometimes include exclamation points. In general, however, we'll strive to convey our message through our tone and not rely too heavily on emoticons.
- No swear words.
- Because our sport contains lots of technical language that an outsider wouldn't understand, we will try to frame these posts in plain, simple language.
- All posts will use person-centered language (i.e. person with a disability, not handicapped).
- Please use full sentences.
- Please use clear, simple language. Avoid wordiness. A Grade 8 student should be able to understand your post.
- Keep it brief. Try to keep all posts between 1 and 3 sentences.
- No all caps posts (we don't shout!).
- Within reason, please try to frame negative events in a positive light. For example, instead of saying "Our team failed to win the gold and will have to settle for silver :(" say "Our team wins silver after a hard battle." (Note: there are times when this may seem disingenuous. In this circumstance, it's okay to say "Tough loss for our team, but we're proud of our silver medal finish. Coach Smith tells us what they've learned from the loss.")
- We will strive to encourage discussion, so we encourage posters to ask questions or comment on articles. (I.e. "How do you avoid sports injuries?")
- We will respond to negative comments in a clear, positive manner, apologizing if necessary, correcting any facts the poster got wrong, and remaining calm and rational.
- We will read our posts out loud before posting to catch any mistakes.

Our humour policy: While we encourage humour, we do not allow humour that is directed at a person or group, or any content that has even a 1% chance of offending someone. It goes without saying that sexist/racist/homophobic jokes are absolutely banned. When in doubt, run the joke past a colleague or your Executive Director.

Our language policy:

Because our membership is predominantly English-speaking, we will use this language nearly exclusively. When we host an international tournament, however, we will provide social media coverage in both official languages. If possible, we will translate common social media posts in advance so that we can post content quickly. Please do not use Google Translate.

Sources:

1. <http://www.slideshare.net/farra/how-to-empower-your-staff-to-be-the-voice-for-your-organization-in-social-media>
2.  (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/19/science/good-news-spreads-faster-on-twitter-and-facebook.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)

To learn more, check out our Social Media Toolkit, found [here](#).



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