

**Publication:** The Hindu Business Line - Catalyst

**Date:** October 9, 2015

# The hashtag obsession

To drive consumer engagement and by extension, to drive businesses, a hashtag is instrumental for all brands today



**club catalyst**

**ANUPAM VASUDEV**  
CHIEF MARKETING OFFICER, AIRCEL

The language evolution, in line with technology advancement, has taken the world by surprise and has left the erstwhile language enthusiasts and experts baffled. Internet slang, texting, chats through instant messaging services and such have re-defined the way people communicate, especially the 'pressed for time' and 'looking for convenience' younger generation.

A reply such as 'K' is considered rude, what has become 'wat', wait has become 'ws' and the traditional laughs have turned into 'LoLs'. The trend has now trickled down to the social media space and is being led by a simple hashtag (#).

Conversations today are led by hashtags. In fact, on two of the largest social media platforms – Facebook and Twitter – if something is not a hashtag, it isn't popular enough.

Hashtags have been in existence much before the trend caught on with the advent of the micro-blogging site Twitter. The usage of hashtags began in the early days of Internet Relay Chats, with users including them to bucket images, videos and content into groups. However, Twitter hasn't looked back since August 2007 when designer Chris Messina used the hashtag for the very first time while tweeting. This powerful symbol enables people from all parts of the world to connect their thoughts, views, ideas, and posts in little strings that provide some structure in an otherwise chaotic social world – so much so that even other social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram,

Tumblr, Google+ and Pinterest were compelled to adopt the hashtag due to its growing popularity.

## How it benefits brands

As a marketing professional I must recognise that hashtags are not just a tool of indexing, but a dominant medium of expression and popular choices. Today a large section of people choose to communicate online only by using hashtags. Therefore, hashtags have become critical to drive effective and engaging communication between a brand and a customer.

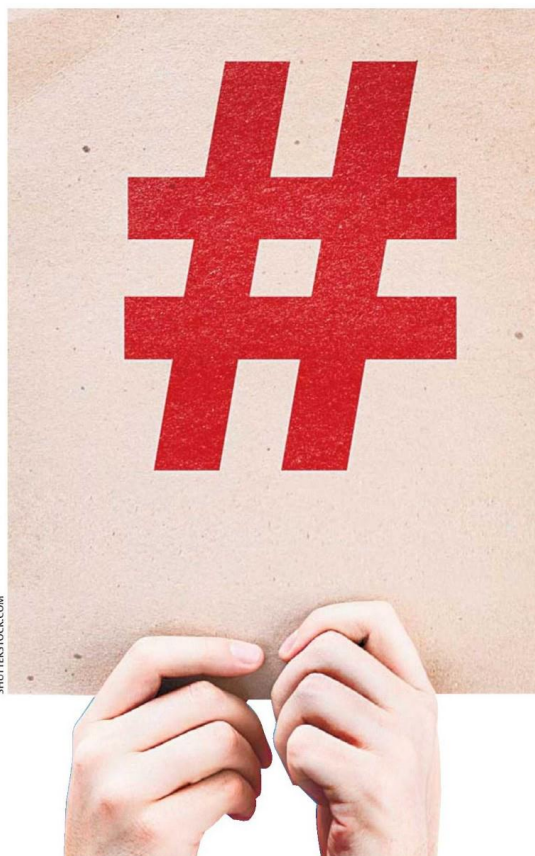
With unique hashtags, brands can enhance their recall value and regularly target their audience to gain more visibility for their products and services.

As a brand custodian, I may even focus on developing user generated content to deepen my engagement with my target audience. I could achieve this by asking my users to generate content in form of posts, pictures, or by simply answering a question. Alternatively, I may choose to run various online campaigns and sew them together under a single hashtag to create a much larger impact.

We must not forget that to drive consumer engagement, and by extension, to drive businesses, a hashtag is instrumental for all brands today – no matter how big or small they are. For instance, if I am a relatively newer brand, an appropriate hashtag strategy can take me a long way in helping me drive the right kind of conversations around my brand and popularise it. Not only can I track how my existing and potential customers feel about my brand, but I can also successfully steer the conversations to deliver the right messages.

Research has proved that more than 70 per cent of consumers are motivated to explore new content when hashtags are present. Some of the most creative brands today make it big online through the use of hashtags.

One of the world's largest car brands celebrated its upcoming



launch by issuing a media advisory in an emoji format along with a hashtag and asked people to decode the message. The novelty in the idea and the hashtag's popularity helped create the necessary curiosity on Twitter.

With success stories like these, no wonder the shift from a mobile-first strategy to a hashtag-first strategy is gaining momentum. Aircel's #AircelPlus3, a campaign around finding the biggest Chennai Super Kings fan during the Indian Premiere

League, a cricket tournament, achieved staggering numbers, generating up to 80 million impressions on certain match days alone. We integrated the #AircelPlus3 in our television commercial as well, for better reach and penetration.

## Handy in crises

Hashtags have been instrumental in dealing with crisis situations too. An aircraft in the US, just before its take-off, received a bomb threat and was immediately isolated and parked at

the tarmac. As the police and authorities investigated, the airline used hashtags to calm its passengers on board by tracking their conversations on Twitter and reassured them that everything was fine.

While all brands today want their hashtags to trend and drive conversations in the social media space, we must acknowledge the inherent 'social' nature of social media and treat the medium carefully. The 'viral' element/effect can sometimes go against a brand when a hashtag turns into a 'hashtag'. People, especially unhappy customers, often tend to tarnish the image of a brand using a hashtag to try and gain the attention of the brand. The lifespan of such conversations can run into a few minutes, few hours or even days. An extremely popular fast-food joint started a hashtag to make people share their wonderful memories associated with the brand. Since the hashtag was a little vague, people, on the contrary, used this opportunity to express their worst experiences with the brand. As marketers, we must understand that hashtags of this nature can help identify negative conversations and enable us to turn them around by properly addressing them. We can deploy free or paid online tools that can help us get a comprehensive insight into who all are talking about our brand, and help gauge sentiments accordingly.

As I pen this thought down, there is another school of thought which argues that the essence of a hashtag, which is to group and track conversations, is getting lost as people are using multiple hashtag variants to express the same thing.

Moreover, they go on to suggest that newer people are using hashtags more than the existing socially savvy audience only for the sake of it, without understanding its true relevance.

Today, however, a hashtag remains an obsession, and regardless to say, an unputdownable tool for any brand. Whether or not hashtags cease to exist in the future is a question that can be answered only as time passes by.