

Popcorn Content

The craft of writing short-form content
for social media

Nick Usborne



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By Nick Usborne

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Introduction

While popcorn may not be a particularly nutritious food, it's a fun, social snack, and a perfect conversation starter.

In other words, popcorn is to food what social media is to relationships. It's not the real thing, but it's a start.

If you are using social media as a way to kick-start business relationships, you are going to need to hone your skills at writing popcorn content. This is short-form content that grabs attention, gets you noticed and, hopefully, becomes the first step in developing deeper and ultimately more profitable relationships.

This book is primarily about writing social media content in 140 characters or less. And no, that doesn't mean it's just about Twitter. Whatever the social media site you are writing for, you'll be writing a short line or headline of some kind. And even if you don't, the first 140 characters of anything you do write or share are going to be the most important.

Within 140 characters or less you are going to hook your readers or not, engage them or not, intrigue them or not...and so on.

This short book is divided into four parts, each of them focusing on different aspects of writing short-form content.

Part I: Understanding Popcorn Content

Part II: Popcorn Content Etiquette

Part III: How to write compelling Popcorn Content that drives clickthroughs

Part IV: How to write Popcorn Content that builds engagement

While it may seem that writing this kind of content is simple, and not much different from any other aspect of writing for the web, that's not the case. Writing good popcorn content requires a very particular range of skills, and demands a flexibility and responsiveness not needed when writing for other media.

Social media moves quickly, so your popcorn content has to work quickly.

Social media is interactive, so your popcorn content has to fit into the conversation.

Social media success is about building trust and relationships, so your popcorn content needs to be credible and personal.

As you work your way through this book, I hope you'll pick up the core skills you'll need to succeed as a writer of short-form content for social media.

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Part I: Understanding Popcorn Content

Writing popcorn content isn't like writing a website or an email. It's a whole new skill.

You have to communicate faster. You need to hook your readers immediately. You need to read as well as write. You have to be more empathetic, available and responsive.

We'll be getting into the specific approaches that work best in this new form of writing in Part II. But first, let's get absolutely clear about what popcorn content is, how it differs from other forms of content, and how to make it work for you.

And we can do that best by looking at some of the attributes of popcorn itself.

Popcorn is social.

For most of us, eating popcorn is a social thing. We eat it and share it in the movie theatre, or during family movie nights at home. We share it with friends and neighbors while watching the big game. We have a bowl of it on a sideboard to snack on during parties.

Imagine for a moment you are invited to one of those parties or gatherings, but you don't know a soul. They look like your kind of people, and their conversations seem lively and interesting, but you just don't know a single person in the crowd.

If you are a total extrovert, you can stride into the room and start talking. But most of us don't have that amount of confidence. So to make things easier, you grab a bowl of popcorn and start walking around.

At some point someone meets your eyes, turns away from the group, says, "Hey, thanks!" and grabs a handful of popcorn. Others in the group do the same. They have no idea who you are, other than the person who came around with a bowl of popcorn. But that's OK.

They huddle back into their group and conversation, so you wander over to another group of people. Same thing. They grab some popcorn and say thanks. This time they are a little more welcoming, and you find yourself part of the circle, joining in the conversation. You introduce yourself, learn the names of everyone

there, and listen to what they are saying. Maybe you join in a little. But it's clear they all know each other pretty well, so you try not to make a nuisance of yourself.

Then you wander off at some point and meet people in other groups, having other conversations. Some invite you to take part, others don't. And that's just fine. Nobody there is under any obligation to talk to you, or listen to you.

By the end of the evening, you are fitting in well with one particular group, and someone invites you to a BBQ he's having next weekend. You like the guy and say yes.

This is social media.

The popcorn is the snack, the nibble, the introduction. It gives you an entry into conversations being held by strangers. It's your door-opener. The more parties you go to, and the greater the number of people who reach out and grab a few kernels from your bowl of popcorn, the larger your social network becomes.

You might be thinking, "Duh, all that is kind of obvious."

I agree. It is obvious. But this isn't how most people approach social media. They don't have any popcorn to offer, and they don't slowly ease their way into conversations with groups of strangers.

What most people do is stride into the room and, in as loud a voice as possible, say, "Hey everyone! Stop what you're doing and listen to me! Check me out! I'm awesome! Be my friend! Buy my stuff!"

That approach wouldn't go down well at a party. Everyone would conclude you were some kind of moron, and a rude one too. Nor does it work well with social media.

Don't start by making a big noise. Begin by holding up your bowl of popcorn.

Popcorn is irresistible.

Who doesn't like popcorn? Well, I suppose some people don't. But most of us do, if only occasionally.

Does it taste great? Not really. It's the butter that adds the flavor. Or the cheese. Or the caramel. But even without flavorings, we'll still reach for the bowl.

How come? Because it's popcorn. It is associated with fun times, fun events. It's about being with other people. We grab a handful to get a feeling for all the good things we associate with it.

When someone holds out a bowl of popcorn it's tempting, almost irresistible. And, because the setting is social, we don't want to dismiss the bowl-holder. We want to be polite.

And that's exactly what we strive to achieve when writing popcorn content. We want our social media content to be tempting...or better still, irresistible.

