## Dynamic Chiropractic

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# How One Symbol Can Help You Get More Patients: The Art of the #Hashtag

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Are you looking for ways to connect with your patients online? Or do you just want to know how to keep them engaged (comments, retweeting, liking, and sharing)? Then, you will want to know more about these two symbols, # and @.

We'll cover hashtags in this article and tackle the history, strategies, do's and don't's of the @ symbol next month in part 2.

The # symbol, you might refer to it as a number or pound sign, has gained its popularity on social platforms and is commonly known as a hashtag. The @ symbol, normally read aloud as "at" and also commonly called the at symbol or commercial at, has had its meaning grow to include the sense of being "located at" or "directed at." For personal or professional profiles on social media sites and on the social media platforms, the @ symbol is a known as tagging.

Although hashtag and tagging sound alike and in some ways they are both used to highlight or draw attention to particular items on the social media networks, you do use each of them differently.

We all know how quickly things are updated when it comes to online marketing. Social media is no exception. So, the strategies and information I am sharing is applicable at the time it is being written. These are strategies I recommend implementing today, but with the ever-changing online world, it will more than likely need to be modified in the future. Rather than throwing up our hands in aggravation at what seems like the constant state of change the online world seems to be in, I recommend we adapt a mindset of flexibility and be ready to make those modifications when needed. Below are some valuable ways you can make hashtags and at symbols help your practice get more patients.

History of Hashtags

You might be wondering what hashtags are or you understand what they are, but aren's sure how best to use them for your chiropractic practice. Although Twitter was the pioneer and leader in using hashtags, other platforms such as Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr, Vine, Google+, Flickr and as recent as June 2013, Facebook added the hashtag option for their users. But social media platforms weren't the ones to invent using the hashtag. Stowe Boyd was the first person to use the word in 2007 to track topics on online forums. Today, you would be hard pressed to watch a television show, sporting event or listen to the radio without a reference being made to hashtags. From the national news to late night television, hashtags are mentioned frequently during the prime time hours.

With more than 1.5 billion users between them, Facebook and Twitter are still the undisputed leaders when it comes to social media. The environments are about as similar and different as PC and Mac. We use them to achieve similar things, but they look, feel and in some cases work quite differently. I think it is safe to say the two networks have a fierce rivalry and it seems the developers are intent upon differentiating their cyber-scapes from each other as much as possible. This fierce rivalry has created severe loyalty in both user camps. To the die-hard Facebook fan, Twitter will often look like a confusing jumble of weird code. To the loyal Tweep, Facebook can seem like it requires too much maintenance and time. Now, there are also those seasoned social media folks who love and utilize both. For purposes of this article, although # and @ are used across other social sites, I will be using Facebook and Twitter as the primary examples.

How Hashtags Are Used

Hashtags have always been an important and vital part of the Twitter universe. But in spite of their popularity, many people who spend their time on Twitter don't use them properly and end up getting their content filtered from search results. With the addition of hashtags to Facebook, we suddenly had millions of people who wondering what they were and essentially clueless on how to communicate with them.

When using hashtags on Facebook, they work a couple of different ways. First, when you click on a

Facebook hashtag whether it is on a personal profile or business page, a box will open up showing other people and pages within a user's network that have recently used that hashtag in chronological order. You should also see contributions from other users (provided those users have set their profiles to public). Even if they are outside your network, they could show up if they have also publically used the hashtag.

Second, you can also search for a hashtag in the Facebook search bar at the top of the page. If you wanted to see what people are saying about back pain, you can type #backpain and click on the results that populate below the search bar. You can select pages and newsfeed posts within your network and other public profiles that have recently used that word or term. Also note: when you click to contribute something, that hashtag will automatically populate your post.

The purpose for hashtags on Facebook is they want users to be able to find useful content in an easier way. And worth noting, hashtags have also morphed from just a filter and finding conversations into a way that has helped save lives in disasters or fomenting and coordinating revolutions.

The official description from Twitter explaining hashtags states, "the # symbol, called a hashtag, is used to mark keywords or topics in a Tweet. It was created organically by Twitter users as a way to categorize messages." Twitter lends itself to be more of a "public soapbox" for the majority of the users. Because of this, you are able to see all kinds of data from the content Twitter users share. What this means is, if you click on a hashtagged word, it allows you to view any other message that contains the same hashtagged word or phrase. That way, you can see what others have to say on that particular subject. Because these are so wildly popular on Twitter, many businesses will sponsor a trending topic. That means a business pays a fee to Twitter to get bumped to the top of the list, giving huge brand visibility to its sponsors.

