

# Chapter 4

## Marketing on Tumblr:

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### ABSTRACT

*Despite many demographic, behavioral, and technical features that should make it an appealing destination for social media marketers, the Tumblr platform has lagged in marketing adoption. This chapter discusses the site features that drive its potential, while also acknowledging the challenges that Tumblr presents. Contrasts are offered between the limited flexibility but easier adoption curve of other platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, with the phenomenon known as choice overload discussed as a possible explanation for non-Tumblr preferences. Three Tumblr case studies are presented in depth to illustrate best practices (Denny's diner chain and the musician Taylor Swift) and to warn against certain common pitfalls (Nordstrom). The chapter concludes with potential future research directions to pursue on this growing but underutilized platform.*

### INTRODUCTION

From a marketing perspective, Tumblr is the dark horse of the major social media platforms. Most corporate sites link to their Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. If they're especially adventurous or dutiful, one might see Pinterest or LinkedIn. Although Tumblr's user base is valuable, it is also notably and uniquely difficult to market to. Despite having many user statistics that should put it in the same discussions as Pinterest and Instagram as a youthful social network on the rise, Tumblr is largely ignored in discussions of social media marketing.

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This chapter offers methods to improve customer engagement and the likelihood of successful marketing efforts on the Tumblr platform. First, an examination is made of Tumblr's background, along with its user base and technical capabilities. Relevant academic theories about social media branding and consumer engagement are also introduced. A discussion of the marketing potential offered on the platform follows. Next, three case studies are presented with multiple supporting examples, with an analysis of two well-performing Tumblr accounts and one underperforming company. Lastly, conclusions and future research directions are offered.

It should be noted that Tumblr is rarely discussed in both the commercial and academic spheres. Accordingly, theories and references used in this chapter are largely about social media platforms in general, rather than findings specific to Tumblr. Accordingly, it is hoped that this chapter will make a significant contribution to the literature about the Tumblr platform.

As might be expected from this chapter's title, Tumblr allows for more flexibility in one's marketing presentation than many other platforms. Companies can be "weird" to stand out, to connect with an audience that distrusts typical marketing voices, or as a way to rebrand a staid image. Simply being weird, however, is not a coherent strategy. To understand how to best, promote consumer engagement and loyalty on a historically challenging platform, it's important to first discuss those consumers and the platform itself.

## **BACKGROUND**

In the introduction, Tumblr was referred to as one of the major social media platforms. That label would surprise many people, who often leave it out of discussions of the most important social media players. Tumblr was founded in 2007 by David Karp and Marco Arment. In 2013, Yahoo acquired Tumblr for \$1.1 billion (Statista, 2015). Tumblr is known as a microblogging platform, and accordingly, each user is described as having his or her own blog. An early assessment of the site described it thusly:

*It's a happy medium between a tidbit posting service, such as Twitter, and a full-fledged blogging tool, such as WordPress or Blogger. Tumblr is aimed at folks who feel they may not have enough content or time to write a full blog, yet still want to write and share links and media. (Lowensohn, 2007)*

This platform style, off-the-cuff but media-rich, proved popular. Tumblr is one of the fastest-growing major platforms (along with Pinterest), with nearly 100% active user growth between 2014 – 2015 (Cohen, 2015). During 2014, it registered

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