Popcorn is fleeting.

Grab a handful of popcorn, and it's gone in a minute. You don't feel like you have eaten a meal, and you may forget you even had any. (Except for the bits that get caught between your teeth.)

And as the popcorn bowl-carrier, if you say just one thing as part of a broader conversation, your contribution will soon be forgotten. It's just part of the flow, as the whole group keeps talking. When you stop at saying just one thing, the rest of the group will soon forget you.

You have a choice now. Say something else, contribute in some way, or take your bowl elsewhere, to another group, and try your luck there.

It's the same with social media. It's fleeting. You tweeted something, and that tweet stays in view for a few minutes, or even seconds, and then the flow of new tweets pushes it down below the fold, and it's pretty much lost forever.

It's the same with Facebook, Google+ or YouTube.

Everything you do through social media is fleeting. You're part of a crowd. And some of those crowds are huge. So if you want to build a relationship through Twitter with someone who has 20,000 followers, it won't happen overnight.

Popcorn makes you smile.

Popcorn is associated with fun times. And the same should be true with writing popcorn content. I'm not suggesting that every tweet or update should include a smiley face, but there has been

plenty of research done to show that upbeat tweets, updates and posts are more likely to be shared.

In fact, anything that makes you smile is more likely to be shared. Cute or funny videos on YouTube are shared more often than sad or neutral videos. Cute or funny images are liked and repinned more often on Pinterest boards.

If cute or funny doesn't work for your topic or business, think in terms of being upbeat or optimistic.

Popcorn has a massive profit margin.

Like me, you probably grind your teeth when you see how much they charge for popcorn in the movie theatres.

There is money in them there kernels.

It's the same with popcorn content. While the heart of social media success lies in engagement and conversation, there is a payday for people who understand the environment and its rules, or etiquette.

When you start out writing your social media messages, you would do well to stick with engaging others in conversation. But there'll come a time, once you are trusted, when you can use social media to link to sales pages for your products, services, events and so on.

It's at this point that popcorn content can give you the same kinds of return as popcorn in a movie theatre. If you do it right, your time spent with social media can be very profitable.

Popcorn is just the beginning.

Let's break the analogy a little.

The first time you enter the room you are offering popcorn. But if you keep circling the same group, and simply keep offering the same bowl of popcorn, people will soon tire of you.

So on the second time around you offer cheese on crackers, or maybe shrimp and a dipping sauce. You mix it up. So each time you approach a group, they take a moment to turn around and give you a little attention. "I wonder what's he's got to share with us this time."

Whether it's popcorn or some other snack, the idea is to grab some attention, achieve recognition and, when you are lucky, secure some genuine interest.

Once you have some interest from someone, you need to do more to grow that relationship.

Whether at the party, or with social media, any relationship starts with conversation. This means engaging, one-on-one. It means retweeting through Twitter, adding comments or sharing on Facebook. Ditto for Google+. Or repinning on Pinterest.

Through engagement, you get a deeper connection. People start clicking through from your profile to your website. They learn more about who you are and what you do. This is true whether you are a solopreneur or a top 100 brand.

First you get people's attention. Then you interest them enough to enter into a conversation. Then they seek ways to secure a deeper connection with you or your brand.

Building relationships through social media is pretty much the same as building relationships in real life. You start with the popcorn, and build from there.

Part II: Popcorn Content Etiquette.

Before we get into how to write popcorn content, let's first establish some rules or guidelines. These aren't the law, but take the place of the rules or guidelines you might stick to when attending a party at someone's house.

When you're in a real social setting, there is an etiquette you follow. It is the same with the encounters and conversations that take place through social media. There is an etiquette you should understand if you want to be accepted and liked.

Here are the rules:

- Be generous
- Be patient
- Listen more than you talk
- Be likeable
- Be realistic in your expectations
- Don't try to sell stuff all of the time
- Know where your Popcorn Content comes from

Be generous.

With a bowl of popcorn you are giving something away. It's a gift. It's a small moment of generosity. It should be the same with your popcorn content. Each tweet, update and post is a small gift to your readers. At least, most of them should be.

Many people using social media take the view that if they "give you" tweets, then they are entitled to your attention when they have something they want to sell you. This isn't the case. They are not entitled to anything.

However, the more generous you are in what you give and share, the more likely your followers and friends will be to take notice of you when you do want them to buy something.

Be patient.

When you offer a stranger a handful of popcorn, you don't expect them to become an instant, lifelong friend. To imagine such a thing would be ridiculous. But in the world of social media, many people really do think that a single retweet should entitle them to the original tweeter's undying gratitude.

Obviously, that kind of thinking is wrong. It takes multiple engagements through social media to achieve anything close to a meaningful relationship.

As a result, you need to be generous...and patient.

Listen more than you talk.

Nobody likes the guy who always hogs the conversation. The foundation of social media is built on sharing, and sharing means allowing and encouraging other people to participate.

We know this. So how come most of our social media actions revolve around trying to make our own voices heard? The simple answer to that is that it's a whole lot easier to contribute than to listen. I can tweet a link to my latest post in less than 10 seconds. But to listen, I have to sit back and invest some time in reading or watching what others have contributed. It may take me 5 or 10 minutes to find something I want to share or comment on.

