How to create effective social media branding guidelines (tips and examples)

Category: Branding
written by Alyssa Omandac | 24 June 2024

Designing effective social media branding guidelines is more important than you'd think in today's world. In virtually every industry, countless companies rely on social media platforms to boost brand awareness and equity, and connect with their target audience.

If you don't have guidelines to help you ensure your social media presence is consistently powerful, you risk damaging your brand's reputation, and limiting the success of your marketing campaigns.

Alternatively, the right approach to branding on social media generates amazing results. Just look at how much Wendy's social media strategy has boosted customer loyalty, or how Innocent Drinks differentiates itself with its fun, playful social strategy.

As someone who's worked both as a branding consultant, and a social media expert, I've learned a thing or two about the best practices companies can use to optimize social media branding.

Today, I'm going to share my top tips for creating branding guidelines that elevate your presence across social channels, and strengthen your relationships with customers.

What is social media branding?

Social media branding is when an individual, company, or organization (like a non-profit), creates and shares a unique identity with its target audience across social media channels. Your social media brand is basically an extension of your primary brand strategy.

It takes all the unique components that make your brand special, like its distinct tone of voice, core values, and visual identity, and embeds it into your social media marketing strategy.

Just as you use key components in your branding strategy for your website, offline marketing campaigns, and digital advertising strategies, you should also be using them on social media.

What are social media branding guidelines?

Social media branding guidelines are the rules you follow to consistently convey the right message and image to customer across all social channels.

While the exact content you share on different social platforms might vary, the core essence of your brand needs to remain consistent to help you build an emotional connection with your audience.

As an example, Network Homes built its brand around a mission to provide affordable housing to people in the UK. The company's mission, and its personality (friendly and informative), show through every channel it uses to interact with its customers, including social media platforms.

Just look at how Network's professional tone of voice, and

community-focus shines in this post on Instagram:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C3kalIGtiim
Or how about how the company uses bright colors and engaging imagery in its marketing campaigns:

https://www.instagram.com/reel/C4IWwdMrZAs/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==
Companies like Network Homes excel at social media branding because they have the guidelines, they need to outline everything from which content to create to social media, to how to post across different social accounts.

Social media brand guide vs style guide

Notably, a social media brand guide and style guide are slightly different things. A social media brand guide includes all of the information you need to know about your brand's personality, image, tone of voice, and other factors, and how they align with your social media marketing strategy.

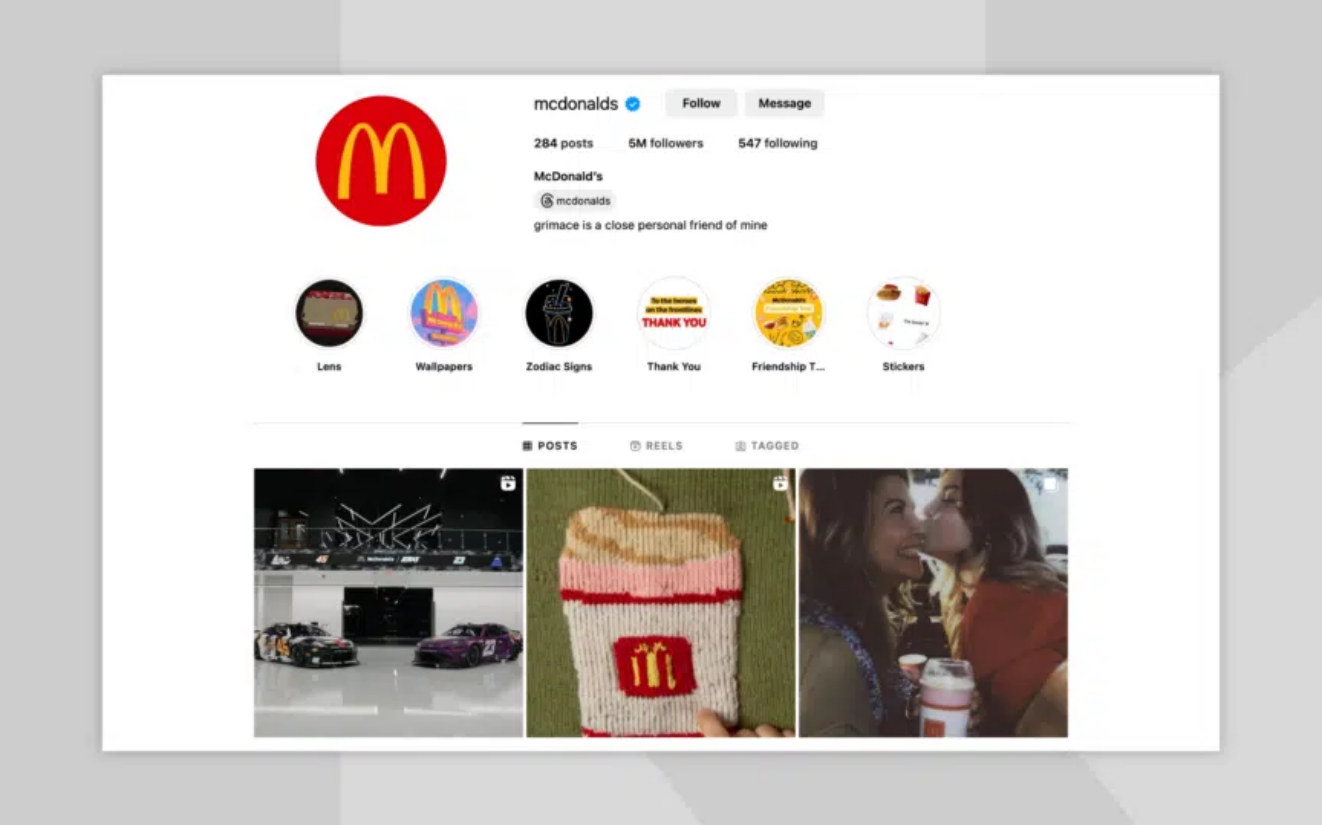
This guide goes a lot more in-depth than a standard style guide. Most style guides are brief documents that provide users with a few key details. For example, they might outline the recommended formats for your company logo, colors, and fonts.

