

Patch Practices

A semimonthly newsletter detailing Patch's editorial best practices.

Our goal: to help editors learn how to better deliver what users need to know about what's happening in their communities.



This edition of Patch Practices focuses on social media engagement.

Quote

"It's better to excel at one platform than to try to half-ass on all of them," said Liana Messina. "If you find yourself particularly drawn to one platform, focus on that first."

Key Takeaways

- **Audience Attraction:** Writing for your social followers
- **Facebook:** Making the most of Patch's primary social driver
- **Twitter:** Tips to turn your Twitter into an audience machine
- **TikTok:** Experiment with an emerging platform
- **New horizons:** What you should know about each platform
- **The Perfect Post:** Ingredients for success

Is there something you'd like to see covered in an upcoming Patch Practices newsletter? Email payton.potter@patch.com with recommendations and suggestions.

Audience Attraction

There's more to audience development than posting a continuous stream of articles on Facebook and hoping readers click, and few know that better than Patch social media editor Liana Messina.

A strong post elicits a response or starts a conversation without stirring unnecessary controversy over a hot-button topic, Liana said. "If you're unsure when crafting an engagement post, try this: 1) Think about what type of questions you would be drawn to answer if you saw it on your social feeds, and 2) Take note of your personal conversations in your daily life and identify what makes a topic engaging."



The best online discussions are on light-hearted but polarizing topics: What is the worst Halloween candy?; How soon is too soon to put up your Christmas tree?

In the experience of Joliet, Illinois, editor John Ferak, people engage best with informative stories that aren't too touchy or political, such as new restaurants opening in town.

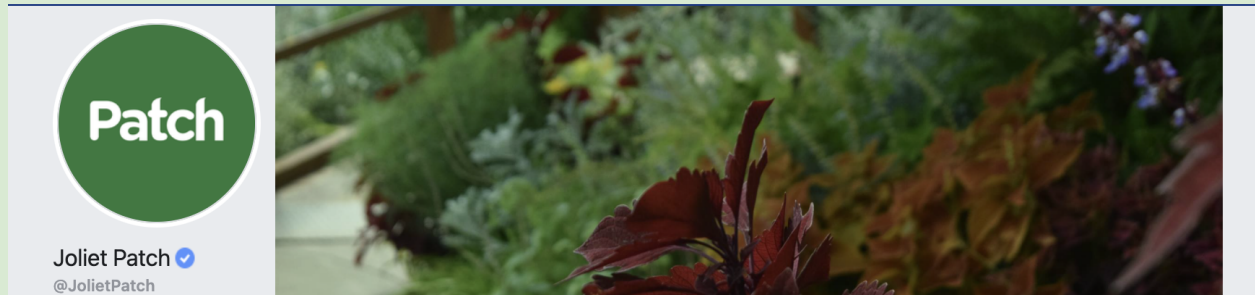
"Sometimes, if I write about public salaries, many readers will shy away from commenting on those stories for fear of ruffling feathers with the police officers and firefighters or school administrators who are key subjects in these stories."

The best posts call on readers to engage, John said. Examples of strong posts include "Did you see all the police cars last night?" or "Is it priced to sell?" if a story is about a restaurant or business that's now for sale. Editors can also ask "What's your favorite food here?" or "Have you been here before?" when profiling a new restaurant, for example.

John said keeping an eye on small local stories (fast food restaurants opening or closing or a local eatery adding new items to its menu) "will set you up in the future to be your community's go-to source for real estate, development and restaurant/bar coverage."

Takeaway: Less can be more when it comes to social engagement strategy. Offer readers the chance to voice an opinion without getting into a fight, and prepare to watch comments roll in. An engaged social audience is more likely to visit the site or subscribe to a newsletter.

Facebook



Patch editors know when it comes to social media, Facebook is still a news outlet's best friend because many people count on the platform to give them the news.