As a result, when I am busy, or when any of us are busy, the temptation is to quickly pump out our own stuff, rather than invest the time in listening to others.

This is a mistake, and it's one that takes some effort to rectify.

Be likeable.

Most people don't understand the raw power behind being likeable.

Presidential candidates get it, and so do their media handlers. Popular speakers get it. Many successful blog authors get it.

If your audience likes you, half the battle is won.

Many years ago I gave my first conference speech to an audience of about 700 marketing executives. I had never spoken in front of such a large group before. And I had never used PowerPoint before.

Once the event was over and the evaluations were in, I asked the organizers how I had done. It turned out my performance was average, in the middle of the pack of speakers.

The organizers then asked me to come to their next event as a speaker. I asked them how come they wanted me back. They said, "Because you'll improve your presentation. But most of all, because the audience liked you."

It turned out that the likeability of their speakers was the most important factor in the success of their events. Their attendees cared less than you might think about the quality of information the speakers shared. What mattered most was whether they liked the speakers as people.

That was a huge lesson I learned that day.

The same is true across all communications, whether you are a corporation or an individual, whether you are writing a book or a tweet.

Above all else, give your readers a reason to like you. This can be a factor of what you say, how you say it, and how you reply to your readers when they respond.

Be realistic in your expectations.

This popcorn content rule is, in a way, a compilation of all the others. Social media moves quickly. Everything happens at great speed. Mistakenly, we somehow assume that this will translate into our being able to achieve our own goals quickly as well.

But this isn't the case. Remember, all but the tiniest fraction of all social media activity has absolutely nothing to do with you. There are billions of conversations going on out there at any one time. This means that the conversations you are having get only a tiny slice of people's attention.

So when you write your social media content, don't expect a handful of great tweets, updates or posts to suddenly catapult you to the front of everyone's attention.

Go back to the popcorn analogy. Even if you give each person at the party a whole bowl of popcorn, that doesn't mean you have created any relationships. It's not the volume of social media that matters, it's how you use each kernel as a means to grow a relationship. And meaningful relationships don't develop overnight.

Don't try selling stuff all of the time.

With some people, every tweet and Facebook update is focused 100% on trying to sell something. Understandably, these people don't have much success in the long term. People use the social web as a means to connect with others, and engage with them. They don't want to be "sold at" all the time.

That said, people also recognize there is a commercial component to pretty much everything that happens online. They know that when you invite them to your site to read a post or article they will also be exposed to some sales messages. For as long as you offer sufficient value with your free content, people rarely object to that.

Also, millions of people connect with brands in the knowledge that the relationship will always be about promotions. For example, if you are one of the almost 40 million people who Like the Coca-Cola Facebook page, you know that page is all about selling you cola.

The key is to be generous and transparent. Don't be sneaky, or misrepresent yourself.

Know where your Popcorn Content comes from.

Some of your popcorn content will be typed directly into a field on whatever social media site you are using. But just as often, the content is drawn from elsewhere.

Browse through your social media dashboard and you'll find that a good proportion of posts, entries and updates include the headline from an article or a post.

In other words, someone is tweeting a post they wrote in the hope that people will click through and read it. Or they might be posting a link to something someone else wrote.

If you are going to do this, it means your own page or post headlines need to be less than 140 characters in length.

What's more, the demands on your headline when it appears in your Twitter feed are quite different. When someone reads your headline on your blog, you have already got the reader to your page. Your page fills their browser window, and yours is the only content they can see at that moment. This gives you an advantage. You have already secured that reader. He or she is yours to lose.

However, when that same headline appears in a Twitter stream, on a Facebook page or on a social bookmarking site like Reddit, it is seen within a moving stream of competing headlines.

This puts a significant burden on your headline. It has to survive fierce competition and make people want to read your line, and not someone else's, or click your link and not someone else's.

This is why the need to write compelling popcorn content extends beyond just writing within social media sites. It also means using your writing skills to write site and blog headlines and titles that are optimized for sharing through social media.

Understand the purpose of your Popcorn Content.

As you know, social media can be used to achieve a variety of different goals. You can use it to build a community of fans, to engage the fans you already have, to sell stuff, to handle customer service issues, to poll your customers, and so on.

Many of us use social media for more than one of these reasons, and that means adjusting how we write our popcorn content. Each tweet, Facebook entry and YouTube title needs to be created with our purpose in mind.

In Parts III and IV we'll be looking at how to achieve just two of these goals – driving clickthroughs and building engagement.

Why just these two? Because they pretty much cover all the other goals you may have in mind. Driving clickthroughs is a priority when building a larger community of fans, building traffic for your site or blog, or selling products or services. Building engagement takes care of community building and customer service.

Part III: How to write compelling Popcorn Content that drives clickthroughs.

Writing popcorn content is not the same as writing a blog post or an article. It isn't always the same as writing the headline for a post or article, although in many instances it can be.

And yes, there is a skill to writing this kind of content, and it is a skill you can learn and develop. Take a look at the Twitter streams of a few people with huge followings and you'll likely find some very well written popcorn content. Yes, many of these people have lots of followers because they are celebrities within their particular niche. But they attract new followers, and keep the followers they already have by writing compelling tweets.

