



# Engagement on Facebook: When it matters

Engagement is a foundational concept in marketing that involves moving the hearts and minds of your target audience. Since the advent of online advertising, clicks have been viewed as proxies for the traditional notion of engagement. However, in many cases, these click-based forms of engagement do not align with the desired business outcomes of your content. The dual meanings of engagement in traditional marketing and online advertising have been challenging for many marketers. In this paper, we explain how to use online engagement metrics in a way that can help achieve your business goals.

## Summary: Setting the stage

- Consumer engagement has always been and continues to be important in marketing. However, ‘engagement’ is a complex term, with varying definitions across traditional marketing and online advertising. It is difficult to measure engagement comprehensively, and clicks capture only a small portion of what the term entails.
- Online advertising defines engagement as clicks, which on Facebook comes in the form of likes, comments, shares, and onsite and offsite clicks.
- Online engagement metrics are a proxy for interest, but they are not a reliable indicator of the content’s persuasiveness. Persuasive content influences your audience in a way that helps move your business.
- Broadly speaking, there are ‘engagers’ and ‘watchers.’ A click on a post may reflect the person’s tendency to click, rather than the content’s relevance to that person.

## Key takeaways

- ✓ Focus on business results to measure effectiveness of your marketing efforts on Facebook. The KPIs and metrics that you know drive business results in other channels should also be used on Facebook.
- ✓ Use quality creative that ladders up to your business objectives. Creative assets solely built to generate engagement (i.e., ‘like baiting’) will not drive core business results.
- ✓ Engagement should not be a campaign goal. If you aim to generate demand for or change perceptions about your product, engagement metrics should not be used to assess your advertising effectiveness. They are helpful, but not sufficient given people can be persuaded by content even if they don’t engage with it.
- ✓ Engagement metrics can be one way to inform creative decisions - as long as the audience, messaging objective, placement, and campaign structure are held constant.

## Engagement doesn't equal persuasion

Engagement rate on Facebook is measured as the percentage of people who saw a post and liked, shared, clicked or commented on it. To understand the significance of this metric, it's useful to unpack the underlying inferences. When a person engages with a post, it indicates several events:



**1. Notice.** The post captured the person's attention.

**2. Interest.** The post captured the person's interest.

**3. (Potential) Persuasion.** The post influenced the attitudes or intentions of the person. Content that does not highlight the brand or lacks a message aligned with the campaign's objectives may be *interesting* to the person, but it may not persuade him/her to feel a certain way about the brand or to take action. For example, people may be *interested* in a post that has a beautiful sunset, but if sunsets are

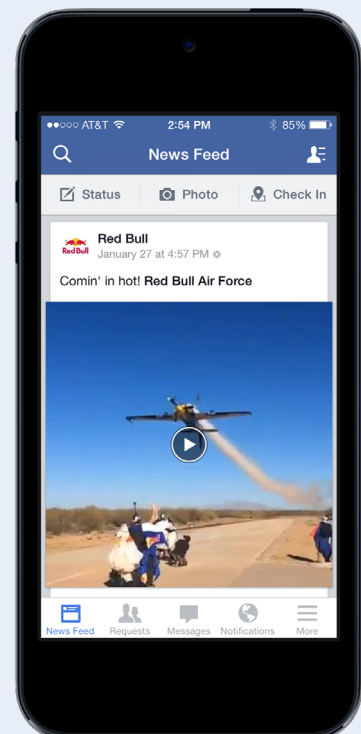
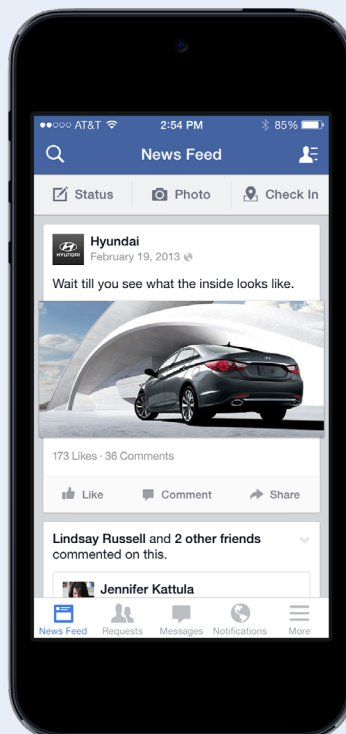
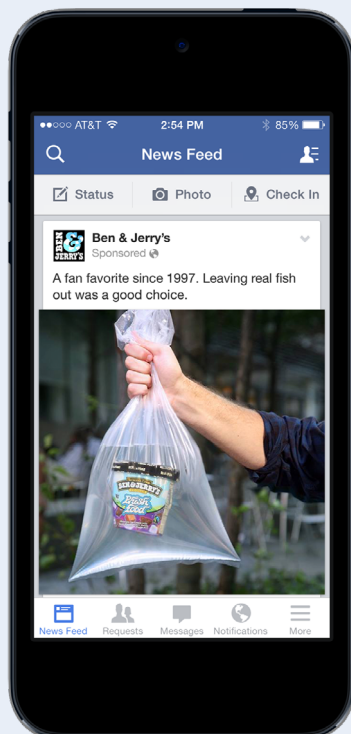
not associated with the brand, people won't make that connection and it is unlikely that we would observe any lift in brand metrics.