Why do you need social media branding guidelines?

Ultimately, social media branding guidelines are how you ensure you maintain "brand consistency" when interacting with customers across every touchpoint. More than 5.17 billion people use social media today, not just to interact with friends, but to discover brands and products too.

If the image and identity you portray on social media differs from the branding strategies you follow elsewhere, that's going to confuse, and potentially alienate your customers.

Just imagine how confusing it would be if you visited McDonald's Instagram page and didn't see its iconic logo, red and yellow color palette, or playful messaging.



The more consistently you draw attention to the unique selling points of your products or services, your values, and your mission, the more trustworthy and credible you'll appear.

While a lack of social media brand guidelines leads to brand dilution and uncertainty among customers, developing strong social media branding rules to follow:

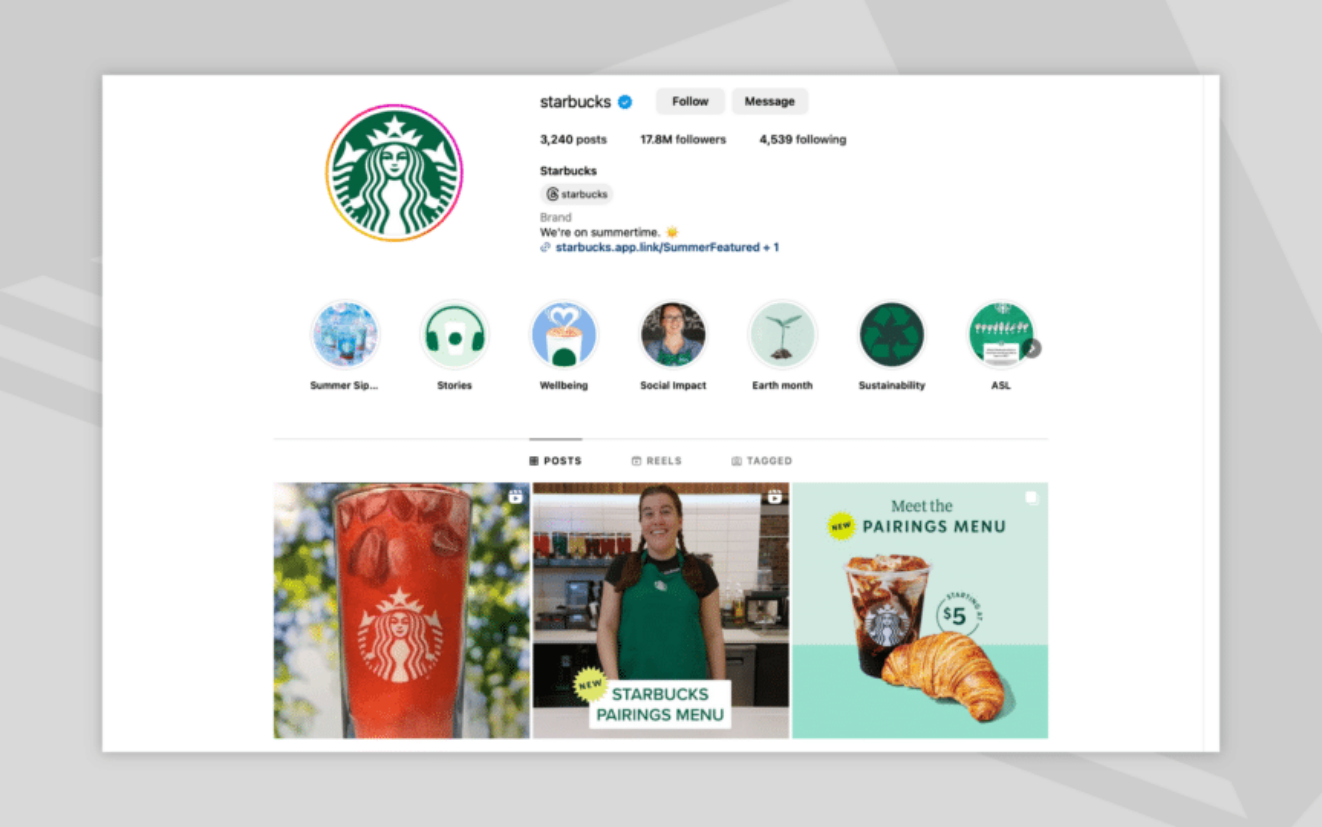
Improves brand reputation and authenticity

88% of customers say authenticity is crucial to determining which brands they want to support. It's hard to see a brand as "authentic" if the brand's identity is always changing. The

right guidelines ensures customers can instantly recognize your brand, and connect it with the right values.

It ensures you're always sharing the same consistent message and image with your community members, boosting that crucial sense of familiarity buyers crave.

Plus, a strong brand can help draw followers to your company. The more followers you have, the more trustworthy and credible you'll seem. Would you automatically assume Starbucks is a world-leading coffee brand if it didn't have a huge online presence? Probably not.