How to Create a Hashtag

As mentioned before, a hashtag is a word or term that is preceded by a # symbol. There are no spaces or special characters between the # and the word(s). This automatically creates a hyperlink that people can click to find all the posts and updates from anyone using the hashtag to talk about a topic. The links are not case sensitive but I do recommend adding an upper case to make it more readable for the user (ex. #IloveMyChiropractor is easier to read than #ilovemychiropractor).

[pb]Benefits & Strategies

First, stay current on trending topics. Get rapid updates about a story as it is happening in the moment. Some of the examples have been when they were used during natural disasters, world events like the Olympics and national events like the Super Bowl. Next, you should find topics and people of interest. Then, create a hashtag that identifies your brand. I wouldn't put my brand hashtag on every tweet or post; I would recommend using them when you are specifically referring to one of your services. The obvious advantage to creating a brand hashtag is that it reinforces brand identity, it also a more powerful benefit is that if people click the hashtag, they will find all the updates you or your patients and fans have posted about your business. And if your updates include links to your blog or website, that encourages other possibilities of engagement and potentially becoming a patient.

Next, set up a hashtag stream on your website. Once you have your brand hashtag set up, you can use it to your advantage outside for Facebook and Twitter by bringing the hashtag to your website or blog. This is using a feature called "Twitter widget."

Use the hashtag to track a marketing campaign. You always want to be able to know if a marketing campaign is working or not and hashtags are most helpful for tracking and analysis. I recommend searching similar hashtags to inspire fresh content for blog posts as well.

A Twitter Widget

Social media platforms are ever-changing and as of press time, here are the steps you will take to produce a Twitter Widget. First you will need to set up your brand hashtag. Once that is complete, from your Twitter account select the "Settings" from the options in the upper right-hand corner of your profile. On the left side of the page, you should see an option for widgets. Select "create new widget" and a new window should open up. This should allow you to customize the setting for your widget.

Widget Strategy for Your Practice

Most people create a widget to stream their tweets on their website for their Twitter Handle (ex: @SRBSolutions is my Twitter handle). What I recommend is to create a Twitter Widget for your brand hashtag to use in your blog posts and website. Select the 'Search" tab and enter your brand hashtag. Note: You can change your options by checking "only show top tweets" if you want to more customization. When you select "create widget," a new window will appear. Copy and paste the code into the HTML of your site or have your website administrator add the code for you. You can use this new widget on your website and sales pages for that particular brand hashtag. That way, when you share tips, information about your products/services and more using your brand hashtag on Twitter, this information is also streamed on your website.

This is a good strategy to create some curiosity for your website visitors to discover more about that subject by clicking on the links to the various tweets. It also creates some excitement and activity around the information. Differences between the Twitter and Facebook hashtags include:

- Facebook enables you to control the audience for your posts.
- When you delete a post on Facebook, whether hashtagged or not, it will delete all its related comments.
- Sharing a Facebook hashtag will not cross the boarders of your friends or fans list unless you make the post public.
- Following specific hashtags on Twitter for events brings you up-to-the-minute updates.
- All hashtags used on Twitter are automatically shared publicly.

The Do's and Don'ts

Here are a few tips for using hashtags effectively to assist with brand engagement and awareness:

- Limit the number of hashtags you utilize in your posts and tweets. I recommend 2-3 hashtags max in your tweets and no more than six on Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr or Facebook.
- Select one(s) that are relevant to your topic. You can see how a hashtag is being used simply by clicking on it. You want to make sure that your tagged addition adds relevant content to the conversation.
- They should be used consistently across the different social media platforms. If you are going to create a social media campaign on Twitter for a particular cause, you should continue using it on all the online venues such as Instagram, Vine, Facebook, Pinterest, in your email campaigns, etc. as well as your offline venues like flyers, postcards and signs to relate it back to your specific campaign. This helps establish the use of the hashtag, increase your brand exposure and helps integrate all your marketing efforts.
- Try jumping into a conversation on a topic – meaning using a hashtag that is already trending.
- Run a contest or promotion using hashtags.
- When hosting an educational program, attending a tradeshow,or webinar, encourage topic participation on your social networks with special hashtag words is helpful for your building brand engagement success.
- Create a hashtag ad campaign specific to your brand.
- Be sure to TEST your hashtag first to see if other people are using it for a different purpose.

Things to NOT do with hashtags:

- Create super long hashtags that are difficult to read.
- Don't put hashtags in front of every word.
- Don't use hashtags from something completely unrelated to your update.
- Don't add special characters like !@$%&*? to your word or phrase.
- Don't create entire paragraphs with multiple hashtagged words.
- Don't hashtag trending topics just to gain visibility.
- Don't make the hashtags too cryptic just because you want to make it unique, patients still have to understand it.

Look for more about the history, do's and don'ts and strategies for the @ symbol in next month's *DC Practice Insights*.