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WHEN TO **TWEET,** WHAT TO **POST,**
HOW TO **BLOG,** AND OTHER
PROVEN STRATEGIES

DAN ZARRELLA

WILEY

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Facebook

Facebook is the 800-pound gorilla of the social media space. The network has more than 1 billion active users around the world. Everyone is on Facebook: from the youngest to the oldest and from the geekiest to the most technology unsavvy. If you, as a marketer, had to pick only one social media channel to maintain a presence on, you'd have to go with Facebook.

Old-school marketers just waking up to this reality have been quick to jump on the advertising bandwagon and flood Facebook with mounds of ads with low click-through rates (CTRs). Although the targeting functionality of Facebook's self-service platform is quite powerful, advertising should be a distant second in the Facebook marketing priority list.

Your brand's Facebook page is its face (pun intended) to the social world. The content you share and the interactions you entice your fans to engage in define how well you'll do. This chapter will teach you the kinds of content and sharing behavior you need to understand to succeed.

The fundamental act of Facebook marketing is posting content to your brand's Facebook page. Hopefully that content then gets likes, shares, and comments, leading to a highly engaged audience, which you can then direct to your website to convert into leads or customers.

I collected a data set of all of the content posted by the 10,000 most liked pages on Facebook and the corresponding like, comment, and share data for each post. I began my analysis of this data by looking at the day of the week the content was posted and its
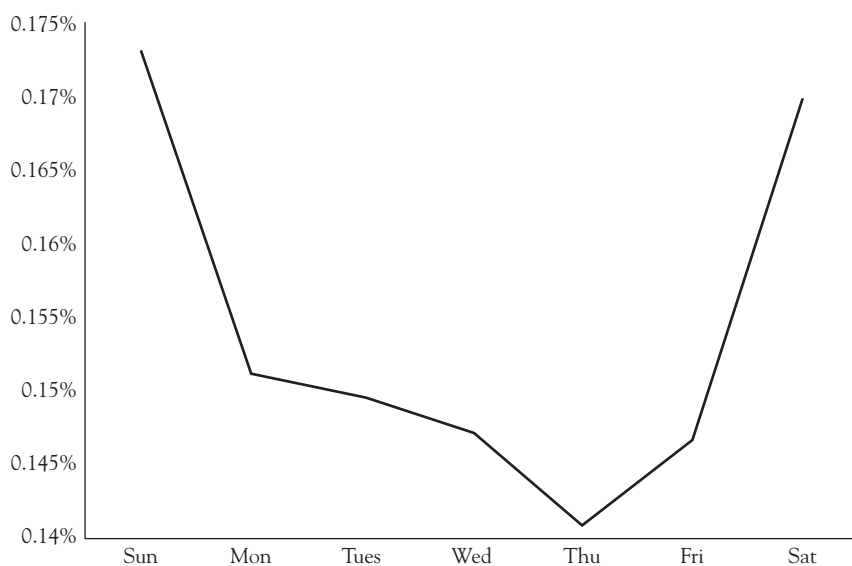
Figure 5.1   Days versus Likes

relationship to the number of likes it got (Figure 5.1). I calculated a like rate by dividing the number of likes on the post by the total number of likes for the page.

Echoing the contra-competitive timing pattern I've found elsewhere in my research and detailed in other chapters in this book, I found that content posted on Saturday and Sunday tended to get more likes than content posted during the business week.

I've said it before with other timing data, but it bears repeating here. Don't take these data to suggest that you should post content only on the weekend. Experiment with Saturdays and Sundays and see how it performs; you may be surprised.

Next, I moved on to study the time of day the content was posted and the relationship that had to the content's like rate (Figure 5.2). Here I found a pattern perhaps unique to Facebook and its place as a mainstream and largely nonprofessional social network.

Content posted in the evening, between 5 PM and midnight Eastern time, got more likes than content posted at other times during the day. For most people, Facebook usage at work is frowned on, and some data have suggested that many companies actually block
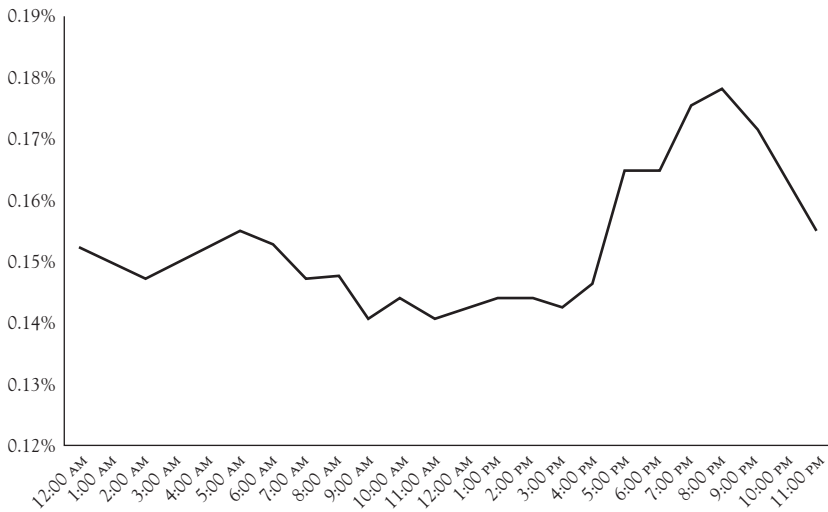
Figure 5.2   Hour versus Likes

access to it from the office. This means that much Facebook activity happens from home, after people get home from work.

Not only do these data suggest the importance of posting content outside of the workday, but it also reminds us that we, as marketers, are creating content to compete with real-world activities such as dinner, family life, and television—not just other work-related content.

When I looked at sentiment, I found a pattern mostly similar to what I've found in other forms of social media and online marketing: positivity works better than negativity (Figure 5.3). For these data I used a linguistic analysis system that gives content a sentiment score; positive numbers indicate positive sentiment, and negative numbers indicate negative sentiment. The size of the number in either direction indicates the strength of said sentiment.

One interesting way these data differ from my work on sentiment data from Twitter is that although positivity does perform better than negativity, negativity works better than neutrality. If you have a choice between negative and positive, generally you'll want to stay positive. But if that choice is between negative and neutral, go negative. Neutrality is boring, and boring is death on Facebook.
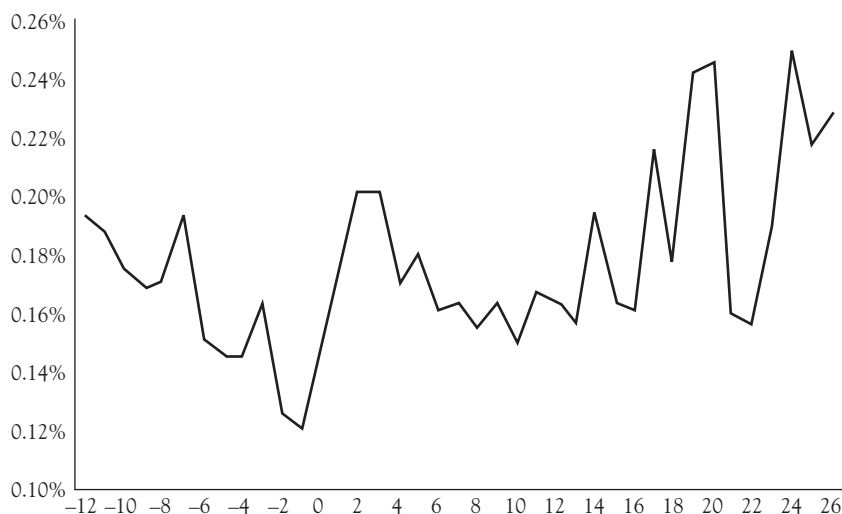
Figure 5.3   Sentiment versus Likes

One of the factors with the strongest relationship to a piece of content's like rate was the type of content. Facebook pages allow admins to post a variety of kinds of content, including photos, simple text-based status posts, videos, and links to external sites.