Reduces social media marketing costs

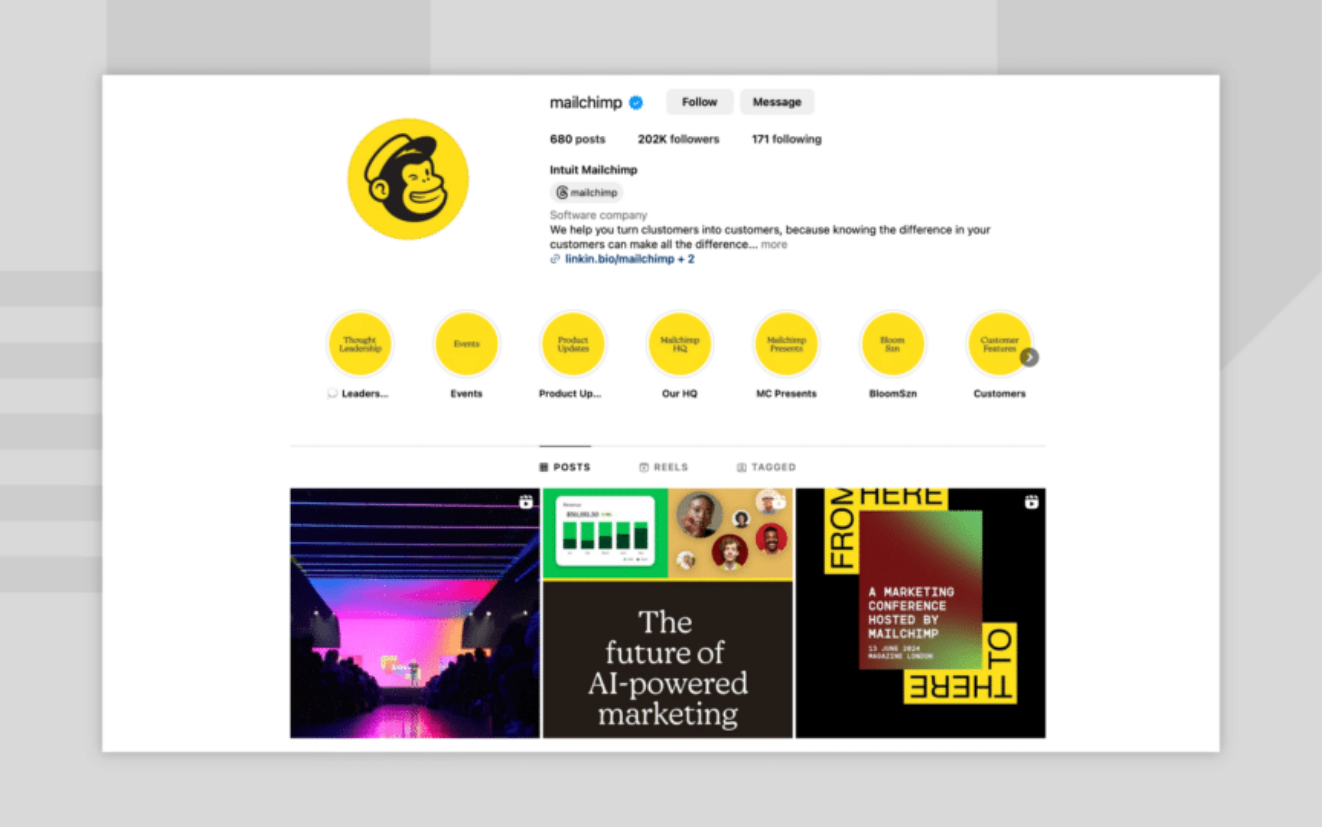
The cost of social media marketing is unpredictable at the best of times. But I often notice companies struggle more with managing their budgets when they don't have a clear plan in place.

Developing branding guidelines can help to reduce the cost of working with strategy experts on marketing campaigns, because

they already know everything there is to know about your brand identity. They don't have to waste extra time and resources on research.

Plus, following guidelines consistently can give you the insights you need to make better marketing decisions in the future. If you're using the same brand identity across all channels, it's easier to test marketing campaigns without having to account for variables like ever-changing brand colors.

You can even create cost-saving templates that help streamline content creation. Notice how MailChimp seems to use the same templates for its text-based Instagram posts:



Enhances alignment among team members

Excellent marketing is a group effort, and to achieve the right results, everyone needs to be on the same page. This includes your internal marketing teams, external graphic designers and content creators, and any specialists or

consultants you might be working with.

Social media branding guidelines allow for quick alignment among team members. They show teams the “do’s and don’ts” for representing your brand on social media, with clear examples.

These resources also help with onboarding new team members and freelancers quickly too. You’re more likely to get a new team member up-to-date and working cohesively with your team if you have a clear set of guidelines for them to follow.

What is included in social media brand guidelines?

As you’ll see from the social media brand guidelines I’m going to cover below, there’s no one-size-fits-all strategy for success. Some companies build entire workbooks or presentations including all the details of their brand identity.

They might combine editorial guidelines (advice on how to communicate with customers), with style guides, image formatting information, and best practices.

Other organizations create different brand guidelines for every social media channel they use, customizing their rules to match the algorithms and features of the platform.

Whichever strategy our clients at Fabrik choose, we often recommend including the following key elements in a set of social media brand guidelines:

1. Tone of voice and brand personality

One of the first things you’ll need to establish for your social media style guide, is how you’re going to speak to your audience on all social media sites. While your content strategy might vary from one platform to the next, your