But changes to algorithms can reduce the number of people who see your posts. That's why it's important to build and maintain a strong Facebook audience at all times.

"We do know that Facebook prioritizes comments and shares, meaning that posts with more interactions are more likely to be pushed up in the news feed," Liana said.

Regional, statewide and national Facebook blasts can also increase traffic across Patch, Liana said. "I think we should take advantage of Facebook blasts (regional and national) and push out relevant content to more users."

On a Patch-by-Patch and day-to-day basis, strategy should be a bit more targeted, John said.

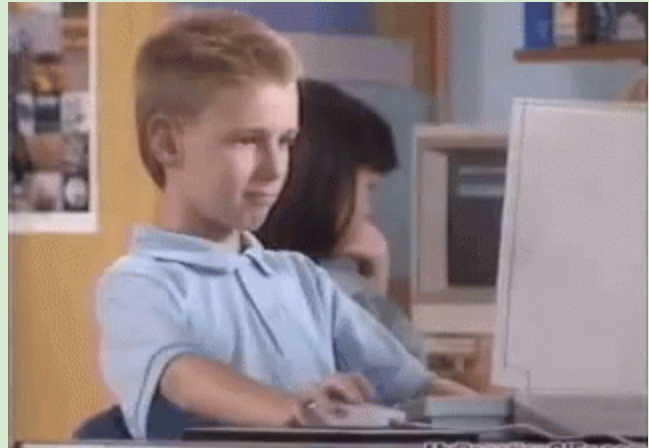
"For the past three years, I have made new restaurant stories one of the highest priorities for the Joliet Patch. That's because these stories are always talkers on Facebook and other social media platforms," he said. "New restaurant stories, unique restaurant human-features and stories about restaurants closing always, always, always generate a ton of reader engagement. That's why I keep doing them."

Takeaway: For better or worse, Facebook feels natural to many users. We can keep them engaged by offering a consistent mix of approachable content that they can interact with and discuss. Not only does approachable content bolster clicks through to Patch.com, it also helps keep our posts in front of readers' eyes, even when algorithms diminish local news.

Twitter

Because Twitter's algorithm only offers recent posts in a top-down format, we cannot rely on an algorithm to prioritize our posts for readers, meaning we have to anticipate when users will be online and what will catch their attention.

New York City editor Gus Saltonstall says including multimedia elements with tweets is a must-do: "It catches people's attention more when they're scrolling."



For both Gus and Nick Garber, another New York City editor, engagement is higher when tweets are shared from a personal or professional account than a company-branded account.

"I can't point to any hard numbers, but I'm sure that engagement from my personal account — mainly on Twitter — has driven readership and probably some subscribers on my Patches," Nick said. "Whenever I publish a story I'm especially proud of, I share it on Twitter, and often notice a traffic bump in the hours after I share it — especially if larger accounts retweet my post or share the story separately."

Nick also recommends diversifying the timeline with non-news tweets. "Social media is more fun to use when you're engaging with people and sharing lighthearted stuff. On Twitter, my own feed is a mix of stray/silly observations and photos of the place I live (NYC), links to other people's stories, and links to my own stories."

Liana Messina recommends that editors looking to engage on Twitter do so from a personal or professional account, if they feel comfortable. "The journalist community on Twitter is huge, and oftentimes readers prefer to follow the writer over the brand. A lot of our local editors are stars on Twitter and really understand how to make the most of the platform."

Takeaway: With the right mix of media, timing and audience development, Twitter offers meaningful returns for editors who put in the effort.

TikTok

By most accounts, TikTok remains an emerging platform for news outlets and editors. Followers of the Washington Post TikTok will be familiar with the experimental nature of newsy posts.

But one Patch editor has waded into the murky waters of TikTok, experimenting with sharing breaking news events, recaps and features. Ryan Phillips's Tuscaloosa Patch TikTok channel has amassed over 4,000 followers in under two months.