When I analyzed each post type and the average like rate, I found that photo posts performed the best, followed by status, video, and link posts, in that order (Figure 5.4). Facebook, for many users, is fundamentally a photo-sharing site. We post photos of ourselves, of our family and friends, of our pets, and of our dinner. It is only logical that we respond the most to brand content that is also visual.

In fact, at HubSpot, one of the most popular kinds of content we post to our Facebook page are "HubSpotter in the Wild" photos—candid shots of various employees at their desks. Users are on Facebook looking at photos of people; whenever you can, give them more to look at and like.

I then studied the relationship between the length, in characters, of the text of a wall post on the Facebook pages in my data set and the number of likes they got. I found that posts that were either very short or quite long did the best (Figure 5.5).
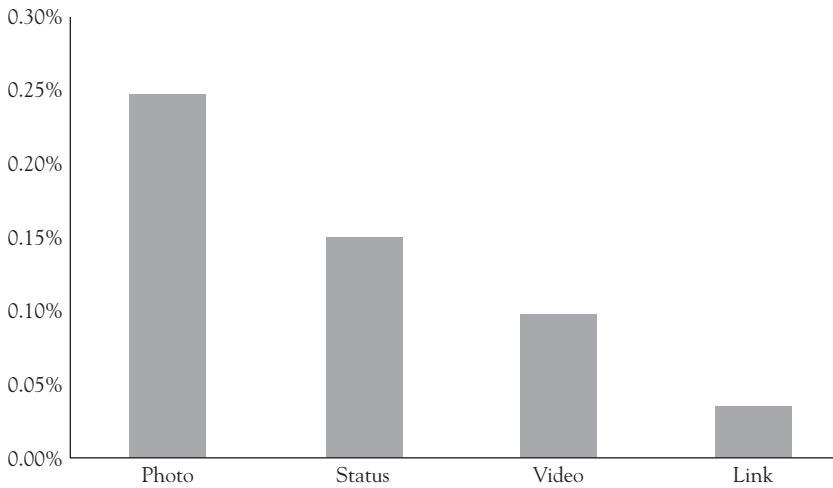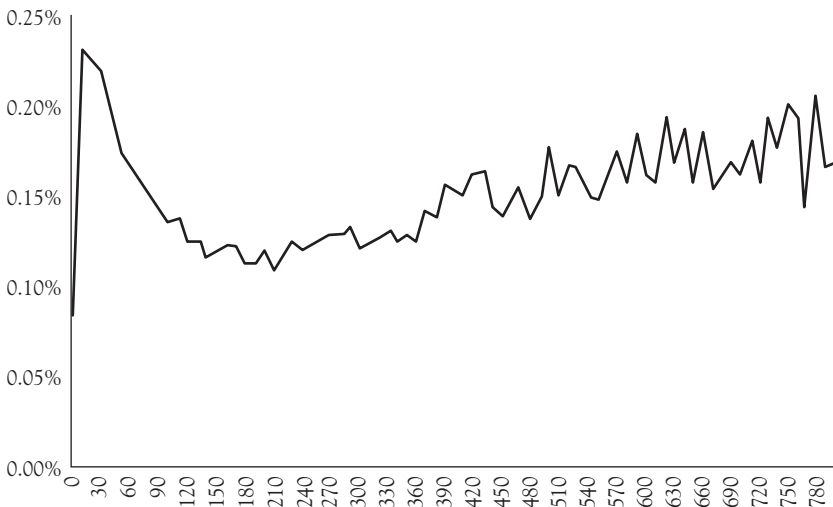
Figure 5.4   Post Type versus Likes

Figure 5.5   Post Length versus Likes

Again, we see that the middle ground is where performance drops. Posts between about 100 and 350 characters performed the worst. This is likely because Facebook users prefer to like photo-based content, which typically comes with only short captions. And if a post doesn't have an image and is primarily text-based, you're better off including a meaty amount of information, rather than a brief Twitter-length snippet.
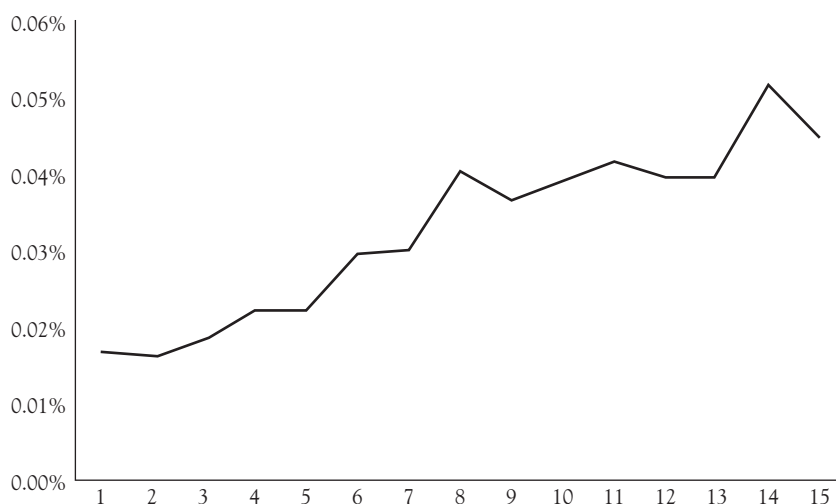
Figure 5.6 Self-Reference versus Likes

Another interesting way in which my Facebook data differ from my data on Twitter is when I analyzed self-referential language such as *I, me, us,* and *we.* On Twitter, talking about yourself and your brand can lead to fewer followers and retweets, but the same isn't necessarily true for Facebook. I found that as self-referential language increased in content posted to the Facebook pages in my data set, their like rate also increased (Figure 5.6).

Most Facebook users spend their time on the social network talking about themselves, telling their friends what they did today, posting pictures of themselves, and generally being self-referential. It makes sense that they're more tolerant of brands they've liked doing the same things their friends are also doing.

I'm a big fan of calls to action, and I often lament the fact that many marketers have become convinced that they don't have a place in social media. Nowhere is this more untrue than on Facebook. I analyzed posts that contained the word *like* and found that those posts had more than double the like rate of posts that did not contain the word (Figure 5.7).