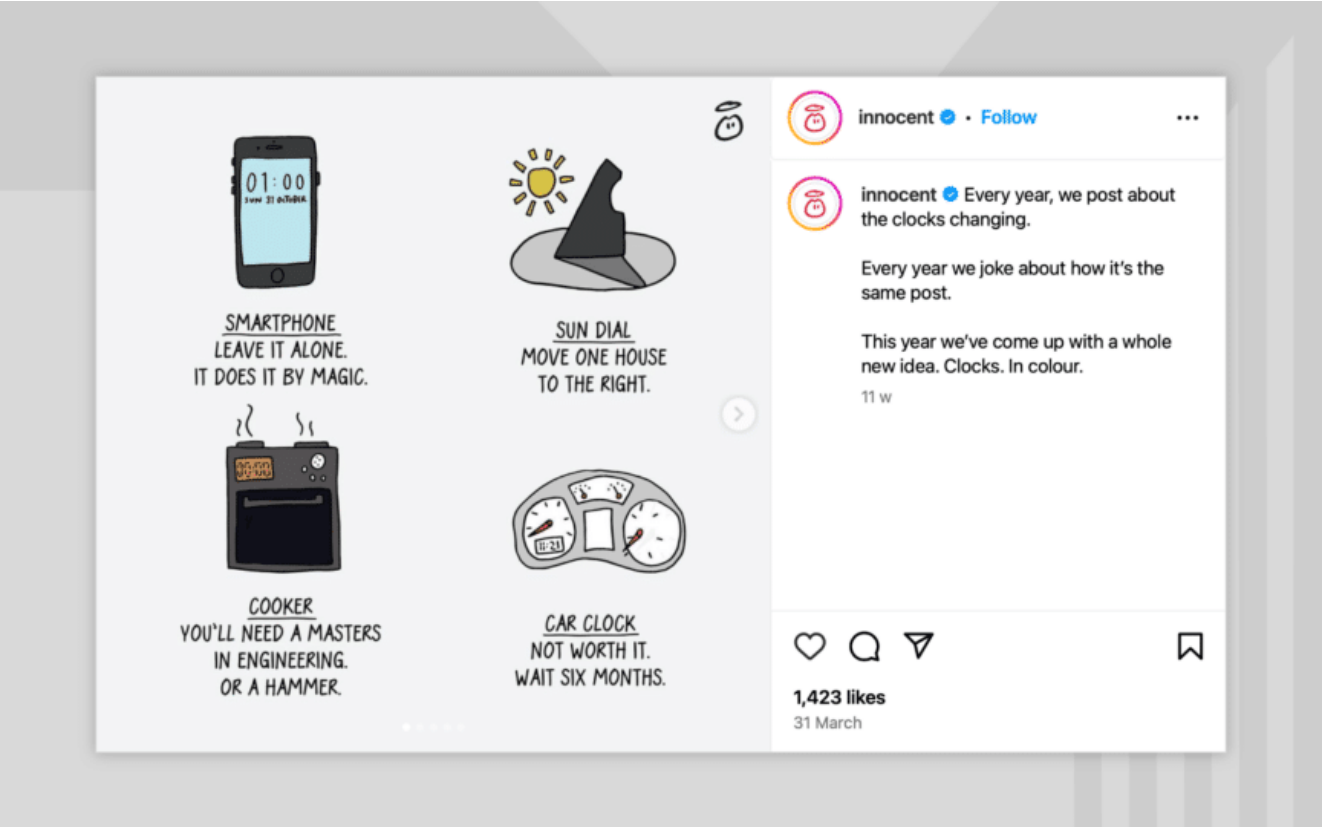
overall tone of voice and brand personality needs to stay consistent.

Let’s look at an example from one of my favorite companies on social media, Innocent drinks. Innocent is a fun and playful company, so it uses straightforward, friendly language on all of its social channels, as well as some occasional humor.

Here’s an example from Twitter:

> *NEW DRINKS ALERT*
>
> *We've made some new juice drinks called Juicy Water. It's got water. And real fruit. And it's a source of vitamin C. If that's not enough, we've even made a version with bubbles. IN DIFFERENT FLAVOURS. We know. We really do spoil you. pic.twitter.com/pM7EoxhGId*
>
> *— innocent drinks (@innocent) April 9, 2024*

And here’s another one from Instagram:



Notice how while the content changes, the company's voice remains youthful and humorous. Decide what you want your customers to see when they interact with your brand. Do you want to come across as cheeky and playful, like Innocent, or professional and intelligent, like IBM?

When choosing your exact tone of voice, I'd recommend looking at how your competitors and consumers communicate. What kind of language do they use? How long are their sentences? Do they use a lot of humor, abbreviations, and even emojis?

2. Visual asset guidelines

Next, it's time to think about how you'll elevate brand recognition and awareness with a consistent brand image. If you've already built a brand outside of social media, you should already have some insights into the visual elements that distinguish your company.

Outline your design guidelines, looking at things like:

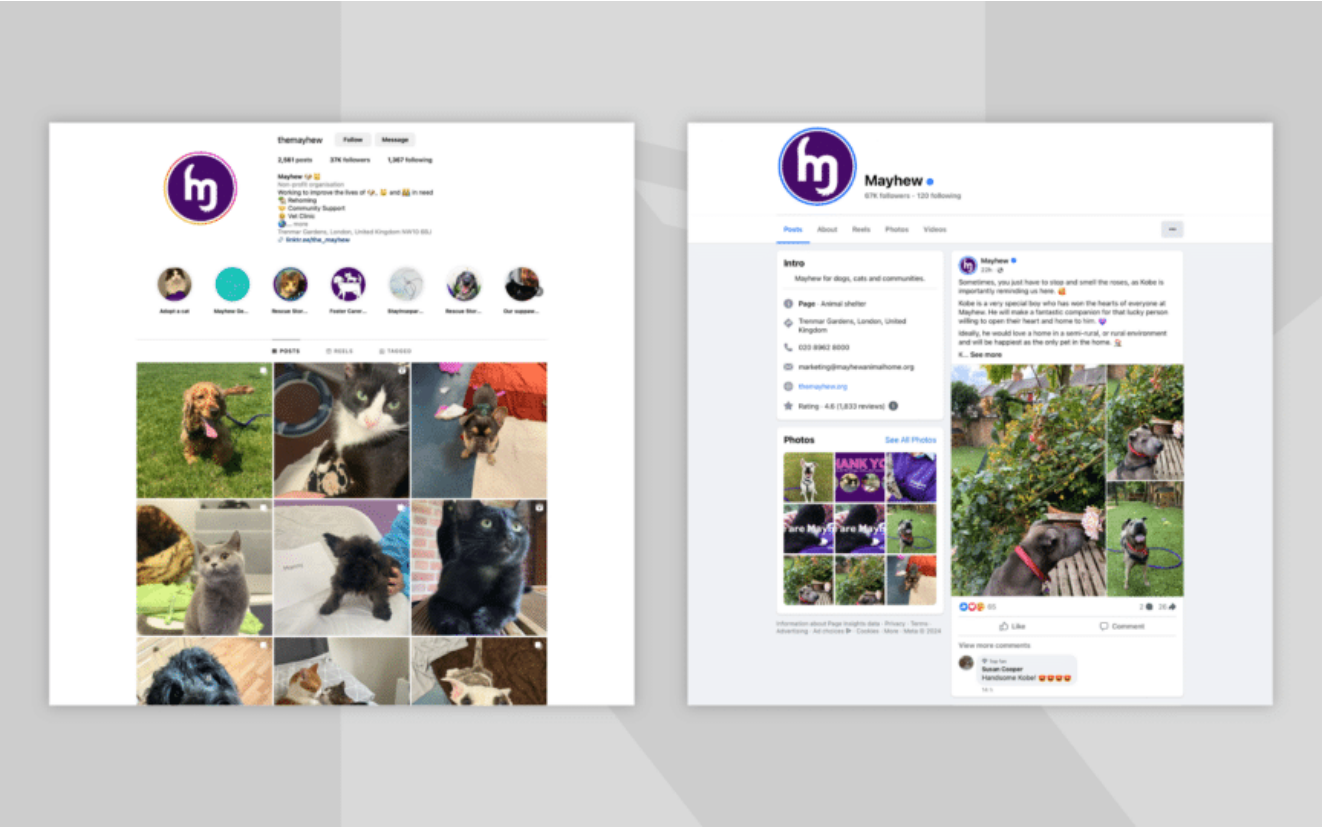
- **Your brand colors:** What kind of colors will show consistently in your social posts? Companies like HubSpot are memorable on social channels because their cover images and posts all include an iconic shade of orange as their primary color.
- **Fonts:** When sharing images with text, what kind of typography will you use? Sans-serif fonts are more playful and modern, while serif fonts look professional and authoritative.
- **Visual guidelines:** What sort of visuals will you create for social media? Will you be using filters on channels like Instagram and TikTok? Are you going to take a lot of photos and authentic videos, or share illustrations?
- **Logos:** How will you be using your logo on social media? Will it appear on your profile picture and cover banner? Are you going to embed it into various social media

posts? How will you ensure it shows consistently in different sizes and formats?

Let’s look at another example from an organization Fabrik has worked with in the past, Mayhew. The non-profit organization has a very memorable logo, and a distinct color palette, which appears across all its social channels.

It also uses a lot of user-generated content and photography in promotion.

Here’s a look at Mayhew’s Instagram and Facebook pages:



Maintaining visual consistency can be a little tricky, as every platform has its own formatting guidelines to follow for different types of content. You can work with a branding expert to create guidelines for different channels, or you can use a free platform.

Tools like Canva even allow you to build comprehensive brand kits, and templates for different channels, like Instagram and TikTok. Using these tools can help you achieve your social

media goals, by ensuring consistent branding on every channel.

3. A social media channel strategy

Here’s where learning how to create social media branding guidelines can get a little tricky. Different social media platforms have different rules you’ll need to follow when creating content. It’s worth checking out the detailed instructions provided by each platform before you start publishing.

Additionally, customers often expect to see different kinds of content on different channels. TikTok is where customers look for fun, fast-paced video content. Instagram is all about visual appeal, and LinkedIn is where you showcase your authority.

With your social media team, define which different platforms you’ll use to reach your audience, and what kind of content you’ll share on each platform.

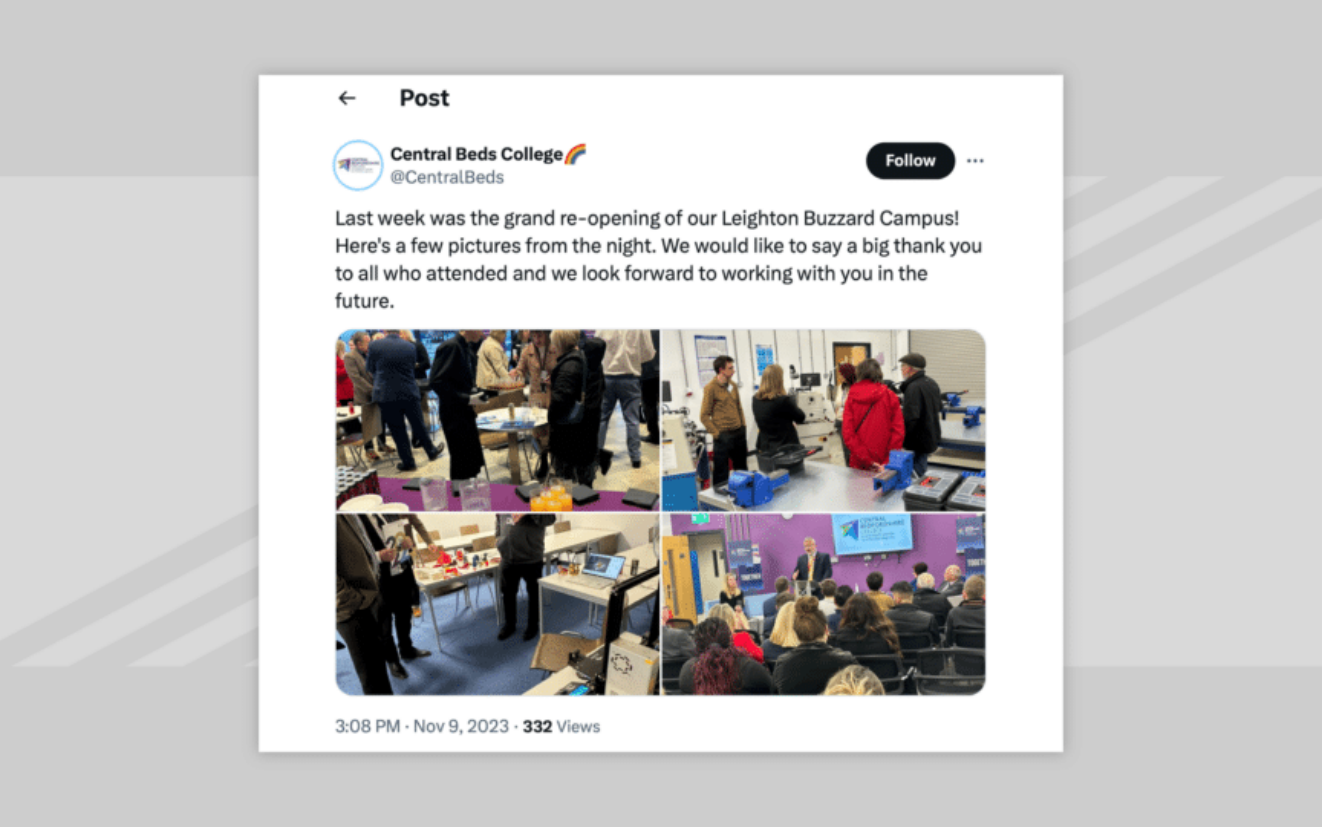
For instance:

- **Twitter:** On your Twitter account, you might share breaking news with your target market, using relevant hashtags to elevate your posts visibility.
- **Facebook:** On Facebook, your social posts might include event photos, news, promotions, and competitions.
- **Instagram:** On Instagram, you’ll delight your audience with attractive images, fast-paced videos, and quotes.
- **TikTok:** With TikTok, you can have more fun with potential customers, showing behind-the-scenes insights into your brand, and taking part in hashtag challenges.
- **LinkedIn:** With LinkedIn, you’ll want to show authority, sharing detailed insights into your company’s growth and executives.

Don’t just copy/paste the same social media content onto every

channel. Tailor your posts to different people and markets. Central Bedfordshire College, for example, shares a lot of insights into the "behind the scenes" experiences on its campus on Instagram:

https://www.instagram.com/p/C5yVZxbraOQ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==
Alternatively, on Twitter, the Group's posts are very news focused:



When determining your posting strategy for each channel, it's also worth thinking about how often you're going to publish content on each platform. You might share pictures on Instagram every day, but only add content to LinkedIn once a week.

You can always consider creating a content calendar with a tool like HootSuite or Sprout Social, for insights into the best time to post, and how frequently to publish content.

4. Social media communication rules

Finally, decide how you're going to communicate with customers throughout your social network, on different platforms.

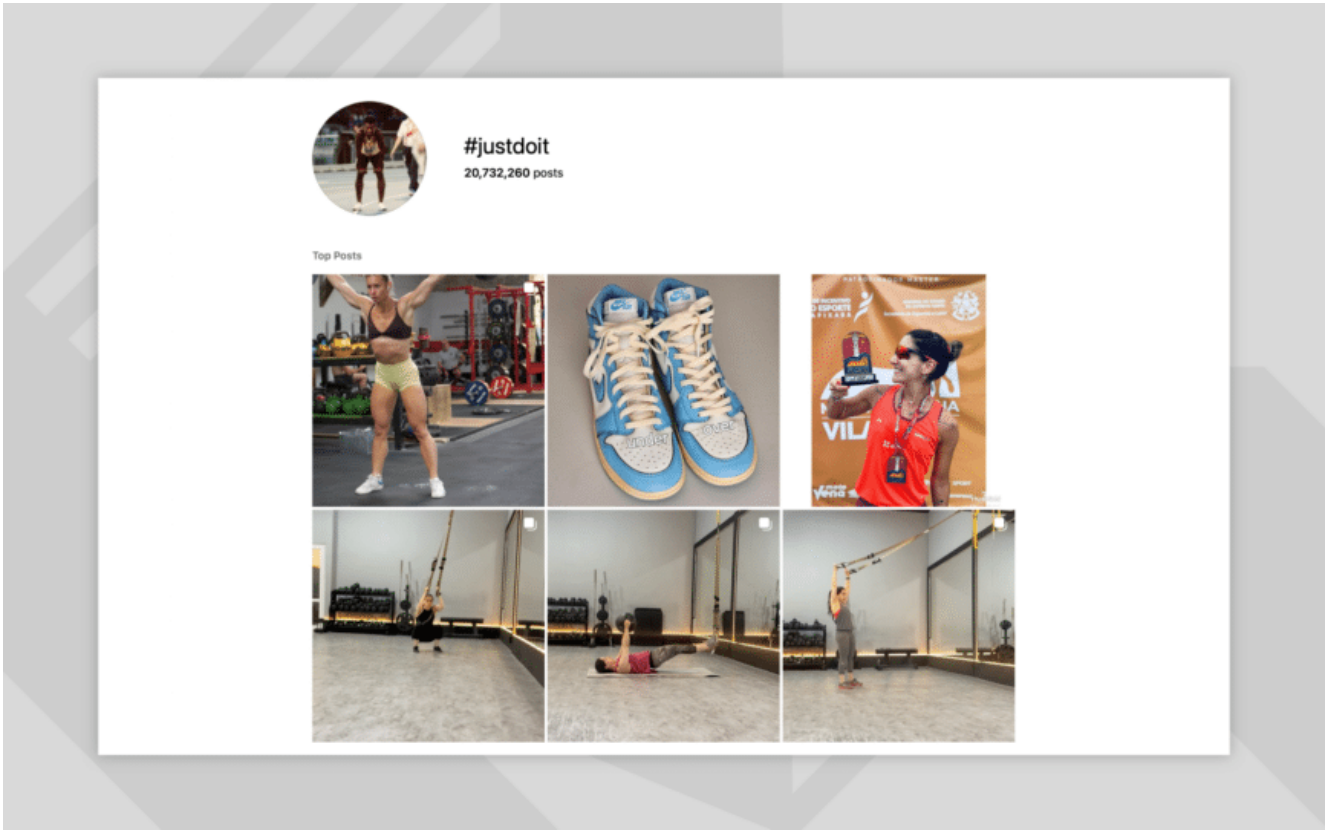
There are a few things to think about here, such as:

Hashtag rules

While hashtags might have started life on Twitter, they're common on virtually every social media platform today. In all accounts, the right hashtags can help you boost the visibility of your posts, and attract new people to your customer base.