But it's not as easy as just downloading the app and posting content, both Ryan and Liana caution. The latter recommends creating an account and spending a week or two scrolling through the For You Page and familiarizing yourself with the content.

"If you do end up creating a brand account, please share it with the social team. Note: creating TikTok videos is not as easy as it may appear to be. (It's a full-time job.)" Liana said.

Once you are ready to post, heed Ryan's advice: "I've been watching other high-volume accounts and mimicking their approaches to certain things," he said. In his experience, University of Alabama sports stories and breaking news bring in the most viewers.

"I think it works best for active situations for news and for unique feature content, like my 10 [Spookiest Real Places in Tuscaloosa](#)," he said. (That post has over 13,000 views).

Whether the account is driving visitors to his sites or subscribers to his newsletters is unclear. "I like to think of it more as a noisemaker and brand promotion, but I've been toying with the ideas of doing a live membership drive or something. I still think we are getting the majority of our new subs from Facebook."

Regardless, Ryan has found there is a basic formula to maximizing engagement on TikTok: "[Keep it] clear and concise. Do as little talking and as much showing as possible. Think about what your readers or in TikTok's case, followers, respond to, be it good or bad, and focus on that."

Beyond that, he cautions against applying traditional methods to an innovative app.

"I think it's easy to get stuffy and sterile when living in fear of rocking the boat," he said. "For TikTok especially, people want to see you having fun or at least being energetic with what you're doing. They would rather see me live on an active scene telling them what I know. But it's important for less experienced journalists to understand the ethics that come with covering active scenes with video."

Takeaway: Building an audience on TikTok will require some experimentation, but that doesn't mean editors shouldn't try.

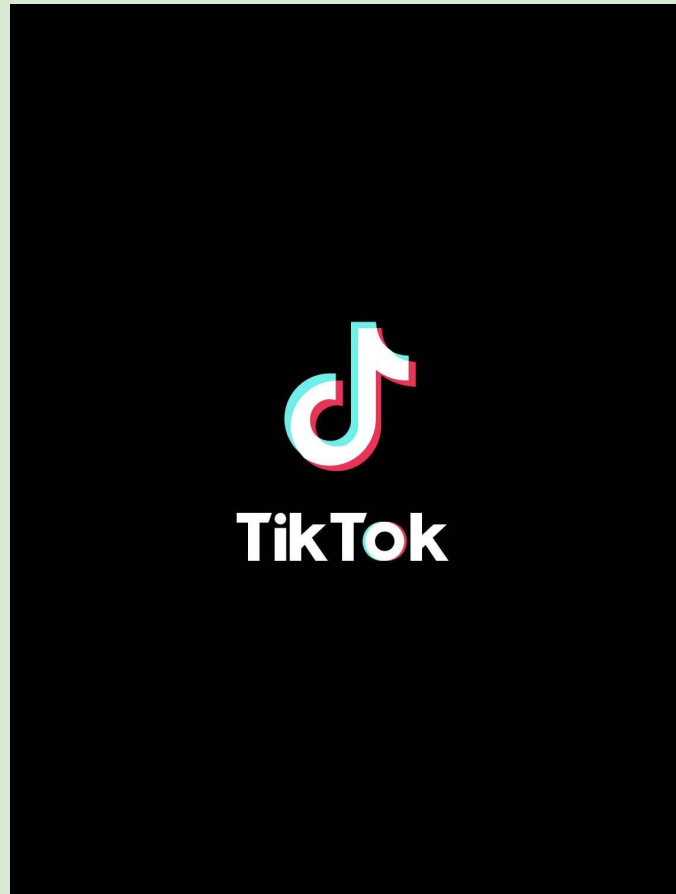
New Horizons

Liana breaks down a few common platforms and what editors need to know about each.