**4. Expression.** The person chose to express his or her interest with a like, share, comment, or click. Content doesn't need to be persuasive to elicit an engagement. Similarly, not all persuasive content results in an engagement, especially for campaigns focused on driving objectives like brand awareness or brand equity.

If your goal is to generate awareness or shift perceptions, it's important to recognize that people don't necessarily need to engage with content to notice it, be interested in it, or be persuaded by it. All of these events can occur without the person ultimately engaging with the content.

## Not all persuasive content results in a click

These creative examples grab attention, reflect each brand's personality and are memorable.



## Engagement rates often reflect the behaviors of the person clicking on the content, rather than the content itself

With over 1.2 billion people<sup>1</sup> visiting Facebook every month, Facebook is home to a diverse community. One dimension they differ on is how they engage with their friends' posts. Many people engage with a high volume of content, sharing commentary throughout the day on the stories posted by friends, while many others observe posts without interacting with them. These tendencies can't

**There is a meaningful correlation between engagement rates with friend content and engagement rates with advertising content, indicating that ad engagement, in part, reflects people's tendencies to click on content.**

easily be explained by demographics or device usage. We see substantial variation in post engagement rates, even among people who appear quite similar on the surface<sup>2</sup>.

The same people who have low engagement rates in general, are also unlikely to engage

with advertising content. There is a meaningful correlation between engagement rates with friend content and engagement rates with advertising content, indicating that ad engagement, in part, reflects people's tendencies to click on content<sup>3</sup>. So, low engagement rates don't necessarily reflect that people weren't interested in or persuaded by your content. And, people who don't click on your ad shouldn't be devalued; they may just have different click tendencies compared to other people in your target audience<sup>4</sup>. The vast majority of people who purchase your

products will do so without clicking on your ads; studies show that more than 90% of offline sales come from people who don't interact with ads during the campaign<sup>5</sup>.

## Focus on business results, not just engagement

We know that many of you are focused on achieving business goals such as sales lift or brand awareness. And, many publishers have historically pointed to engagement metrics as a sufficient proxy for understanding the impact of advertising campaigns.

Industry research, however, has repeatedly shown that engagement rates do not correlate with the outcomes ultimately used to judge the success of your marketing efforts. While clicks can be strong indicators of success for online direct response campaigns, research by Nielsen shows very limited correlation between clicks and offline sales lift; the same is true of clicks and standard brand metrics like awareness<sup>6</sup>.

Given these findings, the success of advertising campaigns should be measured through business results and not via engagement rates. The same KPIs and metrics you use in other channels, and you know drive your business, should be used to assess impact on Facebook.

<sup>5</sup> Datalogix ROI study, Oct 2012; Facebook Telco Outcome Measurement, Mar 2013. Both study findings are consistent with comScore's "Whither the Click" study, Nov 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Nielsen NetEffect Meta Analysis and Nielsen Brand Effect Meta Analysis. "Beyond Clicks and Impressions: Examining the Relationship Between Online Advertising and Brand Building," 2011.

