

Ten Tools for Creating Attention-Getting Social Media Messages

Abstract

It is not enough to simply post text in social media messages. Tweets with images garner three times more engagement, such as through likes, retweets, follows, clicks, and comments. Social media messages without accompanying visuals are a missed opportunity. This article describes 10 simple tools and accompanying techniques for creating attractive graphics and videos for use with social media: Canva, Paint, Piktochart, grayed out images, hand-drawn sketches, stock images, personal photos, PicCollage, GIFs, and Boomerang. Visuals should be copyright free and fit the content of a post. Time can be saved through repurposing existing images and videos for use in social media content.

Keywords: [social media](#), [social networking](#), [Twitter](#), [graphic design](#)

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This article describes how to create graphic images and videos to engage audiences via social media. It extends the work of Brinkman, Kinsey, and Henneman (2017), who described strategies for expanding the functionality of social media sites. Extension educators have been using social media for program marketing and outreach for over a decade. Facebook launched in 2004 and Twitter in 2006 (Shah, 2016). Several dozen articles about social media use in Extension work have been published in the *Journal of Extension*. For example, Gharis, Bardon, Evans, Hubbard, and Taylor (2014) described a three-step process for integrating social media into Extension work and urged Extension professionals to add it to their outreach tool set. Kinsey (2010) described characteristics and benefits of five social media tools, and Parsons (2015) described five others. Garcia, Dev, McGinnis, Thomas, and The Learning Child Team (2018) documented the impact of a purposeful approach to engaging users of social media and described a tool kit for best practices. Similarly, Christensen, Hill, and Horrocks (2015) urged a social media planning process and described their use of a social media marketing map.

Unlike a decade ago, it is not enough to simply post text in social media messages. According to social media management tool provider Hootsuite, "every Tweet that you send without an attached image is a missed

opportunity" (LePage, 2015, p. 1). Tweets with images get three times more engagement, such as through likes, retweets, follows, clicks, and comments (Harvey, 2016). In addition, images slow viewers down and capture an extra few seconds of attention (LePage, 2015). Doyle and Briggeman (2014) analyzed social media engagement statistics, noted that posts with pictures received the highest average view per post, and recommended that Extension personnel focus on these types of posts. Similarly, Elmer, Harrison, and da Silva (2016), who studied social media use in nutrition education, urged the use of colorful pictures and videos for recipes and healthful eating tips. Allen, Jolly, and Barnes (2016) found that graphics increased online engagement in a program for teen parents.

Enhancing Social Media Messages with Images

Rather than miss opportunities, Extension professionals can create them by using various tools and associated techniques to enhance their social media messages through the addition of visuals. Ten easy-to-apply options are described here.

Canva. Canva (<https://www.canva.com/>) is a graphic design website that provides access to a wide variety of background colors, premade designs, font styles, graphics, and photographs. Photos can be uploaded at prices starting at \$1 each, or users can upload their own images. Basic design functions are free of charge. Key Canva editing sidebar tools include "layouts," "background," "text," and "upload." Figure 1 shows a sample of an image designed through Canva.

Figure 1.

Canva Example



Paint. Located within Microsoft Windows Accessories, Paint (<https://www.digitalunite.com/guides/microsoft-programs/what-microsoft-paint>) is a useful tool for creating quick graphics for social media. The steps are as follows: First, capture a screenshot of online content (e.g., a page from an Extension website) or a PowerPoint slide using a design template or solid color background, minimal text, and graphics or photos. Open Paint, and paste the screenshot. Click "File," and then click "Save" and name the file. Crop if desired. Figure 2 shows a sample result of this execution. Another option is to simply save PowerPoint slides as JPEG images.

Figure 2.

Microsoft Paint Example

#30DaysofSavings:
A 30-Day Twitter Conversation About Saving Money
to Celebrate America Saves Week 2019

- No Cost to Enter
- Worldwide Participation
- An Opportunity to Win \$100 Gift Cards
- Ideas and Inspiration to Meet Your Savings Goals
- Respond to 30 Daily Questions on Twitter from 2/1/19 through 3/2/19
- Challenge Yourself to Save by Completing the 30-Day \$100 Savings Challenge



Piktochart. Piktochart (<https://piktochart.com/>) is most frequently used for creating infographics, which can teach key concepts or report Extension program results. Typically, infographics are too large to display attractively in social media messages. However, if the sections are designed as coordinated "stand-alone" segments, they can be cropped and digitized (e.g., using Paint) and used individually as social media graphics. Figure 3 shows an infographic developed through the use of Piktochart.

Figure 3.

Piktochart Example




Background

Since 2014, Rutgers Cooperative Extension has been providing professional development opportunities with special state grant funding to build the financial education capacity of New Jersey financial educators.



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Over 500 Financial Education Boot Camp attendees



18 comprehensive lesson plans tied to state standards

Grayed out images. Grayed out images can be very effective when applied as the shadow of a photo or graphic in the background and covered by a small amount of text. The steps are as follows: First, open PowerPoint to the blank slide layout, and then right-click. Click "Format Background." Click "Picture Fill," and upload a photo or graphic. Adjust the transparency slider to around 70%–80%, and click "Apply to All" and then "Close." Insert a text box and type text over the grayed out image. Digitize the PowerPoint slide using Paint or the "File," "Save As," "JPEG File Interchange" commands in PowerPoint. Click "Current Slide" for one graphic or "Apply to All" if you are digitizing a series of grayed out PowerPoint slides. An example of a message over a grayed out image is shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4.

Grayed Out Image Example



Hand-drawn sketches. Books have been written featuring sketches on paper or napkins to illustrate key concepts. An example is *The One-Page Financial Plan* (Richards, 2015). Extension educators with artistic talent need only a Sharpie to make use of this tool. A completed sketch can be photographed, cropped, and enhanced with filters (if desired). It is then ready to be shared online.

Stock images. A source of quality copyright-free stock images is Pixabay (<https://pixabay.com>). Users can select from among almost 2 million Creative Commons photos and illustrations as well as vector graphics and film footage. Attribution is appreciated, but not required.

Personal photos. Sometimes there is no substitute for photos taken in real time at an Extension event. As with photos of program participants used in print media, a photo release should be obtained. Tips for taking quality smartphone photos include looking for light, adjusting exposure, turning on the grid, and editing your shots (Fisher, 2018).

PicCollage. A leading photo phone app, PicCollage (<https://pic-collage.com/>) enables users to make collages with cell phone photos. Images can be further enhanced with stickers, background patterns and textures, and templates. Some features require small payments.

GIFs. GIFs are files for moving images. GIFs used in social media are usually less than 10 s long and have been found to increase user engagement, such as through shares and retweets (LePage, 2015). A database of GIFs is available at <https://giphy.com/categories>. GIFS should be used sparingly and only when they really fit the content of a post (LePage, 2015).

Boomerang. Boomerang is a free Instagram app that allows users to create their own GIFs. It works by combining a series of 10 short, fast photo bursts into a mini video that plays forward and backward several times (Rousseau, 2016).

Conclusion

Effective social media use requires the ability to attract and engage users. This goal can be achieved through use of the tools and techniques for creating attractive graphics and videos described here. Adding visuals to social media posts need not be time-consuming. Repurposing existing images and videos and creating templates for images that will be used frequently promote efficiency. Opportunities to grab the attention of audiences through the use of social media can be seized, not missed.

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