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It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia: The Gang Gets Analyzed

Background

FXX is not as prominent as stations such as NBC, CBS and ABC, yet the station has proven to be a strong sister channel to FX. Launched on September 2nd, 2013, FX developed FXX to increase original programming and compete with larger stations. The launch date also coincided with the move of *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* (IASIP) from FX to FXX for the premiere of season nine (Andreeva). In addition to *It's Always Sunny*, FXX acquired *You're the Worst* and *Archer* from FX, as well as rights to several syndicated shows, including *Parks and Rec.*

It's Always Sunny follows a depraved group of friends that own a bar in Philadelphia. It premiered in 2005 and is tied for the longest running live-action comedy series ever with the recent renewal of the fourteenth season (Patten). The show initially received critical feedback, which only increased after Danny Devito joined the cast in season two. The cult following was cemented during season three after the hit song "Dayman" was introduced from "The Nightman Cometh" episode. Core actor Charlie Day wrote the song and continued to write and perform music for later episodes (Ward). *It's Always Sunny* purposefully presents the main characters as unlikeable people, but through the jokes and storytelling it became hard for fans to resist picking favorite characters. Thus, the show has amassed a loyal fan base for more than a decade.

The Campaign

IASIP focuses on campaigning across platforms before each season premier and does so at effective times. On the morning of June 28th, 2018, IASIP posted a preview video across all of their social platforms at the same time. The caption read, “Just when you thought it was safe to go back to Paddy’s... #sunnyfxx”. For fans of the show, this was an intriguing preview following monumental events in the previous season. The show continued the hype for the premiere of season thirteen in several forms. For instance, it played up the anticipation regarding whether Glenn Howerton’s character Dennis would return after he left the gang at the end of season twelve. The campaign is expected to end after the final episode of the season airs on November 7th but could potentially last for a week or two after the show ends to keep the social conversation going and generate feedback.

With every campaign comes unique goals, yet all television shows have one universal goal: viewership. IASIP uses social media to accomplish three unique campaign goals in an attempt to maximize viewership. The first goal is to increase and retain interest in the show. IASIP does not need to create awareness because it is a well-known show with a cult following, but it does need to foster interest and maintain it over the season. The second goal is to engage with fans. Whether it is replying to comments on Facebook or Instagram, or retweeting fans on Twitter, IASIP makes sure to interact with followers. The third goal is to encourage participation from fans. The show’s social channels run polls during episodes, encourage fan art submissions through hashtags like #sunnyfanart, and create gifs for fans to share and repurpose.

To accomplish these campaign goals, IASIP utilizes two zones of social media: social community and social publishing. Social community focuses on creating conversations, participation and engagement, while the goal of social publishing is the creation of content

(Tuten and Solomon 48). IASIP uses Facebook, Instagram and Twitter within both zones of social media to accomplish its campaign goals. The show specifically utilizes photos, videos and gifs across social channels for effective disbursement of information for varying age groups. Additionally, IASIP created a unique experience for followers within its social media channels, compelling users to interact and engage with the show.

Experience Strategy

Tuten and Solomon describe a social media experience as “the sweet spot at which the audience’s passions and needs intersect with the brand’s identity” (151). IASIP utilizes tactics, content types and content strategies as the three components of experience strategies to generate a compelling and engaging experience for users. Branching and friending are the two tactics employed by IASIP, which are both core aspects of social community (Tuten and Solomon 152). Effective use of branching aligns the brand’s social media profiles to the brand’s elements. IASIP accomplishes this by posting messages and responses to fans in the language of the show’s characters, essentially extending the world of the show onto the social media platforms. IASIP has effectively use the friending tactic to create environments where fans can talk to one another. Facebook in particular is the ideal platform for fans to converse because of the usability of its threads.

IASIP rarely posts content consisting of only text. The show relies heavily on video, posting nearly twice as many videos versus photos across all platforms. IASIP also posts GIFs and polls, though mainly on Twitter and Instagram. The content even includes past media from the show, which serves as evergreen content for the show because it can constantly be repurposed.

As far as content strategy, the show follows the 80-20 marketing formula. This formula suggests a brand's account posts 80 percent of content focused on benefiting the audience and 20 percent focused on brand benefits (Tuten and Solomon 157). IASIP is particularly audience-centric, especially on Twitter. Most posts are for the followers in an attempt to further create an experience for fans, such as GIFs that relate to each episode. Though audience-centric posts are not as obviously beneficial to brands, IASIP utilizes them to create engagement with fans, which helps retain interest and encourages participation. Therefore, being so audience-centric is beneficial to IASIP because it helps the show achieve every one of its campaign goals.

IASIP heavily cross-posts across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to amplify their messages. Similar posts appear across all platforms yet some stand alone on Twitter. IASIP only includes links to articles and new GIF's on Twitter instead of additionally cross-posting on Facebook and Instagram. IASIP also attempts to amplify their messages by cross-posting but slightly altering the content of each cross-post to cater to the demographic of each platform.