Calls to action always work best in a persuasive or logical context. One of my favorite examples is the sports team whose Facebook
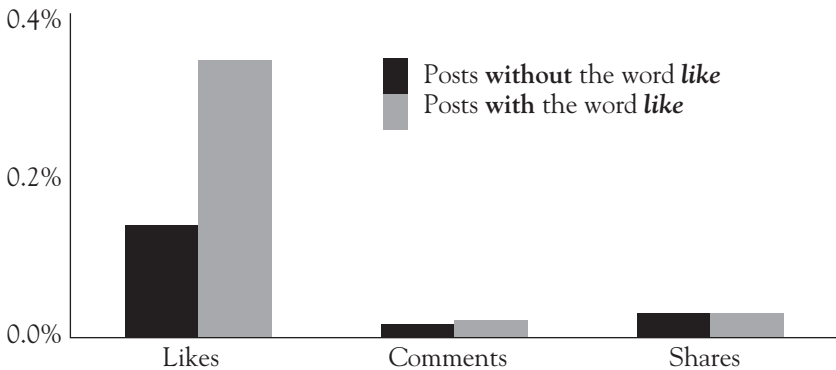
Figure 5.7 Posts Including *Like* Get More Likes and Comments

page contains posts talking about various awards and honors won by individual players. The posts ask viewers to like the post as a way to congratulate the players, and subsequently these posts are liked far more than the average post on those pages.

Experiment with different motivations to entice your readers to like your content, but don't forget to actually ask them to do what you'd like them to do—it works.

I then shifted my attention, in the same data set of 10,000 of the most liked Facebook pages, to the act of sharing rather than liking. I found several places where characteristics correlated with higher-than-average sharing were different than those associated with more likes.

One such place was in timing. Looking at the hour of day that posts were published, I found that sharing activity peaks much higher in the day than does liking activity (Figure 5.8). Posts published between 4 PM and 6 PM Eastern time had the highest rate of sharing (post shares divided by total page likes), with a sharp drop off later in the evening.

Another place where I found a difference between sharing-friendly behavior and like-friendly behavior was in the length, in characters, of the text of posts. Although very short, text-light posts tended to get the most shares, longer posts also attracted more shares than medium-length posts. (Figure 5.9).
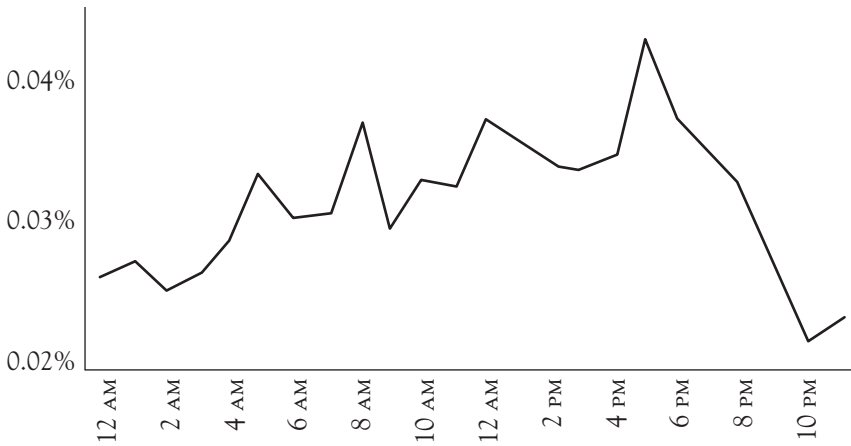
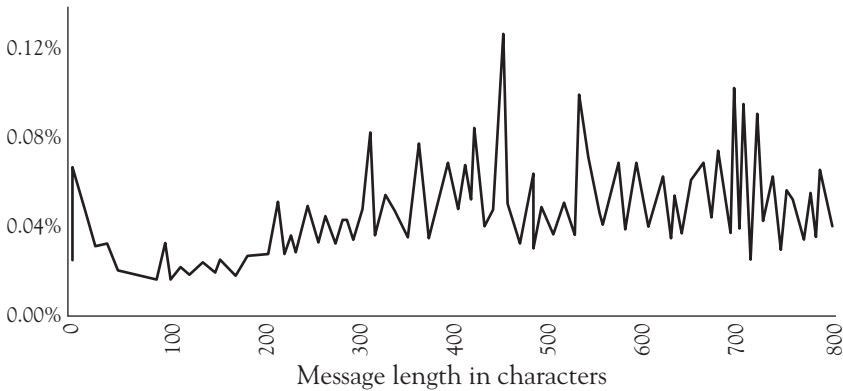**Figure 5.8   Share Percentage Based on Time of Post**

Figure 5.9   Share Percentage Based on Post Length

This is probably because the act of clicking Share involves a much higher level of commitment and engagement with content, so it requires more persuasion than a quick click of the Like button does.

As you're experimenting with your Facebook page, trying to increase the sharing your posts get, test some longer, text-heavy updates, providing your readers with plenty of motivation to spread your message to their Facebook friends.

The last place I found a difference between sharing and liking is in post type. Whereas for like rate for text-based content is the
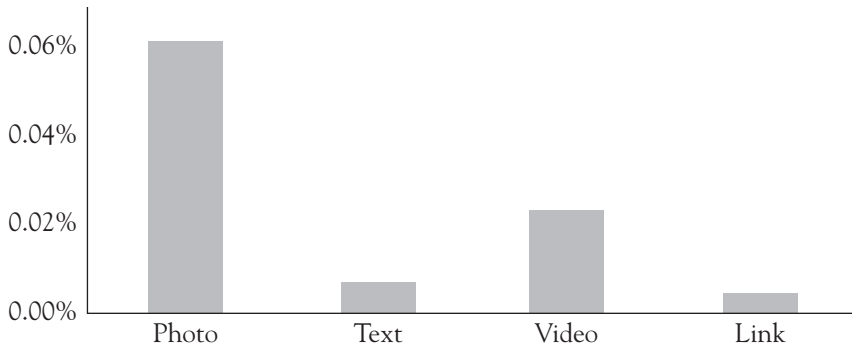
Figure 5.10   Share Percentage Based on Post Type

second highest performing type, when it comes to sharing, video posts perform better than text (Figure 5.10). Again, I believe this is because sharing a post with my friends is a much more involved action than just clicking Like, plus videos are a more immersive experience.

When compared with Twitter, Facebook tends to be a better place to share videos in social media. Twitter audiences are often multitasking, and asking them to spend 4 or 5 minutes watching only your video is a hard sell. Facebook, on the other hand, provides users with the ability to watch videos directly on the site, and users tend to be Facebooking when logged on, actively browsing the site, rather than just having it open in the background as then often do with Twitter.

If video production is a part of your marketing strategy (and you should at least test videos to see how they perform for you), use Facebook to promote them and think about how to encourage your viewers to share.

Continuing my investigation into the performance of calls to action on Facebook, I also looked at posts that contained the word *share* and their like, comment, and share rates. Not only do those posts get more shares than posts that don't use the word, but they also tend to get more likes and comments (Figure 5.11).