Outline clear guidelines for any branded hashtags you're going to use like Nike's #JustDoIt, how you're going to monitor hashtag trends, and even how many hashtags you're going to use in each post.

Notably, the number of hashtags you can use on each platform will vary depending on the character limits imposed by each solution.



Caption and post limits

What’s your social media policy when it comes to writing captions for your content? Are you going to keep your posts short on sweet on channels like Twitter (X), and Instagram? Do you want to provide more detail and insights on channels like LinkedIn and Facebook?

Make sure you know the limitations imposed on each channel, and ensure you stay compliant with posting rules. Find out what kind of content you’re not allowed to share on certain social media accounts.

Follow the platform rules for your sector carefully and avoid sharing anything that might be considered “false advertising”, or risky.

Direct communications

When defining your social media branding guidelines, it’s also important to think about how you’re going to communicate directly with your customer base. Social media channels give customers the opportunity to reach out to companies through comments and direct messages.

Do you have any rules about how existing and new employees should respond to comments, and how quickly they should answer questions? Are you going to use automation to immediately respond to customers who reach out to your social team via direct message?

Social brand guidelines examples

I’ve already shared a few examples of great social media profiles that always seem to get their branding just right.

However, here are a few extra examples, just in case you need more guidance.

Wendy’s

Wendy’s has become a social media legend in recent years. The company’s social media team know how to connect with customers through humor, memes, and tongue-in-check comments.

The company is best-known for its posts on Twitter, like this one:



However, it also takes a consistent approach to sharing content across all of its social channels, from Instagram, to TikTok:

> *@wendys*
> *that’s where the protein is*
>
> *♬ original sound – Wendy’s*

One particularly great thing about Wendy’s is that although its iconic voice and image remains the same across all channels, the company isn’t afraid to experiment. It’s constantly taking advantage of new filters and social media

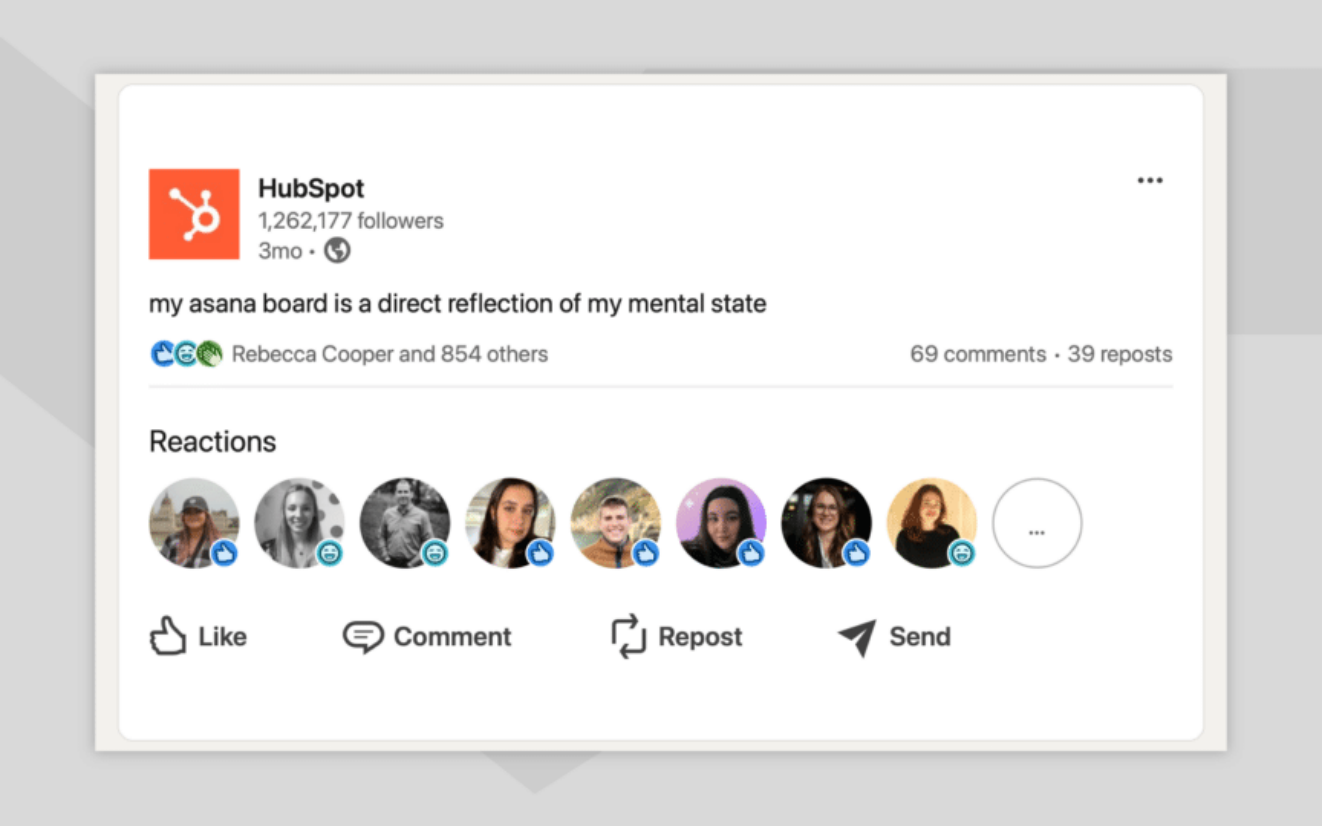
trends, which helps it resonate with its younger audience.