So what is this skill? How do you write an outstanding tweet, or a killer headline for your next Facebook update or Google+ post?

Let's count the ways...

But first, be aware that this part is going to be focusing on how to hook your readers with short content. It's about driving clickthroughs from social media sites through to blogs or websites.

Then in Part IV we'll look at writing popcorn content that drives engagement and conversation.

Frontload your text with the most important words.

Busy people scan before they read.

This is particularly true when your headlines appear on social media pages or dashboards. When you look at your Twitter page, do you read every tweet, word for word? Or do you scan the page, looking for something interesting, new or intriguing?

You scan.

This scanning behavior has been confirmed by numerous eye-tracking studies. As a result, you want to frontload your headline with the most interesting words. You want to hook the reader BEFORE they get to the second half of your headline.

In fact, you would do well to get the good stuff into the first 5 words.

To show you what I mean, here are some of the headlines I might consider if I were making this point in an article or post:

- Spend more time working on the first 5 words of your headlines
- Why you should work harder on the first 5 words of your headline
- Why the first 5 words can make or break your headline
- Why the first 5 words are the most important part of any headline you write
- Why people read only the first 5 words of your headlines
- Why your headline will live or die by its first 5 words
- Live or die by the first 5 words of your headlines

As you read through them you'll see they are all trying to communicate the same point, but some are more successful than others at grabbing your attention. And when it comes to making that grab within the first half of the headline, only a few even come close.

Here is a particularly weak one:

- Why you should work harder on the first 5 words of your headline

Using the word "why" is not such a bad idea. That can be a strong way to open. But if I break this headline in half, here is what I see first:

- Why you should work harder on the...

OK, now imagine you were scanning your Twitter stream. And when you scan, you really do take in just the first few words. Would you find this line compelling? Would you be intrigued or interested in a headline that says you should work harder?

Probably not.

Now let's look at the first half of the headline I would actually use:

- Live or die by the first...

I think you'll agree that this first half is a little more dramatic and compelling.

I'm going to add to that line just a touch now:

- Live or die by the first 5 words...

Now I have the drama of "live or die" plus the specificity of "the first 5 words".

I have some drama and curiosity working for me now. This should be enough to get people to read the balance of the headline. And if writing content headlines is a part of my audience's work, they will probably click through to my post and keep reading.

The bottom line is that when writing short-form social media content, you have to frontload the line with the most interesting words and ideas within the first few words.

That's how you grab attention and drive your readers forward.

If you leave the good stuff to the second half of the line, many of your readers will never read that far, and you'll have lost them.

7 More tips and tricks that are proven to work.

Social media has been around for long enough for people to figure out how to track and measure its performance.

If you are using Twitter, you can use a service like Hootsuite to track how well your tweets perform. If you are using Facebook, you can use Facebook Insights to show you how widely your updates have been read, shared and commented on.

In other words, we have been doing social media for long enough now to get a pretty clear idea of what works, and what doesn't.

Here are some tips and tricks to keep in mind as you write your popcorn content.

Tip #1: Share what's new.

It probably drives the editorial teams at sites like CNN.com crazy, but the news usually breaks on social media first. Twitter in particular is famous for being the first place you can find out what just happened, anywhere in the world.

But that's just part of it. Users of the web, whether searching websites and blogs on their computers or mobile devices, are drawn to what's new. That's why Google uses a "freshness algorithm", and tries to serve up the most up-to-date results for any given search.

In their official blog, Google states, "Search results, like warm cookies right out of the oven or cool refreshing fruit on a hot summer's day, are best when they're fresh. Even if you don't specify it in your search, you probably want search results that are relevant and recent."

They talk about cookies instead of popcorn, but you get the idea.

All this applies to social media more than anywhere else, simply because social media sites are best suited to getting information out there fast. It takes only a few seconds to type and publish a tweet.

To tap into the power of newness, you don't even have to write about something newsworthy. You simply have to declare that something is new.

Here are some examples of popcorn content that touch on what's new.

- New White Paper on Enterprise Social Networks now available...
- Check out what's NEW on our video channel...
- Apple announces new iPad...
- Welcome our new team member, Janice....

Often I see tweets and headlines on Facebook or Google+, or YouTube titles, that are talking about something new, but fail to use the word new in their text.

This is a mistake, because our eyes are naturally drawn to the word new, wherever we see it.

“New” is one of a small handful of words that can be used as often as you like, without diminishing its power. Most of us have probably been exposed to the word new a few million times in our lives, but we still find it compelling.

Given that popcorn content is short, and that you need to frontload the most powerful words and messages, a word like new should be used whenever it’s appropriate.

Tip #2: Begin your text with a numeral.

Numerals catch the eye when you scan a list of headlines or entries.

But the use of numerals does more than simply impact the design of your line, it also sends the reader a signal about the nature of the content that follows.

As an example, I might think of two different ways to write my line.

- How to improve supply chain management efficiency

Or...