Again, don't forget the context of the social call to action. A great example of how to motivate sharing is to ask readers to share
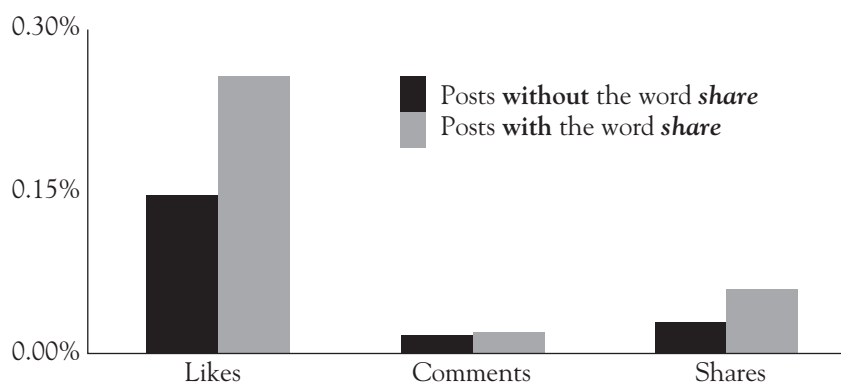
Figure 5.11   Posts Including *Share* Get More Shares, Comments, and Likes

a post if they agree with a statement you've made or if they can identify with an experience you're relating. A fitness page might talk about the moment when you can fit into jeans you had in high school and ask fans to share that post if they've ever been able to say that (or hope to be able to say it soon).

The third place I looked for evidence of the efficacy of social calls to action on Facebook was with posts that used the word *comment*. Here we find that the posts do get significantly more comments; they also get more likes, but they seem to get fewer shares (Figure 5.12).

It makes sense, in Facebook culture, to comment on a post and like it, but it's somewhat less natural to comment on and share the same post. This is especially true since most sharing activity actually includes comments added to the content by the sharers when it appears on their wall.

Easy ways to incite more comments are to use fill-in-the-blank posts and ask readers to finish your statement with a comment. A sports page could ask fans to fill in the best game they've ever watched. My favorite airline, JetBlue, did an experiment where they posted fill-in-the-blank updates for every week about the just-released *Hunger Games* movie.
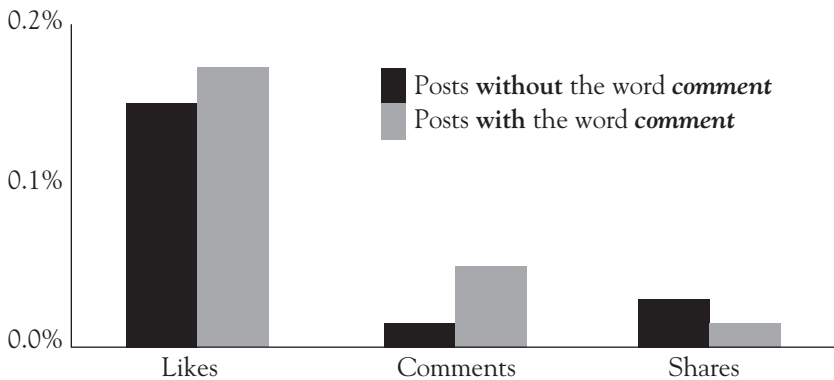
Figure 5.12 Posts Including *Comment* Get More Comments and Likes

Another way to drive increased comments is to use questions. But my data suggest that marketers need to be aware of the effect comments can have on other metrics such as likes and shares. Posts in my data set that included a question mark got more comments but fewer likes and shares than posts that did not include a question mark (Figure 5.13).

Likes are typically reserved for content that viewers agree with, things they literally like. Rhetorical varieties aside, questions are something you answer, not generally something you agree or disagree with. Periodically using questions to encourage commenting can work, but they're not an all-encompassing engagement panacea. Use them, but use them as part of an overall strategy.

I also dug deeper into the questions tactic to find out which kinds of questions led to the highest comment rates in my data set. I found that the easier-to-answer question types, such as *should, would,* and *which,* performed the best, whereas complex questions, such as *why* and *how,* drove the least comments (Figure 5.14).

Should and *would* questions are typically answerable with a simple yes or no. *Which* questions are generally presented as multiple choice, where readers merely need to select from a list of answers. *Why* and *how* questions require longer, well-thought-out answers and a larger investment of time from fans.
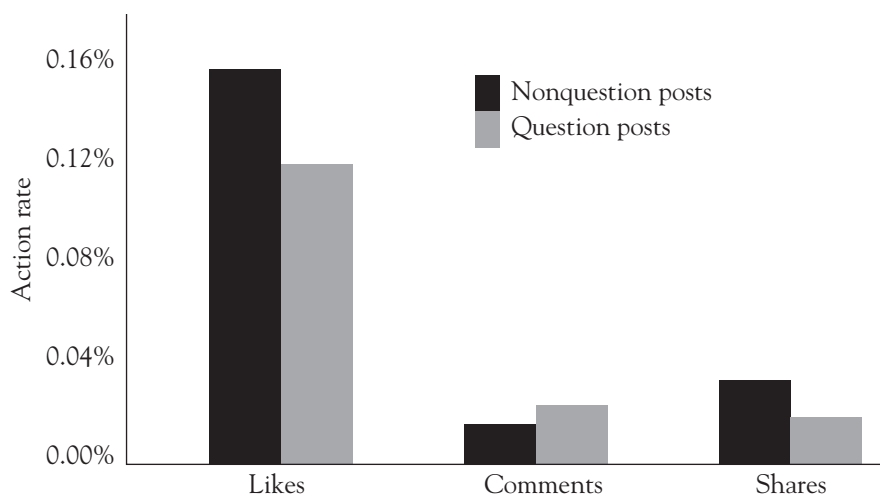
Figure 5.13   Question Posts Get More Comments but Fewer Likes and Shares

Note: Posts that include questions tend to get more response in the form of comments but fewer likes and shares.

When using questions to drive Facebook engagement, stick to the easy-to-answer varieties most of the time. The data show that these will do the most good for your page. But feel free to experiment with more in-depth questions to see how your audience reacts to them.

Perhaps the most interesting data I found when studying my commenting data was the relationship between post sentiment and the amount of comments posts had. On Twitter and in e-mail marketing, positivity does better than negativity. And when we're talking about likes on Facebook posts, positivity also comes out the winner. But when I looked at commenting, I found that highly negative posts drove more comments than positive posts (Figure 5.15).

This is quantitative evidence of the controversy hook often mentioned by social media thought leaders. Stirring the pot and challenging your readers with an opinion they might not agree with can be an easy way to rile them up and into action. Pointing out an evil done by a common enemy can incite an us-versus-them style of energy and drive up comments as well.