<sup>1</sup> Facebook internal data, Dec 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Facebook Internal Analysis, based on US users from Jan 21–27, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Facebook Internal Analysis, based on US users from Jan 21–27, 2014 for non-ad (friend) content and Oct 29, 2013–Jan 27, 2014 for ad content.

<sup>4</sup> These findings are consistent with findings from comScore, Starcom USA and Tacoda: "Natural Born Clickers", Oct 2009.

## Use engagement metrics as one way to inform creative decisions

While engagement metrics are not effective for measuring campaign performance, they can supplement any creative pre-testing you may already perform for your paid media campaigns on Facebook. When comparing engagement rates among creative executions on Facebook, it's critical to hold the following characteristics constant:

- 1. Audience.** The same set of people must be compared. While click behaviors vary within any audience, keeping audiences constant when comparing engagement across ads ensures discrepancies are not being driven by differences in audience composition.
- 2. Messaging objective.** Campaigns designed to shift brand metrics or offline sales have different engagement rates than campaigns designed to drive online actions.
- 3. Ad placement.** Ad placement impacts the device people use to consume content. Engagement rates on mobile devices are higher as attention is more focused in a linear environment than in the traditional online display environment, which can have multiple distractions.
- 4. Campaign structure.** Engagement rates can be impacted by the budget, duration and flighting of campaigns.

If you observe a higher engagement rate for a piece of creative when all other characteristics are held constant, this is as a leading indicator that the ad copy or imagery is drawing interest from that audience. That piece of creative is a strong candidate for your paid media campaigns.

Selecting among your creative executions on Facebook in this way may also help your content gain broader distribution in News Feed. Seeking to deliver the most relevant and interesting content to people, Facebook's News Feed algorithm uses engagement data as one element to determine which stories should appear in each person's News Feed. Engagement data is a valuable element because we've identified higher engagement rates lead to more time spent on Facebook, which ensures you as a marketer can consistently reach your target audience on Facebook.

Page posts geared solely toward generating post likes (i.e., 'like baiting') are not advised. They can derail your analysis because such posts lack brand messaging and are unlikely to persuade people. They can also reflect poorly on your brand. We encourage you to only post content that is aligned with your brand and ladders up to your business objectives. This can safeguard you from making misinformed choices.

## The role of fans and engagement metrics in assessing creative

Admittedly, ensuring apples-to-apples comparisons of your creative is difficult and establishing a database to use on an ongoing basis requires time and effort. But Facebook does facilitate this approach for each Page through its fan base.

Page posts are unique because they are shown to the same bucket of people (your fans) in the same placements (News Feed desktop and mobile) without any budget dynamics at play. This simulates a controlled experiment—as long as the messaging objective remains constant. Your fans can help you identify your strongest Page posts based on their relative engagement rates. When distributing those Page posts to a larger set of people, it's important that the target audience is similar to your fan base.

If you want to reach target audiences not well represented by your fans (e.g., loyalists to a competitor), proceed cautiously with this approach. Comparisons of engagement rates for fans versus other audience segments may lead to the wrong conclusion on the success or failure of the creative. Steer toward comparing engagement rates within the same target audience.

## Marketing fundamentals on Facebook

Relevant and interesting creative is key, but cannot solely ensure success. Marketing fundamentals such as campaign structure, reach and frequency management, as well as persuasive messaging are also essential.

### Keys to a successful campaign on Facebook

- 1 Establish campaign goals and success metrics.**  
Ensure there is a plan for measuring the campaign's impact with metrics that are rooted in your business objectives. Facebook offers an expanding set of 1st and 3rd party measurement options, including the Facebook conversion pixel, Offline Conversion Measurement, and Nielsen Brand Effect to help measure key business metrics.
- 2 Identify your target audience.**  
Begin with the full set of potential consumers that can help your brand achieve its goals. You can define your segments through demographic, interest, behavioral, and location data on Facebook or using your own customer data through Custom Audiences.
- 3 Develop creative that reflects your brand and resonates with your audience.**  
Best practices for persuasive content on Facebook align with best practices in traditional media: grab attention, demonstrate benefits, and link to brand equity. Moreover, embrace the diversity within your target audience and develop custom ad creative for each of your audience segments.
- 4 Advertise to your target audience at scale.**  
With quality creative in place, reaching a large percentage of your target audience will ensure your impact scales to levels that drive business results.