- 7 Ways to improve supply chain management efficiency

Let’s say I’m fairly busy at work, and I see that first line in my Twitter stream. The impression I might get is that if I click through, I’m in for a weighty read. That’s a big topic, and I’ll probably find myself having to take 15 minutes or more out of my schedule to read the article.

However, if I read the second headline in the same circumstances, I’ll get a very different impression. I’ll sense that while the topic may be weighty, here is a link to a page that breaks it down into 7 bite-sized chunks. In fact, when I first click through I can commit just to scanning each of the “7 ways” subheads, and then make up my mind as to whether I should read the whole page.

When you use numerals in your short text you are letting people know that you have created some content that is easy to

consume. And whether you are at work or at home, content that is easy to consume is enormously attractive.

This is why you will find so many headlines, titles and tweets that use this device.

Smart writers know that people are busy and that their attention span online is short. So they deliberately create content that is quick and easy to read or watch. And they let their prospective readers know that it's "easy content" by adding a numeral to the beginning of the line.

Tip #3: Begin the line with "How to..."

There is an element of headline design here, because people will recognize the words "How to" at a glance. And, as with the numerals, that first glance gives readers some important clues as to the nature of the content that follows.

It has been widely stated that people come to the web for one of two reasons: to be entertained, or to solve a problem.

And each day billions of people use search engines as their first step to solving a problem. When someone enters the search term "descale coffee maker", they are simply abbreviating their real query, which is, "How can I descale my coffee maker?"

So when you write a tweet, a YouTube title or the headline of a post you want to link to from Facebook, the "How to..." opening lets people know that you are going to provide them with a solution to their problem.

Readers really do look for short text that signals a solution is close at hand, because they have wasted too much time in the past reading through posts and articles that are simply informational rather than instructional. If my coffee maker has stopped functioning, I don't want to learn all about the inner workings of coffee makers, I just want to know how to fix it, so I can make myself some coffee.

Occasionally I'll find a really good how-to page of content and then shake my head at the headline they have used. Why? Because the headline doesn't signal to readers that the page will show them how to solve their problem.

People love how-to content, so be sure to flag your solutions-driven pages with the words “How to...” at the beginning of your headlines.

And, of course, use that same line as a tweet or as the intro or title on Facebook or Google+.

Tip #4: People love lists and resource lists.

This content tip overlaps with the one about using numerals at the beginning of your headline. Not every list starts with a numeral, but many do. Here are some examples, with and without numerals.

And as you’ll see, some of these are about simple lists, while others are about lists of resources.

- 21 must-try vegan restaurants in Manhattan
- The essential pre-camping checklist
- The 7 questions you must ask before buying a used car
- Top 10 Wordpress plugins
- The best Sarasota hotels for families with pets

People love lists, because they represent a shortcut. If I plan to vacation in Sarasota, and want to take my dog, I might start searching on Google and anticipate having to check out dozens of different hotels before I can find one that will welcome my dog. When I find a page of content that has done all the research for me, and lists the best dog-friendly hotels, all on one page, that’s wonderful. I just saved myself hours of searching.

The same goes for most list-based content pages. They make life easier. As with any of these tips, just be sure to write your short headline in a way that signals to the reader that your content delivers a list of some kind.

Once again, use the same device for your tweets and updates.

Tip #5: Share secrets.

You don’t need me to tell you that people are attracted to secrets, whether they are really secrets or not. In fact, we know

perfectly well that the secrets people want to share with us are not secrets at all. If they were, nobody would be sharing them.

However, it seems at least one part of our brain is happy to put common sense to one side and be lured in by the promise of the latest secret or secrets.

Here are some examples, all or any of which could serve as a template for your own secrets-based headline.

- The secret to losing weight without eating less
- The 7 secrets of successful writers
- The secret ingredient in bread that could save your life
- The secret to SEO success for bloggers

Once you have written a strong line, should you use the exact same line for your post headline and the tweets and updates that point to it? Often it makes sense to do exactly that, but you don't have to.

For example, the headline for a post might be:

- The secret to losing weight without eating less

The first time you link to that post on Twitter, you could use that exact same line. But if you want to tweet about it a second time, you could change the words in your tweet to say something like:

- Eat all you like, and still lose weight. Secret revealed...

Tip #6: A little intrigue begs for explanation.

People love a little intrigue. If you doubt it, just browse the front pages of the magazines you see at your local supermarket checkout.

A while back, while waiting to pay for my groceries, I was scanning those magazine covers and stopped at a headline that said, "Dog drives car into coffee shop."

The thing about a line like this is that it only tells us part of the story, and it fills our minds with questions that beg to be answered.

- How can a dog drive a car?
- Was the dog hurt?
- How much damage was done to the coffee shop?
- Where was the dog's owner?

The more we feel the need to have these questions answered, the more likely it is that we'll buy the magazine or, online, click through from an intriguing tweet. Intriguing lines build mystery, and leave questions unanswered.

Tip #7: Try a little controversy.

Most of us know who Rush Limbaugh is, even if we have never listened to his radio show. Love him or hate him, he is a master of using controversy to bring attention to himself and his show.

Few companies can afford to risk being quite that controversial, but you might want to stir things up a little from time to time. Controversy not only gains you immediate attention, but also provokes conversation and engagement. People will jump into the conversation, either to attack you or defend you. Either way, you'll have some time in the spotlight.

