# #hashtags 101

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It's a simple symbol: two lines intersecting two lines. It's been called the number sign, the pound sign and the hash mark. It's used for different purposes in linguistics, mathematics and computing. Of course, we're talking about the # symbol. It's a simple sign, but one with growing influence.

Today, the # symbol is used to create "hashtags" in social media posts on sites like Twitter and Facebook. A hashtag is the # symbol followed by a word or phrase.

Hashtags create a system for grouping messages and allow social media users to see content, such as tweets, from people they do not follow. If you search #cats on Twitter, you'll see cat content from around the world—and there is a lot of it.

Exploring topics using hashtags is simple. On Facebook and Twitter, hashtags are clickable—so you just have to select the hashtag within a post to view more about that topic. You can also search using hashtags (as opposed to traditional keywords), but there is a difference between keyword and hashtag queries. A hashtag is usually written without spacing and might not contain normal words. That means searches for "#ILoveCats" and "I love cats" will generate different results.

When you use hashtags, you're more than simply sending a message into a larger pool for others to see; you are joining a conversation. Whether referring to sporting events, political affairs or breaking news, your voice can be heard.

**How to use a hashtag**
Hashtags are easy to use. However, it's important to keep a few things in mind when using them.

It's recommended that hashtags be short and concise, making it easy for messages to be grouped with others relating to the same topic. A search on Twitter for #cats delivers a long list of tweets sent out within the past 24 hours; while it takes more than five months for #mycatiscrazy to produce the same amount of results. In short, the simpler the hashtag, the bigger the grouping.

Hashtags can go anywhere—at the beginning or end of a post, or within it. It's just as correct to use "I can't wait to leave for vacation! #NYC" or "#NYC, here we come!" It's also common to use multiple hashtags in one post. But, again, keep it simple: "I can't believe the #ChicagoBlackhawks won the #StanleyCup" or "Next weekend will be so much fun #winetasting #NapaValley."

It's important to note that users can join topic groups without writing keywords in the message itself, as seen in our second example with Napa Valley being used as a hashtag outside of the message.

When a message is flooded with too many hashtags, it becomes difficult to read and loses meaning. "The #2012 #London #Olympics was so #amazing. Can't #wait for #Rio. #athletes #goldmedal" doesn't help people find your information faster—it just confuses them.

**Trending now**
Hashtags provide a glimpse into the topics that are important to people and the world at any given moment. In 2011, the top two Twitter hashtags were vastly different: #egypt and #tigerblood. One refers to a country's unrest, the other to the antics of actor Charlie Sheen. Hashtags help us share our wide spectrum of thoughts and feelings.

Imagine if social media existed in the dynamic and turbulent 1960s. Popular hashtags might include: #TheBeatles, #MoonLanding, #MLK, and #VietnamWar. The voices of millions would've been easily recorded regarding key historical moments.

**Hashtags for marketers**
For companies, hashtags are a vital tool in measuring the impact of brands and advertising campaigns. Not only can a company gauge its popularity based on the number of times a specific hashtag has been used, but it can also view what people are saying about its brand. Hashtags provide both quantity and quality.

Today, many advertisers use hashtags as campaign anchors. Whether it's a new promotion for Coca-Cola or a summer blockbuster movie, hashtags are essential. They are even used outside the online world. The habit of watching television and surfing the web at the same time is very appealing for marketers, so a television commercial for Coca-Cola might direct users to post to Twitter using #CocaColaHappiness.

And with the rise of mobile usage, a billboard can influence people on the go to post using hashtags as a way to further interact with their favorite brands or access discounts and information.

**Real-time feedback**
It's just as easy for people to post negative messages about brands as they do positive ones. If a customer tweets about a bad experience at a retail store using the company's name in the hashtag, it's very possible that the company's brand team will see it. The good news is that this gives the company an opportunity to reach out to that customer to try and resolve any issues.

It's now common for TV viewers to tweet about a show while watching it, which allows networks

to better monitor audience reactions. Hashtags create a focus group without having to physically gather participants behind a two-way mirror—all you need are the viewers, wherever they are, and the computer screen.

**The future of hashtags**

Remember, the hashtag is still evolving. In February 2013, its usage took a big step with the "pay by tweet" partnership between Twitter and American Express. By linking their American Express and Twitter accounts, people can pay for some products by tweeting specific hashtags. Each product—such as the Amazon Kindle—has its own hashtag. Users simply tweet the designated hashtag and receive a confirmation code. They then have fifteen minutes to tweet the code again to finalize the order.

In June 2013, Facebook launched its hashtag program, creating thousands of conversations for more than a billion users. Facebook hashtags give people one more reason to spend time on the network—and that means more opportunities for marketers to mine data on user interests.

**#Thefuture**

As our digital experiences continue to evolve, what will come next for the hashtag? Will email services like Gmail begin incorporating hashtags? Will hashtags become so pervasive that they lose impact or become a burden on users? Or will their expanding use only assist users in searching for useful information and become the default language of the web? It might be two lines intersecting two lines, but the hashtag is a true cultural phenomenon.