Certainly experiment with these kinds of edgy content, but do so carefully. Occasionally going negative can work, but you don't
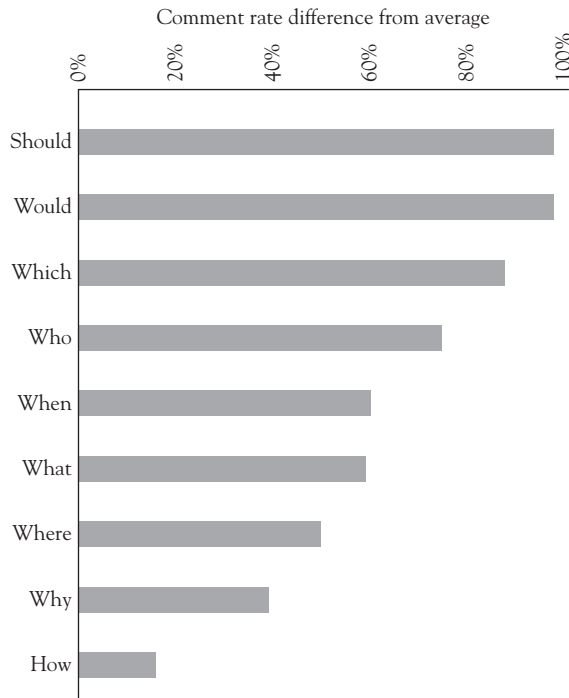
Comment rate difference from average

Figure 5.14   Certain Types of Questions Get More Comments

Note: Posts that include *should, would,* and *who* questions get more comments than those that include *why* and *how* questions.
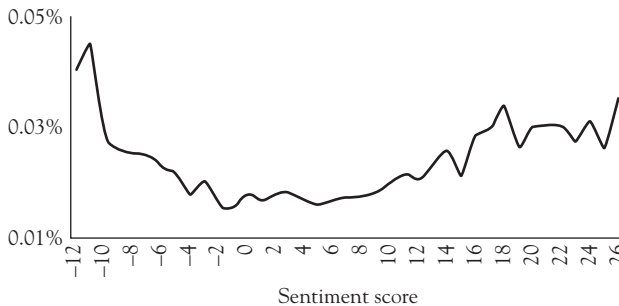

Figure 5.15   Comment Percentage Based on Post Sentiment

want a reputation as an exceedingly negative content producer or a constant Debbie Downer.

One of the most common questions about Facebook marketing that I'm asked when I speak at conferences is, "How often should we post?" When I'm asked that question about blogs, Twitter, or e-mail marketing, my answer is the same: "More than you are right

now." On those platforms my data suggest that it's hard, if not impossible, for a reasonable marketer, using good-quality content, to go overboard.

Facebook is a different story, however. If you're posting too often to a page and your content is showing up in my News Feed, it might be competing with and drowning out content from my friends, which I probably want to see more. When I looked at posting frequency and total number of likes on Facebook pages in my data set, I found that fan count was the highest for pages posting between 0.5 and 0.6 times per day—roughly once every other day or 4 to 5 times a week (Figure 5.16).

Frequency is definitely something you should experiment with; there is a high likelihood that your audience varies from the average, but start your experimentation from this best practice frequency level.

One of the most important aspects of how people use Facebook is the prevalence of mobile content posting. I studied tens of thousands of publicly viewable posts made by random Facebook users and analyzed the applications they used to post that content. I found that even in late 2011, when I did this research, a full third of all content was posted to Facebook using mobile applications (Figure 5.17). This number has undoubtedly increased since then. The most common mobile application was m.Facebook.com, the mobile website, followed by Android, iPhone, and BlackBerry native apps. Note that this is content posting, not just content consumption, which has a much higher percentage of mobile activity.

The content you're posting to your company's Facebook page isn't competing only with your direct competitors or even simply other businesses' content. You're competing with pictures of my friends, my relatives, and their cute pets and babies. You're also competing with the real world, because there's a good chance I'm checking Facebook while out shopping or at dinner. Can your content stand up to that?

Facebook is such a mainstream network that there are millions of people of all ages interacting with it regularly. I analyzed data on millions of Facebook profiles gathered by HubSpot's free tool
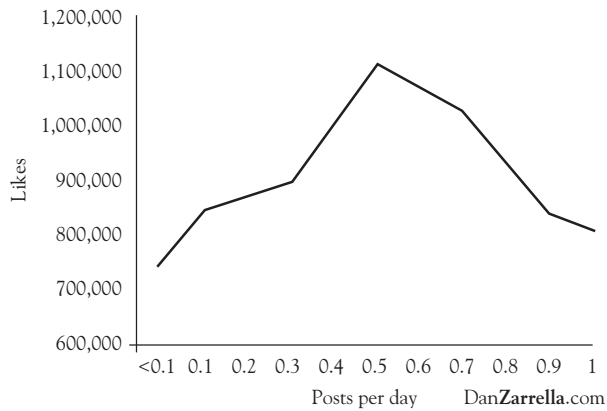
Figure 5.16 plot:

Likes (y-axis): 600,000 to 1,200,000
Posts per day (x-axis): <0.1 0.1 0.2 0.3 0.4 0.5 0.6 0.7 0.8 0.9 1

Dan**Zarrella**.com

Figure 5.16   Effect of Posts per Day on Page Likes

Pie chart:

Other mobile apps (0.98%)
BlackBerry (4.09%)
iPhone (4.37%)
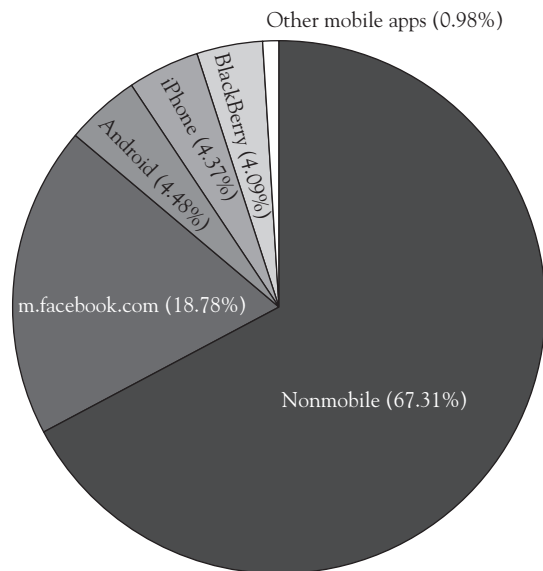Android (4.48%)
m.facebook.com (18.78%)
Nonmobile (67.31%)

Figure 5.17   Mobile Facebook Posting Clients

Facebook Grader and found that the age of a user has an impact on how he or she uses the site (Figure 5.18).

The traditional social uses of Facebook, friend collection and wall posting activity, were highest for users in their teens and 20s. These young users had the most friends and wall posts. As the age of users increased, their use of the self-descriptive parts of the site
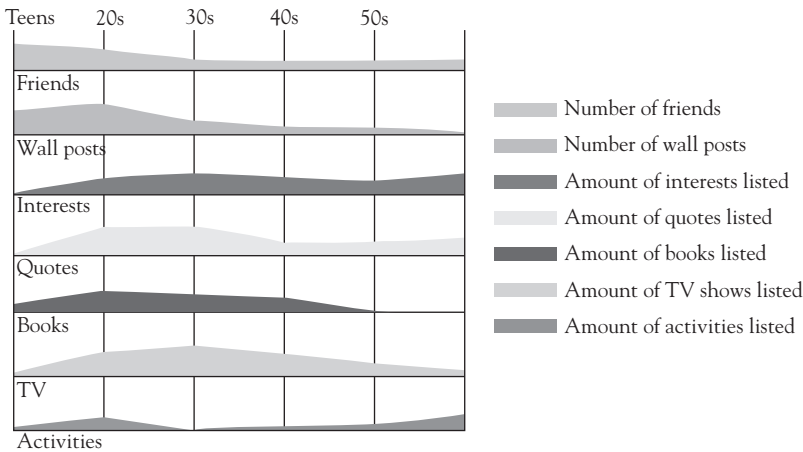
Figure 5.18   Facebook Profile Activity by Age

tended to also increase. Older users had more interests, quotes, books, TV shows, and activities listed on their profiles.