Of all the tactics, controversy is perhaps the hardest to manage. It is very hard to gauge in advance whether your company or brand will come out on top, or finally take a bit of a beating.

Not for the faint of heart!

Something all these tips have in common.

In Tip #5, about secrets, I made the point that a part of our brain puts common sense to one side and is lured by the promise of secrets that are not secrets at all. This weakness in our thinking, which seems to bypass our more analytical and critical faculties, lies at the heart of our attraction to all of the approaches described above. We are susceptible to "easy content", lists, to what's new, to intrigue and controversy.

It is this susceptibility that makes these approaches work so well when writing popcorn content. When you have only 140

characters or so with which to hook a reader, it is hard to do so with a line that requires deep thought or analysis. The 7 tips described are all short-cuts...they grab our attention quickly, and tempt us to click through to the full text of the content.

As a result, while your page or post may indeed be thoughtful and analytical, you would still do well to write a headline that grabs fast attention when it appears as popcorn content on Twitter, Facebook or when listed on your favorite social bookmarking site.

However, don't fall into the trap of writing too many "McHeadlines".

There are plenty of writers out there who know how to write a good headline or tweet.

These are the folks who know that certain types of lines are more likely to hook a reader's attention and get shared through social media.

They write lines that jump out and grab you, and make you curious enough to click through and start reading. These lines not only work well on the page of content itself, but also drive high clickthroughs when they appear on Twitter, Facebook and Google+.

Of all the headline-writing techniques used by these canny writers, perhaps the most common is the use of numerals at the beginning of the line, as we discussed in Tip #2 above.

For example, "5 Ways to Improve Your Child's Exam Results" is the kind of headline that grabs attention. The digit catches the eye, and our love for our children drives us to click through to the content page.

The process of writing headlines in this way becomes a bit like building a burger, layer by layer. Instead of using a bun, patty, cheese and lettuce etc, you use a digit, a "power" word (secrets or tips) and a promise (improved exam results).

From time to time, a fast-food hamburger can be a tasty treat for the family. But if you eat them all the time, you pretty quickly recognize you are eating junk.

It took me about 3 minutes to find all of the following headlines among the first page of Google search results for various terms like "traffic + blog".

- 65 Ways to Drive Traffic to Your Blog
- 21 Tactics to Increase Blog Traffic
- 30 Fastest Ways to Build Blog Traffic
- 10 Ways to Generate More Blog Traffic
- 10 Ways to Boost Your Blog Readership
- 15 Tips to Increase Blog Traffic
- 17 Ways to Grow Your Blog From Top Bloggers
- 25 Ways for how to Drive Traffic to your Blog

Each of these lines probably did a reasonable job of attracting readers.

However, the writers and publishers of these lines need to be aware of the dangers of serving up too many of these “headline burgers”, or McHeadlines.

First, there is the issue of credibility.

If all the articles and posts beneath the headlines above contained useful and unique advice, then combined they shared no fewer than 193 different ways, tips and tactics. If I had spent another 15 minutes on Google building this list, we would probably get up to 1,000 ways, tips and tactics.

Are there 1,000 useful ways to build your blog traffic? No. And that means these guys are just regurgitating the same old stuff. The same old tips, repackaged. They are writing these repurposed articles because they are fast and easy to create, and they are using McHeadlines because they are known to work.

But...over time, their readers are going to catch on. At some point people will realize that each time they read one of these articles or posts, they are seeing the same old tips, rewritten again and again.

At that point, trust in every headline that begins with a variant of “7 Ways to...” will also begin to lose credibility. In other words,

over-reliance on McHeadlines can damage your reputation and your brand.

There is a well-known web marketing blog I have been visiting for years because they generally offer great information. But recently I have noticed that over 50% of their posts use this same McHeadlines approach.

Little by little I am losing my respect for the site. My sense now is that job #1 for them is to hook me, rather than to deliver quality, original content.

They also use a different type of McHeadline a lot. I call this one the “insert celebrity name here” approach. An example might be, “What Adele Can Teach You About Marketing”.

Again, the headline is all about delivering a strong hook. And once we have seen a few hundred variations on this headline, we’ll begin to lose trust in them as well.

Does this mean we should never, ever use a McHeadline?

Not at all. I use them myself, because they work.

But I use a McHeadline for about one in ten of my post headlines or tweets. In other words, they don’t dominate. This way I can use their power to draw in some extra traffic, without reducing my credibility or damaging my brand.

Mix it up.

Whether your popcorn content takes the form of headlines from your content, or original content for your Twitter feed or Facebook page, mix it up. Don’t run into that “McProblem” by using the same approach or device over and over again.

And, as we’ll see in the next section, writing popcorn content isn’t always about trying to hook your reader. For much of the time is about inviting and supporting conversation and engagement.

Part IV: How to write Popcorn Content that builds engagement.

Remember the guy at the party, wandering from group to group with a bowl of popcorn? It's time to check back in with him.

In the last section we looked at 7 different ways to write popcorn content, all of them optimized to grab eyeballs, hook attention, and drive people through to content on your site or blog.