- **Instagram:** Instagram has evolved into a place where readers get their news. A new update now allows all users to link out in their Instagram Stories, giving our editors the opportunity to easily share their stories on their personal accounts. If you are interested in setting up a Patch branded account, please reach out to Olivia Booth for guidance. Here you can share photos/videos of your Patch town and use graphics to post a headline or summarize a news story.

- **TikTok:** TikTok is a short-form video platform with endless opportunities. As a local editor, you can become the face of your local Patch on TikTok, sharing story updates, local videos of town, and joining in on the trends.

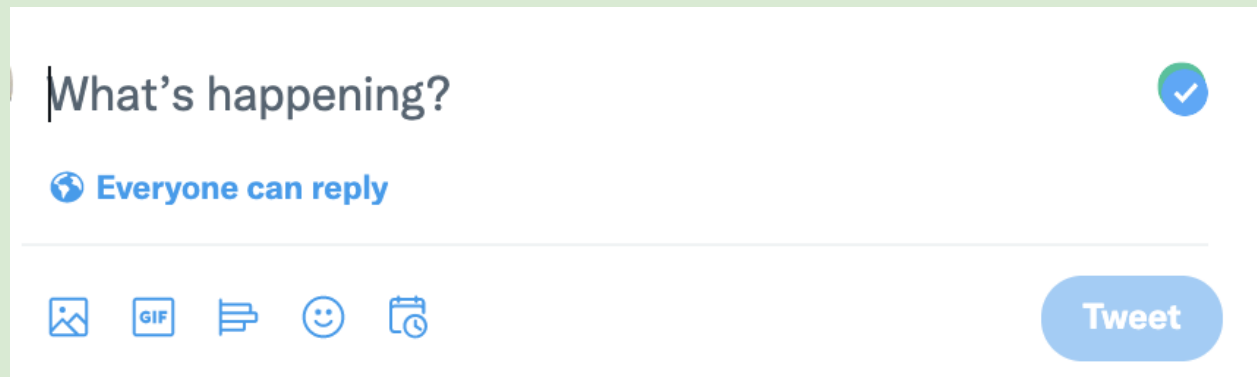
- **Reddit:** I'm going to steal a line from a Reddit webinar I attended a while back: "Envision each subreddit as a cocktail party that's already started. How do you act when you walk in?" Don't be that guy who walks in yelling. News publishers are encouraged to participate in a way that adds value and doesn't interrupt the vibe of the subreddit. Don't just kick off with an AMA (Ask Me Anything). You should be active in the subreddit first. For those active on Reddit, an AMA is a cool way for a reporter to share insight on a high-profile local news event. (If you'd rather post from the Patch Reddit username, ping me, and I'll give you the login.)



Learn More

- [The Washington Post - TikTok](#)
- [The Cut - Instagram](#)
- [Azcentral.com - Twitter](#)

The Perfect Post

A screenshot of a Twitter post creation interface. At the top, there is a text input field with the placeholder text "What's happening?". To the right of the input field is a green circular icon with a white checkmark. Below the input field, there is a blue link that says "Everyone can reply" with a globe icon. At the bottom of the input area, there are five icons: a photo icon, a GIF icon, a list icon, a smiley face icon, and a clock icon. To the right of these icons is a blue button with the word "Tweet" in white.

Regardless of platform, foresight goes a long way in planning an audience engagement strategy, and some rules apply across the board.

“Think of social media engagement as an extension of building a connection with your readers,” Liana said. “If you can't be face-to-face, dedicating even 5 minutes a day to engagement tactics can make a difference. Post a photo of the local restaurant you got lunch from. Ask readers where you should go for brunch this weekend. Simply rewriting a headline to make it more engaging for social media is a great start.”

For editors looking to try out new engagement questions, try out the samples below, courtesy of Liana and Olivia Booth.

- What's one thing visitors **MUST** do when they come to [STATE]?
- What's something you say that only someone from [STATE] or [TOWN] would understand?
- If you could bring back one restaurant that closed in town, which would it be?
- Show us the last picture you took of your [PET] below!