As marketers, this is a reminder that we must understand our audience and how they use Facebook, rather than simply assuming they use it the same way we do.

In the Facebook Grader data set, the average page had 624 fans. I analyzed the characteristics that were correlated with pages having higher or lower numbers of fans and found that one of the most detrimental was the presence of certain jargon and buzzwords (Figure 5.19).

Pages that used words such as *optimization, consulting,* and *productivity* tended to have far fewer likes than the average page in the data set. We know that most Facebook activity happens after business hours and that business content is competing with content from my family and friends, so it makes sense that boring professional words like these would perform poorly.

It is possible to communicate with Facebook users about their jobs and about topics like these, but we have to do so creatively and avoid the same boring words we use in our white papers and reports. Remember, this is Facebook, not the Testing Procedure Specification (TPS) report.
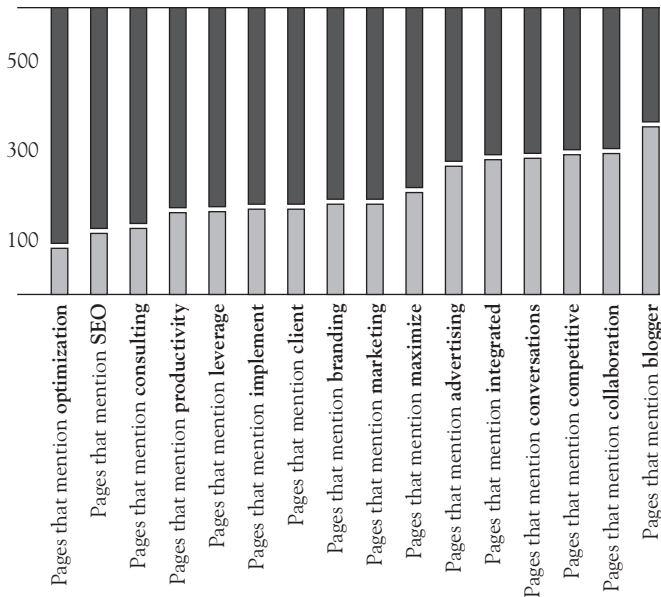
Figure 5.19   Effect of Buzzwords on Fan Count

Note: 624 = Number of fans an average Facebook page has

On the flip side of the coin, I found that there are certain words that are correlated with pages having more than the average number of likes in the Facebook Grader data set. An interesting set of these words were related to guilty pleasure–type foods. Pages that included the words *ice cream, chocolate,* and *sugar* tended to have many more likes than the average (Figure 5.20).

Think about it, which do you really like more: *integrated advertising consulting* or *chocolate ice cream?* Facebook is where users let their hair down, so you need to relax your corporate content and talk to users in a way that won't remind them of the inside of a cubicle.

When you create a Facebook page, you are asked to specify what type of page you're creating. In my data set, I looked at which of these types had higher-than-average numbers of total likes and found very telling results (Figure 5.21).

The top of the list is full of mainstream, entertainment-style page types. Movies, television shows, books, music, and athletes lead. This is the kind of content you'd find on the cover of the
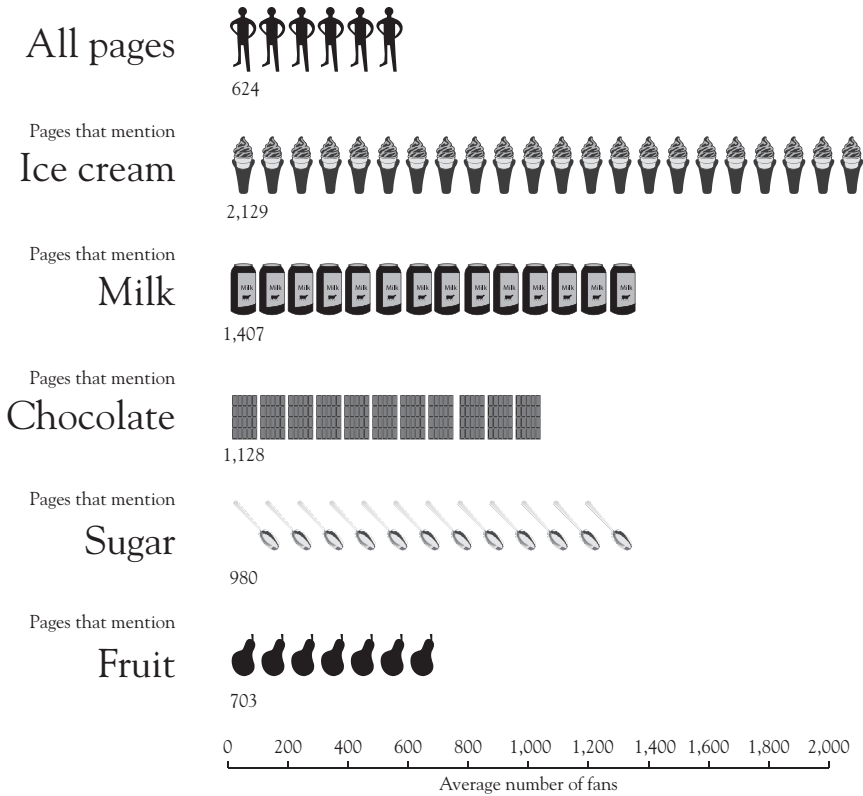
All pages	624
Pages that mention Ice cream	2,129
Pages that mention Milk	1,407
Pages that mention Chocolate	1,128
Pages that mention Sugar	980
Pages that mention Fruit	703

Average number of fans

Figure 5.20   Effect of Food References on Fan Count

magazines at the checkout counter at the supermarket, the type of stuff you'd hear about if you turned on your television at prime time or listened to people talk at a bar next to you. This is normal people content, not geeky, corporate, or boring.

When thinking about content to promote your brand on Facebook, you need to think like a producer of this kind of content. How can you tell your story in a way similar to a blockbuster movie or a best-selling book? This will take a lot of experimentation and the biggest obstacle will be fear. Keep trying new things, and you'll start to understand exactly what your audience wants.

