



Get started: Engage Authentically



Real, authentic engagement goes beyond distribution on social platforms. It involves writing and talking in a way your audience can relate to. It involves meeting people where they are, listening and responding. It involves hosting conversations users want to participate in. It involves humility and humanity.

Look at the types of posts your users interact with now. This is partly quantitative (what gets the most reactions? comments?). It's also qualitative (what prompts meaningful conversation, not just a high volume of likes?). Try to separate where the crafting of the post seemed to contribute to its success, not just the topic of the story. Make special note of posts that explicitly ask a question, but don't limit your analysis to those posts. Users have a way of deciding for themselves what merits a response, regardless of whether a response was sought.

Look for patterns in topics. But also look for patterns in these factors:

- Voice. How would you describe the tone or style of the post?
- Motivation. What about the post inspired responses? A specific, emotional angle of the story? A desire to add more information? Share their own experiences? Frustration at how the story was reported?
- What was the level of commitment needed to interact? Did users mostly sound off in a few words? Did they share personal experiences? Reply to each other?

REMEMBER, CONVERSATION ISN'T ONE-SIDED: Who wants to keep talking if you can't tell someone's listening? Newsrooms that engage successfully are often ones that have a culture of respecting and appreciating user participation. That involves:

1. Validating participation by liking comments and thanking people for contributing.
2. Asking follow-up questions in response to comments.
3. Using comments to share more information on a topic.
4. Answering questions posed to the newsroom.

SO, WHAT CONVERSATIONS HAVE YOU EARNED? Think about types of conversations and invitations as requiring different levels of difficulty. This is certainly true in personal relationships — you earn the right to ask friends more personal or complex questions as you get to know someone better. If you ask a neighbor you just met about their medical history or ask them to take care of your pet while you're out of town, you're likely to cause offense. You have to work your way up to those bigger asks.

How committed are your users? What have they shown themselves willing to participate in? Read through the following descriptions and check the option that best represents where you fit.

____ LEVEL ONE: EASY

If your page doesn't host much interaction, start here. Users need to get used to the idea of talking back to you. Think about what conversations people are eager to have and ease them with easy asks. Go both for quantity (a high volume of responses demonstrates a basic level of engagement, both to users and to Facebook's algorithm) and quality (interesting answers encourage more responses). What about users' own experiences, opinions or expertise might they be excited to share publicly? The answer will be different for each organization.

Your easy invitations to engage with the newsroom could include things like:

- Here's a reporter out at the carnival enjoying a chili dog. What is your favorite carnival food?
- Congratulations to these staff members, celebrating 30 years with the newsroom.
- On this Mother's Day, Editor John Smith says he'll always be thankful his mom taught him proper table manners. What are you grateful to your mom for today?



Some successful conversation prompts from other newsrooms tap into:

- Frustration (traffic, customer service)
- Gratefulness or pride (thank a teacher, celebrate a sports team, share your favorite park)
- Nostalgia (memories the good old days, how the city used to what used to be in this building)
- Easy opinions (should movie theatres sell alcohol, how early is ok for holiday decorations)

___ LEVEL TWO: MEDIUM

If your users have already developed a habit of talking back to you, you might have earned the right to ask them more personal questions, or to ask questions that require more time to answer. (Keep in mind whether you are likely to get thoughtful responses, not just a high volume of responses.)

Medium-level invitations to engage with the newsroom could include:

- What questions do you have for our reporter covering the new marijuana laws?
- Our public safety team is taking your questions about old crimes. What cases do you want updates on?
- Watch this behind-the-scenes tour of the newsroom, and ask us questions.

Consider conversation prompts that:

- Address politically charged topics (climate change, elections, taxes)
- Address other controversial issues (parental discipline, public salaries)
- Invite personal experiences (what's your favorite meal in town, have you been in a car accident)

___ LEVEL THREE: HARD

This is the jedi level, in which you ask a lot of your users, and they step up to the plate. As in personal relationships, if you jump straight to this level when you haven't established a baseline of trust and respect, you could cause offense. But if you feel confident that you've mastered the first two levels, you might be ready.

High-level invitations to engage with the newsroom could include:

- Can you help identify any of the people in this historic photo?
- Here's how we moderate online conversations to promote civility. What advice do you have for us?
- Who do you know whose work the community should know more about? Email or call this reporter with your ideas for future coverage.

Jedi-level conversation prompts could:

- Address highly personal and charged issues (Black Lives Matter, guns)
- Require more work (read this proposal and tell us what you think)
- Ask for more personal information (Have you had a seriously ill child? Have you started a business?)

CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESS:

- Start by asking yourself what about a topic or story people are likely to respond to. Frame the post around that, not necessarily around the newsiest element.
- Use user-focused, conversational language. Avoid journalism-focused language like "share your story ideas." Instead ask people what they wish people knew more about, or what's going on in their lives.
- Keep it brief. If a post looks like a lot of work, users are likely to keep on scrolling or swiping.
- Avoid tacking on a question that will feel rhetorical. Make it clear you want people to answer. Avoid "what do you think" in favor of more specific questions.
- Try making conversation the purpose of a text post (rather than as subordinate to the sharing of a link). For example: "As the community deals with yet another traffic fatality, we'd like to hear from you. What do you consider the most dangerous stretch of road in town? (Details on the latest accident: bit.ly/xxxx)"

Questions? Ideas for further work on trust? Tips to share from your work? Contact project lead Joy Mayer at joy@joymayer.com.