As marketers, that's what we want. We want to attract more prospects. But we can't forget the lessons we learned from our friend with the popcorn.

Yes, he is using his popcorn to attract attention. But no, he can't count to three and then start talking about himself. First, he has to listen. He has to figure out whether he has stumbled upon a group made up of his kind of people. Is there any chance they would be interested in him, and in what he has to say and share?

So he listens for a while, and in the process he will be able to identify the leaders in the group, the influencers who people turn to for opinions and recommendations.

If he wants people in the group to listen to him, he first has to earn their trust. That means listening, maybe asking some questions, and also contributing to other people's conversations as well as trying to start his own.

This is the process by which he will build his own reputation within the group, and which will open the door to people listening to what he wants to say.

If this part of the process is so important, how do we write our popcorn content in a way that encourages engagement and earns trust?

5 Tips and tricks to drive engagement and earn trust.

As you read through these tips, it might be helpful to keep reminding yourself that even while social media conversations might be taking place on your own Facebook page or your Twitter stream, you don't own the conversation.

It's the same as holding a physical party. The party may take place in your living room, but that doesn't mean you are the boss of what people want to talk about.

The key to driving engagement and earning trust is to recognize that even when hosting a conversation or thread, you don't own or control it.

Tip #1: Ask questions.

As any relationship adviser will tell you, if you want a first date to go well, you would do well to listen more, ask more questions, and talk about yourself a little less.

It's the same with popcorn content.

Listening is key. However, in the world of social media, unlike when you are sitting at a table in your favorite restaurant, you are invisible when you listen. Nobody can see you. Nobody even knows you even exist. So while listening, invisibly, is an important starting point, it won't earn you any brownie points with your audience, because they won't know you are there.

So in the world of social media, we not only have to listen, but also have to make ourselves known. One way to do this is to ask questions.

For example, here is an update from the Burt's Bees Facebook wall:

- Which Burt's Bees products help you survive the cold winter months? We want to hear from you about what are your go-to winter products!

It's a simple question, and is related to their line of products. But simply by asking the question, they drove a huge amount of engagement. A typical update on their Facebook wall attracts anywhere between 15 and 75 comments. But when they asked this question, they received 364 comments.

How come? Because a question is an explicit invitation to jump in and take part. Many of the updates Burt's Bees posts are promoting one of their products. But in this case they didn't. They just asked a question. In doing so they got 364 people to join the conversation.

They also built a sense of community between all the people who joined in. In other words, they were building a fan base - a group of people who not only love Burt's Bees, but are also aware of each other, and enjoy interacting together.

Here is another question, but this time from a copywriter I follow on Twitter.

- Is this package copy clever, or too clever? [link]

This was followed by a link to a product sales page. The product had nothing to do with him. He just had a moment of professional curiosity that he wanted to share with his followers. And he asked for their attention by asking a question.

There is some intrigue and mystery there too. We can't answer his question unless we click the link. He is also appealing to our professional vanity. Fellow copywriters and marketers will want to click through and make a judgement as to whether the package copy is clever, or too clever

What does this do for him and his reputation? It makes him an interesting person to follow. It also lets us lower our guard a little, as he is clearly not one of those guys who uses every single tweet to push his own agenda.

Tip #2: Ask rhetorical questions.

You can't build your Facebook presence by asking questions all of the time. The same goes for Twitter, Google+ and LinkedIn.

But you can mix things up a little with rhetorical questions.

Here is an example, from Burt's Bees again:

- This time of year, aren't we all in need of an escape from winter dryness?

This question wasn't asked with the expectation of a direct reply, but it does help build a sense of common ground and community.

Anyone who is in the market for Burt's Bees products will answer yes to that question. But it is still important that this content was framed in the form of a question.

Here is how you would write it as a simple statement.

- *This time of year, we are all in need of an escape from winter dryness.*

As a statement, this is a lot less interesting. It is the company making a point. It's non-inclusive. It doesn't engage the thought processes of the reader. When framed as a question, readers hear an internal "Yes!" in their own minds. But when framed as a statement, there is silence in the reader's mind.

You can turn most statements into rhetorical questions.

- *I'm fed up with reruns of Family Guy* becomes, *Aren't we all fed up with reruns of Family Guy?*

- *Europe fails to solve its debt crisis* might become, *Will Europe ever solve its debt crisis?*

Whether asking a direct question or a rhetorical question, you are inviting your reader to think instead of simply to read. That invitation to think about what you are asking or saying is a great way to attract attention, and to invite participation.

Tip #3: Share interesting stuff.

People are used to companies pitching their products and services. And most of us have created some pretty brutal filters to keep most of those messages from hogging our bandwidth.

But you can still reach out to people and get their attention by sharing information that is not promotional, but is interesting.

Back to Burt's Bees...

- *The foragers from a single honeybee colony will fly 90,000 miles, the equivalent of 3 orbits around the earth to make just 2.2 pounds of honey.*

That's not knowledge I need to have when choosing a hand cream, but it's certainly interesting. Actually, it's really interesting. It's incredible that there are 90,000 bee miles in every 2.2 pound of honey.

That kind of thing makes me want to come back to the Burt's Bees Facebook page.