HubSpot

One of the reasons I love HubSpot's social media strategy, is that it's extremely consistent. A lot of companies assume that they need to completely change their tone of voice when moving between channels focused on younger consumers (like TikTok) and B2B platforms like LinkedIn.

While HubSpot changes its content for each channel, based on the rules and trends of the platform, it maintains a consistent, playful, and relatable voice.

Check out this post on LinkedIn:



HubSpot demonstrates how the content you share on different platforms can change, but you don't have to compromise on your unique personality.

https://www.instagram.com/reel/C4LuqmqIBCq/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==
Plus, as I mentioned above, you'll notice HubSpot's visual

identity stays the same from one channel to the next. You'll always see the iconic logo and orange color palette.

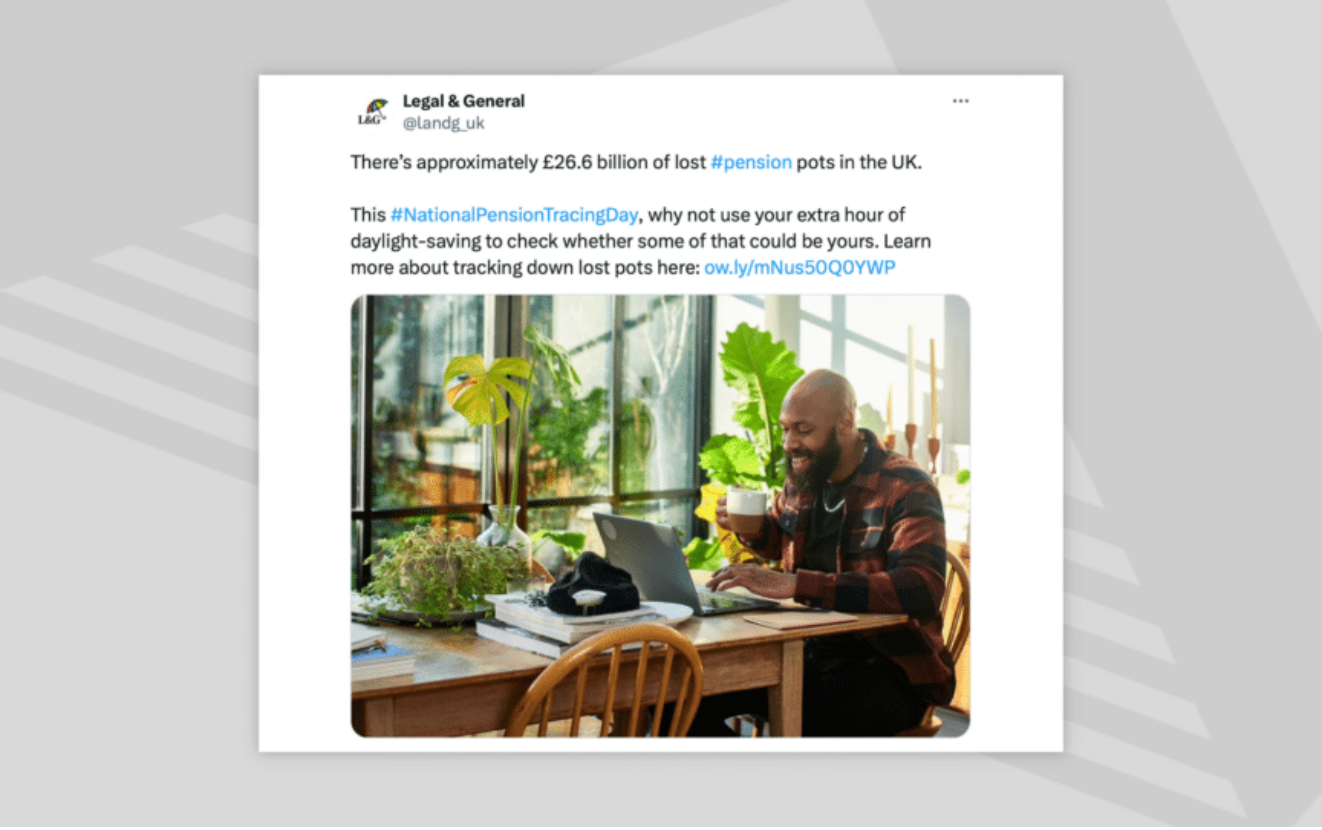
Legal and General

Going back to one of Fabrik's previous clients, Legal and General, we can also see evidence of excellent social media branding guidelines in place. The company consistently positions itself as a trustworthy and reliable thought leader, wherever it's posting content.

On LinkedIn, you'll see behind-the-scenes posts from experts, and consistent brand colors, image guidelines, and fonts:

On Twitter (X), the posts are a little shorter and snapper, but they still demonstrate authority.

Notice how Legal and General share genuine statistics in this post, to draw attention to their industry knowledge:



The company even has clear guidelines in place for how it responds to comments. If they publish a post written by a thought leader on LinkedIn, they ask that thought leader to

respond to comments directly.

Mastering branding on social media

Creating social media branding guidelines can seem like a time-consuming and complex process. However, it’s a crucial part of ensuring you can deliver a consistent experience to your customers across every touchpoint, and elevate your brand equity.

Following the same guidelines consistently will help boost brand awareness and recognition, strengthen your relationships with customers, and make social media marketing a lot simpler.

One final thing I do recommend, is ensuring you revisit your branding guidelines regularly. As your company evolves, and social media platforms change, along with customer expectations, you might need to make the occasional update.

If you’re struggling to design the ultimate social media branding guidelines, reach out to my team at Fabrik for step-by-step support.

Fabrik: A branding agency for our times.