IASIP's last content strategy is to maintain a strong social media presence and character. Social presence is largely determined by a brand's fanbase, and while IASIP may not have a huge following, their following is loyal and engaged. They have thus created a successful social presence and an even more successful social media character. For example, IASIP posts as if it were a character in the show, using language like "bitches" or "jabronis". Additionally, when IASIP responds to fans, the answers are usually quotes or references to the show which keeps everything in the world of the show. Though effective with current fans, this strategy makes the show's social media seem exclusive and could potentially be a deterrent for new fans. Finally, IASIP utilizes a consistent color scheme of yellow and black as part of their brand style.

Increase and Retain Interest

IASIP is a long-standing and established show so it primarily focuses on retaining interest of current fans, in addition to increasing interest for potential fans. The show announced the new season on June 28th, 2018 after almost a year and a half hiatus, during which the show's social media platforms were not particularly active. This post launched the campaign and remains one of the most liked, shared, retweeted and replied to posts of the season across all platforms. Following this popular post, there was an almost two month gap before the official trailer was released. During that time, IASIP posted speculative content with a heavy Friday the 13th theme, which kept fans interested and excited. Another popular post is the official trailer, which proved a successful endeavor to retain fan's interest leading up to the premiere because the season 13 trailer got 13,000 more likes than the previous season's trailer. Once the season premiered on September 5th, the show applied a teaser and highlight strategy to intrigue fans. Each week IASIP posted photos and short videos teasing the contents of the new episodes, thus working to increase interest. After the new episode aired, IASIP posted more photos and short videos highlighting it, which served to retain fans' interest.

Engage With Fans

IASIP's second campaign goal was to engage with fans across all platforms. The show utilized conversations, real-time marketing and contests to attract fans and keep them engaged. According to Tuten and Solomon, "If brands want to engage consumers in conversation, they have to converse" (193). IASIP uses Twitter to consistently converse with fans, especially when new episodes air. During this time, the show live tweets episodes and responds to fans.

Responses from IASIP consist of GIFs and photos, as well as sassy text. For example, during the airing of the sixth episode, IASIP responded to or retweeted fans 63 times.

The show also employs real-time marketing, which involves posting messages that directly relate to any given moment (Tuten and Solomon 194). During live tweets, IASIP only replies with content from the new episode. For instance, each GIF or text response directly references the new episode. Though real-time marketing messages have a short life-span, they work to relate the content of IASIP's social platforms back to the show and will eventually become evergreen content for the show.

Encourage Participation From Fans

The final key strategy in engaging with fans is producing contests and requests for user-generated content (UGC) (Tuten and Solomon 195). In addition to creating engagement with fans, contests and requests for UGC encourages participation from fans because fans must display as much engagement as the show for a rewarding campaign outcome. IASIP realized early on that their social channels would receive more interaction if they encouraged participation from fans, due largely to the success of their "Machelor" mini-campaign. This mini-campaign occurred a week before the season premiere, which not only worked to inspire participation but also to increase interest and excitement. The campaign centered around helping one of the characters, Mac, find a new best friend after Dennis left the show last season. While the show primarily utilized Twitter and Instagram to get fan's participation in The Machelor, some posts on Facebook directed fans to the other platforms to partake in the fun. On Twitter and Instagram, IASIP posted photos and short introductory videos about Mac and each contestant. After everyone was well acquainted with the contestants, fans had the opportunity to vote for a

winner. The mini-campaign was interactive and interesting, though it lacked a presence on Facebook.

Another attempt at fan participation is the continued request for UGC through the #SunnyFanArt hashtag, which occurs only on the show's Instagram stories. IASIP occasionally requests fan-art submissions with the incentive of getting it shared on the show's Instagram story. The hashtag is still active and the show continues to share fan-art.

IASIP also conducted polls during each episode relating to the episode's content on Twitter after realizing that their fanbase is the most engaged on this platform. For example, during the second episode IASIP tweeted, "Poll: Which pair would you want on your side in an escape room?" This poll received 4,419 responses, the most of any poll during IASIP's campaign.

IASIP creates custom GIFs using GIPHY, which they use during live-tweets and then share with fans after the episode airs. This not only serves the purpose of real-time marketing, but also allows fans to share the IASIP brand on their own Twitter.

The Platforms

IASIP utilizes each platform differently depending on the platform's objective, as well as which goal the show is trying to meet. For example, to achieve its social community goals, the show appears to focus its energy on Twitter. IASIP live-tweets every week during new episodes and responds to fans. This generates a conversation for those on the East and West Coast. Twitter is the easiest and fastest platform to interact with fans, largely due to hashtags. Comments tend to get buried on Facebook, which makes it harder for the show to respond to followers. While their Twitter only has 283,000 followers, it probably receives the most engagement from fans, as

opposed to Facebook or Instagram. This is largely due to the continued use of hashtags like #SunnyFXX, which creates something similar to a brand cluster and gives the show's Twitter account the perfect opportunity to engage with fans. As far as social publishing, IASIP's Twitter posts a variety of content, such as short videos, photos, and a lot of GIFs, which are specific to their Twitter account. The GIFs are created using GIPHY and are usually distributed during the live-tweets.