Another way to be interesting is to pique the curiosity of your readers.

Here is a tweet from Guy Kawasaki...

- *14 funky pieces of urban furniture [link]*

Umm...what exactly IS urban furniture, and how can it be funky? I'm intrigued, so I click the link. I don't *need* to know the answer, but I find the tweet interesting and intriguing enough to make me click.

Tip #4: Share personal stories.

Anyone involved in engagement marketing understands the power of telling stories. In fact, the telling of and listening to stories lies deep within our cultural DNA. As young children we begged our parents to read us stories. As adults, we delight in reading stories to our own children.

In short, we love stories. Better still, we love to share them.

You can share unusual stories about people who work in your business or industry. Or you could share customer success stories. Or invite people in your company to share personal stories.

As an example, I have a friend who is a journalist. He is also an avid cyclist and recently took part in a 5-day race. While racing, he tweeted throughout the day, and shared photos through Twitpic. His employer then picked up on the excitement, and shared his tweets on their website.

His tweets were shared far and wide, to the longer term benefit of both him and his employer.

You might think this would work only because he happened to work for a newspaper. Not true. It would have been just as powerful if he had worked for a retailer or a heavy equipment manufacturer.

The point is, he was telling a story, as it unfolded. At the same time, he was humanizing himself, as a real person outside of work. He reached thousands of new people through Twitter over those 5 days, and many of them continued to follow him, even when he got back to work.

Tip #5: Just reply.

Perhaps the most important way to engage with your audience is to be there. Be behind the counter of your virtual business, and be ready to answer questions and interact with your audience.

If you go to Burt's Bees Twitter page, you can see this in action several times a day.

- Honey/Lemon, Honey/Pomegranate @StrawberryMento @BurtsBees OMG I'm in love with your Honey Throat Drops!!! What other flavors do you have?

A happy customer wants to know if they have any other flavors of their throat drops, and Burt's Bees replies.

No particular writing skill is required when writing replies. You don't need to be a master of writing popcorn content. You just need to be there, and be ready to respond to your friends, followers and contacts. And you need to be happy to reply to questions in a timely fashion.

Keep mixing it up.

When social media is done well and written well, you will find a healthy mix of questions, fun facts, answers, intrigue and promotional links.

It's the mix that makes it work.

It's the same as listening to our guy with the popcorn. A good guest at any gathering is going to listen attentively, take part in other people's discussions and also bring up his own topics of conversation.

If you do one thing, all of the time, you'll soon lose favor with the group.

It's the same with social media. You need to consider all of the different ways in which you can interact with your audience, and then provide a balanced mix, so you are always worth following and listening to.

The home stretch.

We're almost done.

There are several other aspects to being successful as a social media writer, including the establishment of clear goals, choosing the right mix of social media platforms, and the science of timing. But I wanted to keep this book short, and keep it focused tightly on the art and craft of writing effective short-form content.

A good popcorn content writer is different from other writers.

Some of her writing will be promotional, when she is announcing a new product or service, or a discount, or a deadline.

Some of her writing will be dramatic and intriguing, when she is trying to grab attention and direct readers to a web page or blog post.

Some of her writing will be conversational, when discussing broad topics, commenting on someone else's content, or sharing an opinion.

Some of her writing will be one-on-one, when answering a direct question, or helping someone find information.

And, of course, she'll be a good listener, and she'll be responsive once she has finished listening.

In other words, she'll be social, while at the same time remaining anchored to her ultimate marketing goal.

Feeling the pulse...

With other kinds of online writing you can do your work and walk away. Not so with popcorn content.

To get it right, to get that balance between conversational and promotional writing just right, you have to keep your finger on the pulse of every thread.

For example, if you are writing Facebook updates, you need to immerse yourself in the flow and tone of every conversation, and know exactly when to step in, and what to say. A rising tide of engagement and conversation can quickly be snuffed out by throwing in a promotional update at just the wrong moment.

The key is to keep your finger on the pulse. It really is like being part of a conversation at a party. If you are paying attention, particularly if you are the host, and a good one, you'll know when to encourage a particular thread of conversation. You'll know when things are slowing down, and when you should raise a new point for discussion, or ask a question. By listening carefully, you can nurture and protect the conversation so that everyone has a good time.

It's the same with social media. You can't just write something and walk away. You have to pay attention. Only then will you be able to keep each thread alive and interesting.

As a popcorn writer you not only write, you know when to write and what to write.

Are you ready to join the ranks of the very best popcorn content writers?

Writing for social media is often given to people who are not well-suited to the task. It is assumed that it's easy to write popcorn content. It isn't. It requires a very particular understanding of the social web, and calls for skills in writing in a variety of different ways.

You have to be intriguing, conversational and promotional.

Above all, you have to be empathetic, and available.

In short, you have to be the good guest at the party, always there with a full bowl of fresh popcorn.

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About the author.

My name is Nick Usborne and I have been writing for the web professionally since 1997. I am the author of several books and courses on various aspects of writing for the web, including social media. I have also spoken at dozens of conferences and events, and conducted web-writing training seminars for companies large and small.

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You can find these and other titles under the [Books tab](#) on my site, NickUsborne.com.