In Figure 5.22, we find the least liked page types—those page types that had fewer-than-average likes. This list reads like the most boring section of the yellow pages.
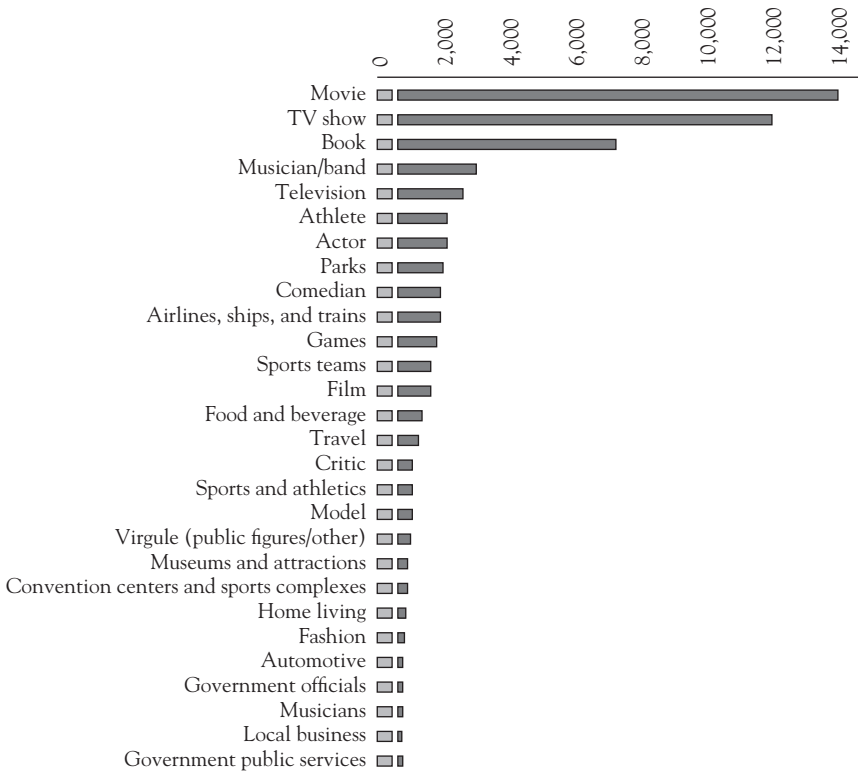
Figure 5.21 Most Liked Page Types

Financial services, professional services, and automotive dealers are included in this graph. This is not to say that these kinds of businesses shouldn't or can't use Facebook effectively, just that they need to try harder. If you're in one of these kinds of industries, it is especially important that you channel someone from a brand similar to the most liked page types graph. Think like a magazine editor, movie producer, or radio station DJ, and less like a real estate agent.

Although it sounds counterintuitive, it is possible for your brand's content to be successful on Facebook even if you don't have a Facebook page (although you should). This is true when the content you're publishing to your website is shared by viewers to their Facebook profiles, such as with the Like or Share buttons available to publishers. I compiled a data set of tens of thousands of articles
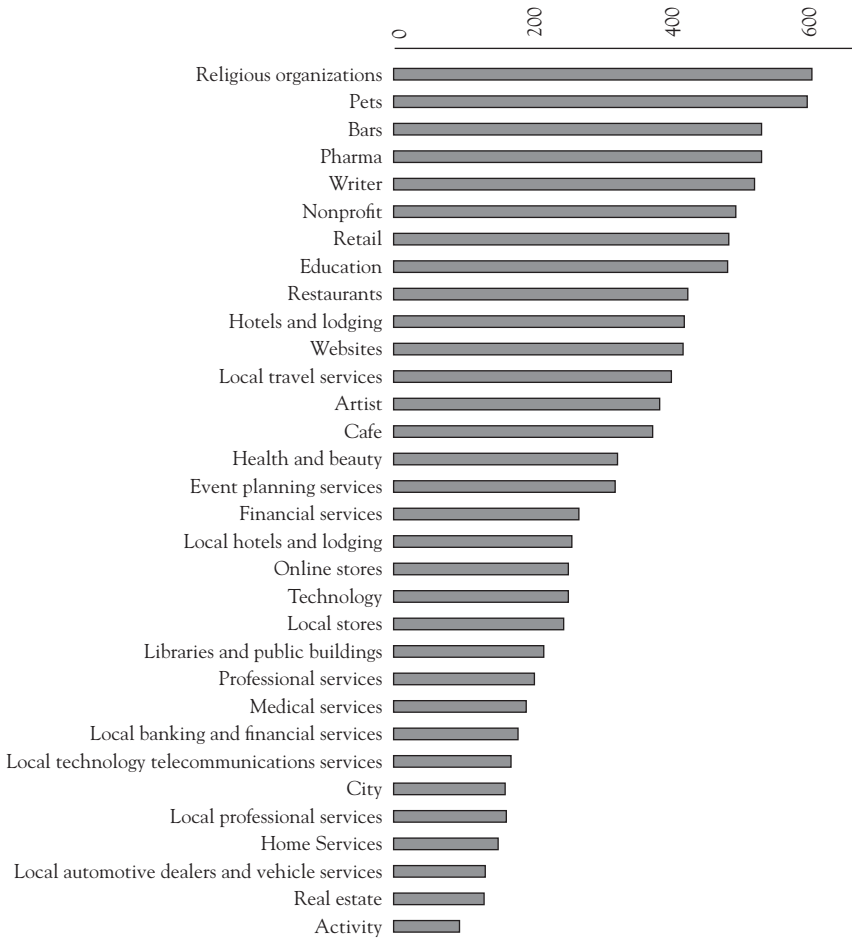
Figure 5.22   Least Liked Page Types

shared to Facebook to study the characteristics that were associated with sharing that was higher (or lower) than average.

Using the same two linguistic analysis systems I talked about in the Twitter chapter, I was able to find the content types that were most (and least) shareable (Figure 5.23). The most shareable kind of content was sexual content, but that's not really useful information for most marketers. What is useful to us is that the second most shareable kind of content is positivity and the least shareable is negativity. Here we find that for external content shares on Facebook, positivity and sex sell better than negativity or anxiety.
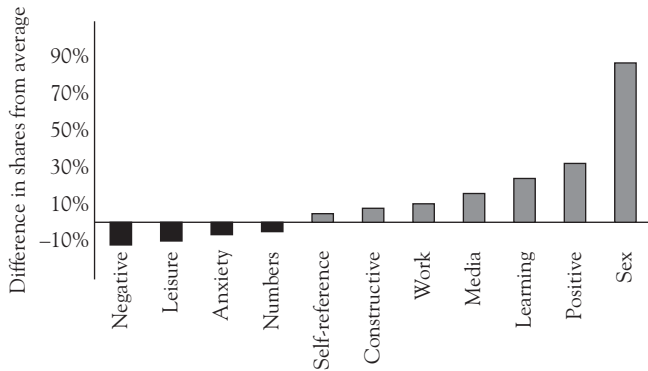
Figure 5.23   Linguistic Content Types and Facebook Sharing
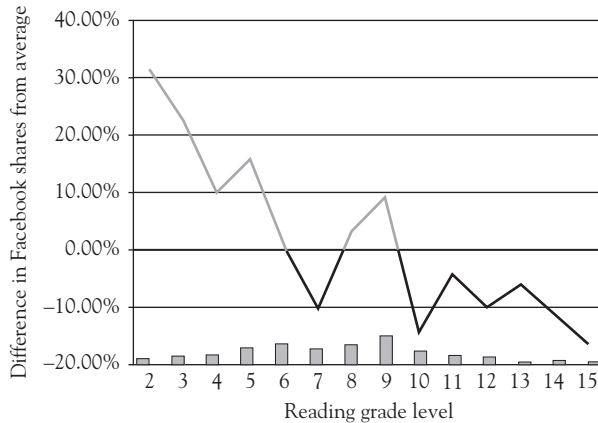

Figure 5.24   Effect of Reading Grade Level on Sharing

I also looked at the readability of the external content in my database. Readability is a measure of the complexity of a piece of content. The most well-known example is the Flesch-Kincaid measurement that is available in Microsoft Word. It produces a grade level that indicates the level of education required for a reader to be able to understand the text being measured.