IASIP utilizes Facebook and Instagram similarly, for both social community and social publishing. Both platforms post photos and teasers prior to episodes, as well as longer videos after episodes. This can lead to discussion, particularly on Facebook. The posts are cross-promotional, as everything posted on their Instagram is also posted on their Facebook. The Facebook page has 3.6 million page likes, which can be attributed to both the age of the show and the available platforms at that time.

Though IASIP's Facebook has the most followers and most potential for engagement, it was actually the most underwhelming platform. Facebook has consistent likes, comments and shares from followers, yet IASIP does not give much attention to the account. The posts are typically more informative versus engaging. For instance, though the posts use multimedia and are visually appealing, they offer no opportunity for fan engagement aside from regular commenting. The show also rarely uses the #SunnyFXX hashtag on Facebook, which, if used properly, would organize campaign posts into an easily accessible area for fans. Additionally, sometimes the show asks for engagement and participation on Twitter but alters the post for Facebook, which decreases engagement opportunities. The most commented on, shared and liked posts on Facebook are videos because videos are the most engaging kind of media. IASIP did a great job of increasing interest leading up to the season premiere, but did not retain it during the

season and instead focused efforts on other platforms. As a result, they also do not meet their campaign goal of engaging with fans or encouraging participation on Facebook.

Instagram gained the most followers of any platform during the campaign, achieving an increase of 13,000 followers in about a one-month span. This increase occurred during the middle of the season and can be attributed to IASIP's success in reaching its campaign goal of increasing and retaining interest. IASIP's Instagram accomplished this goal by primarily posting short teaser and highlight videos about each episode. Additionally, sometimes the Instagram account tried to meet more than one campaign goal per post. For example, one post included the caption, "Check out the #SunnyFXX bloopers, they're good for your hole. Shit, that was supposed to say 'soul.' Go to FXNOW for the full blooper reel." Posts like this increase interest while at the same time encouraging participation from fans. Another thing the Instagram account does well is connect to the show's Twitter. In particular, the Instagram posts text from tweets in graphic form, which encourages fans to follow the show on Twitter and use the hashtag to potentially be featured on the Instagram page. One area in which IASIP's Instagram account could improve is its use of Instagram stories. This feature was underutilized and could have created more interest and engagement.

Finally, Twitter is the platform that IASIP is most active on, tweeting at least three times a day and much more on new episode days. The show realizes that Twitter is the best platform to live post about new episodes due to its usability, as well as the younger demographic of users. Similar to Instagram, some tweets aim to meet multiple campaign goals at once. For example, the live-tweeted polls are engaging and also encourage participation. Instagram stories also have the poll feature but IASIP does not use it, which is a missed opportunity. The show's Twitter consistently uses the #SunnyFXX hashtag, which helps organize tweets and fan responses, but a

more specific hashtag relating to season 13 would have been better. For instance, a hashtag like #SunnyThe13th, which was only used on the post announcing the new season and on the day of the season premiere, is much more targeted to season 13.

The Success

Even if viewership is a campaign's end goal, it is not always the most effective measure of success. In the case of IASIP, ratings are down from last season but the show still managed to meet its campaign goals on its social media platforms. The show created engagement and encouraged participation, but perhaps only for current fans which could lead to a lack of new viewers. The average number of viewers per episode for the previous season was 601,000, while this season it is 367,000 ("TV Series Finale").

The new season of The Big Bang Theory, which premiered this fall, also experienced a drop in ratings ("The Wrap"). Reasons for this might include lack of interest or the show being overhyped. In addition, the show has no noticeable social media campaigns and most posts are in promotion of new episodes. South Park, another 30 minute comedy show, uses social media similarly to The Big Bang Theory. However, it does use a #SouthPark22 hashtag, referencing the 22nd season, which IASIP should have done with #SunnyThe13th.

To measure the success of this campaign, it is important to look at more than just ratings. For example, IASIP definitely met three of the four dimensions of engagement. Interaction, for instance, is "the actions people take while present at the social touch point," such as following an account (Tuten and Solomon 348). IASIP experienced this when the show's Instagram account gained 13,000 followers in only a month's time. Additionally, the show regularly receives affection from fans, which increases the amount of intimacy and overall positive emotion felt by

followers. However, the final dimension of engagement, influence, is difficult to measure without access to the brand's analytics. It remains unclear if IASIP is successful generating influence.

Though ratings dropped from the previous season, the campaign proved successful in increasing and retaining interest, engaging fans, and encouraging participation on IASIP's social platforms. Throughout the season, fans actively participated in the various mini-campaigns, used the #SunnyFXX hashtag, answered the poll questions, submitted UGC and more. While it is impossible to know exactly what effects IASIP's use of social media has on viewership, one thing is certain: the show created a unique experience for fans and met its three goals within its social media channels. Though the campaign was not a success in traditional terms due to lower ratings, it can still be considered a successful endeavor because of the interest, engagement and participation the show created and cultivated on social media.

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