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MEDIA CONSULTING
presents

5 DO'S & 5 DONT'S
of
CONVERSATIONAL JOURNALISM

humbly presented
by

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APME NewsTrain

Journalism-as-a-Conversation: 5 Do's and 5 Don'ts
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Background: Journalists and scholars have been talking about the idea of journalism as a conversation for nearly 20 years. It stands in contrast to decades of traditional journalism as a lecture, in which the all-knowing journalist alone knows what is news and conducts a monologue with the public on such matters, or perhaps a dialogue with public officials and other elites. Citizens here are at best passive bystanders, though the prospect of journalists serving them in a democracy is a linchpin of this country's **First Amendment.**

Public-journalism reform efforts of the 1990s started to advance conversation, though, and then the Internet swept away any resistance to change. Now pretty much any citizen with Internet access and a few Web tools can create and distribute news, collaborate with professional journalists in real time and select what news to follow, if any, from a dizzying array of choices.

The business and the academy were slow to pick up on this sea change but are now taking heed. The repercussions clearly are enormous for both. Curiously, little empirical work developed to help us understand what we mean by conversation and then how to apply it to our most treasured values, credibility and authority. Solid scholarship offers the best hope not only for informing how we teach journalists in the 21st century but how we do news.

My research sought to fill that research vacuum. While conversation is no panacea for industry woes these days –– is any one thing? –– I'd humbly suggest it is a critical component of any news initiative.

Research findings: What is journalism-as-a-conversation today in our democracy, at least in the eyes of our audience? A search of fields as varied as computer network analysis to political communication suggests key features, or in academic parlance, variables:

★ Coorientation/homophily: perceived similarity to journalist.

★ Social presence: perceived humanness of journalist.

★ Interactivity: perceived online interaction/collaboration between journalist and citizens.

★ Friendliness: perceived openness to citizen ideas, accessibility.

★ Informality: perceived casual tone with audience.

HOW does conversation work and does it help us with core values? It's a pretty complex phenomenon but also a powerful one. And, yes, it can aid credibility and expertise. It confirms what researchers have been wondering about for years: that credibility is indeed not just a rational but a social concept.

Two features, coorientation/homophily and interactivity, are most important in conversation. They often predict whether audiences view news as credible and/or expert. They sometimes predict whether people simply like a story, though friendliness does a better job of that.

Perhaps the prickliest features of conversation are social presence and informality. In the case of the former, you pretty much need to show a video of a journalist to get people to sense your humanness. That kind of makes sense. As for informality, you can easily go overboard, often to the detriment of perceived credibility and expertise, so watch out for coming across too casually with your audiences. Informal chit-chat doesn't cut it.

Practical applications of research: Some do's and don'ts highlight journalism-as-a-conversation experimental data:
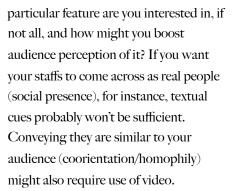
THE 5 DO'S

★ Do use social-media tools such as Twitter to crowd-source a story. Online audiences get them and respect stories derived this way.

★ Do explicitly tell your audiences how they contribute to coverage — and how much. You've all been been trained to show rather than tell. Now is not the time for that.

★ Do put your journalists out there with short, biographical videos of them talking to the audience. It works wonders in conveying they are human beings and not automatons.

★ Give audience members a chance to see if you're like them. Likeness is the Number 1 conversational feature in predicting perceived expertise, credibility and likeability in various story models.

★ Do care about interesting stories. Audience members' pure interest in story topic often determined whether they viewed conversational news as distinct from traditional, and whether a story seems credible, expert and likeable.

THE 5 DONT'S

★ Don't be hostile or annoying to your audience by blocking your content with A**1** pop-up ads.

★ Don't tell your staffs to simply "write more conversationally." Given the complexity of the phenomenon, this makes no sense. What particular feature are you interested in, if not all, and how might you boost audience perception of it? If you want your staffs to come across as real people (social presence), for instance, textual cues probably won't be sufficient. Conveying they are similar to your audience (coorientation/homophily) might also require use of video.

★ Don't be too informal with your audience, in text or video. Want to be taken seriously? The best metaphor is this: Put a suit on and leave your sweats at home.

★ Be careful with coming across as too open and friendly. Audiences appear to draw a very fine line with this news feature. It can literally either help or hurt you.

★ Don't be afraid to experiment with audience-participation initiatives. Audiences are still pretty forgiving of missteps, and the potential rewards if you do things right are immense.

Fig. 1