I found that as the complexity of the language I analyzed increased, the number of times it was shared on Facebook by readers decreased (Figure 5.24). Readability measurements are largely based on the average length of words, in syllables, in the text. When
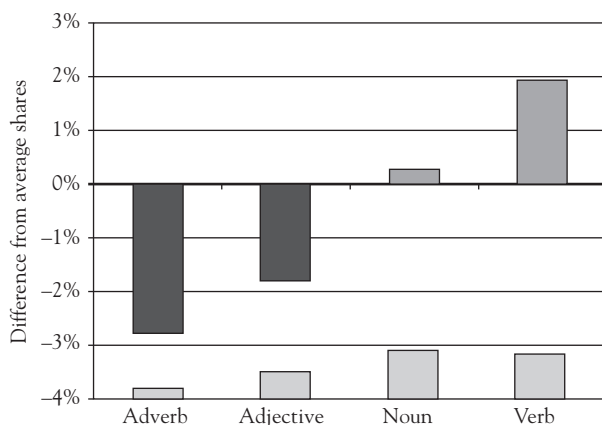
Figure 5.25   Effect of Parts-of-Speech on Sharing

writing for Facebook, avoid unnecessarily large words and write simply. Aim for a fifth grade reading level, rather than a twelfth. Think *USA Today* rather than *New York Times*.

Then I used a piece of software called a part-of-speech tagger to understand the relationship between the four major parts of speech and Facebook sharing. I found that articles that used many adverbs and adjectives tended to be shared less than articles that relied only on nouns and verbs (Figure 5.25).

One of my favorite books, *The Elements of Style*, has great advice for writers thinking about Facebook (even though it was written many years before Facebook): "Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs. The adjective hasn't been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight spot." Write plainly and simply.

Notice that I didn't say "write dumb." It is actually much harder and more stylistically sound to use simple and concise language. Work hard to write simply.

Finally, I looked at the most common words in the title of the articles in my data set and their relationship to sharing rates. Figure 5.26 shows the most shareable words list.

The word *Facebook* leads the pack, and one would expect it to. Facebook users like Facebook, so content about Facebook is naturally relevant. The rest of the list is mostly topics that were in the
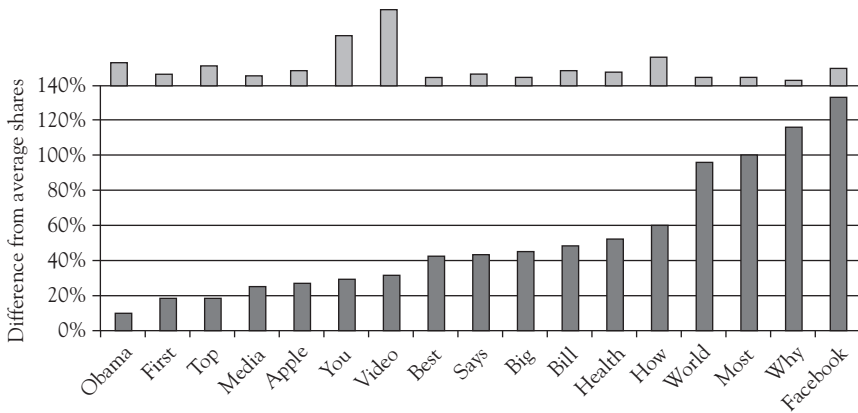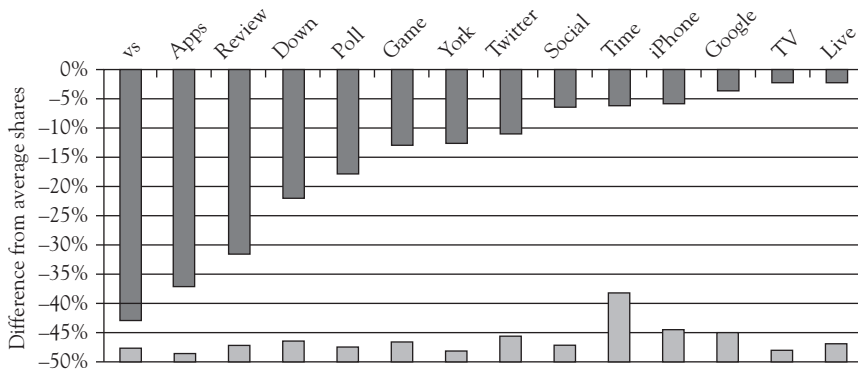
Figure 5.26   Most Shareable Words

Figure 5.27   Least Facebook-Shareable Words

news around the time that I collected these data, topics you would hear about if you turned on the nightly news, such as the president and his health care bill. Facebook users are mostly interested in the same things everyone else is interested in.

Two notable exceptions are the prominence of the words *why* and *how* in the list. Facebook users seem to want more than short sound bite–style content. They want to read the story behind the stories they're hearing on the nightly news, not just the same things everyone else is saying.

The least shareable words list also provides some lessons for content creators aiming for Facebook success.

Here we find a variety of techy and geeky topics such as *Google*, *social*, *Twitter*, and *apps* (Figure 5.27). Facebook users are normal people; being on Facebook doesn't take an advanced computer science degree. And if Facebook users wanted to read about Twitter, they'd be on Twitter.

Do your best to avoid overly geeky topics or jargon when you're writing for Facebook. And if you're in a techy industry, experiment with relating your topics to more approachable ideas and stories.
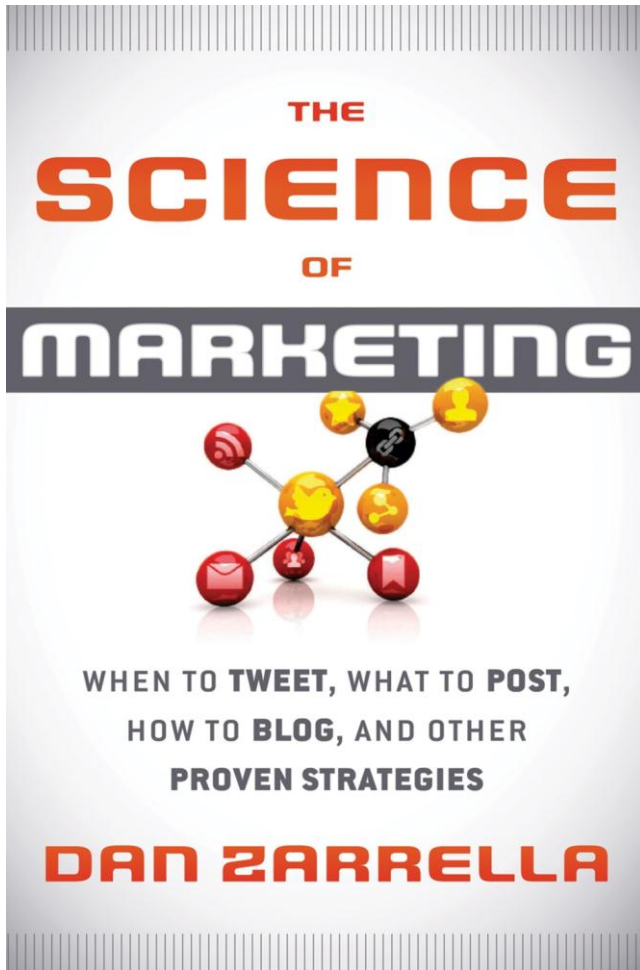
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