

Sesame Workshop began when Sesame Street aired its first episode in 1969. Since then, they have continuously worked towards their mission of helping “children everywhere become smarter, stronger, and kinder.” With a whopping 53 seasons (and counting), Sesame Street is ranked as the most watched children’s show in television history. Studies have shown that 95% of American children have seen Sesame Street. Is it any wonder then, that this organization has some of the most beloved characters in the world?

Sesame Workshop has long operating social media channels, but historically they have tended to use them as promotion for their television shows, specials, and online programming. Despite having a few viral moments, their social media channels needed some attention. Then, in 2020, Sesame Workshop brought in Aaron Bisman in an “Audience Development” role. Aaron has spoken about the thorough review he conducted of the social media output of the organization. He performed social media audits, analyzing metrics and reviewing and categorizing posts, then used this data to begin developing their new social media strategy.

Rather than the high percentage of promotion and calls to action that were being posted before, Bisman proposed a relationships-first approach, hoping to connect with audiences and maintain brand relevance. As Bisman explains it, “rather than aggressively promoting calls to action with pitch after pitch and tune-in message after tune-in message, we instead seek to build relationships with our audiences. If we are top of mind and thought of well, we trust that if and when they need us, they know we are here for them.”

Within the Sesame Workshop organization, social media falls under Samantha Maltin, the organization’s Executive Vice President, Chief Marketing & Brand Officer. Within this marketing division, you find Aaron Bisman and the rest of the social media team. As of March of 2024, that team appears to be comprised of around six individuals. Christina Vittas has been identified as the voice of Elmo, with Eder Reynoso taking the lead on the other character accounts.

The discussion surrounding Sesame Workshop’s target audiences is an interesting one; their primary audience would be preschool children, as they are the target demographic for Sesame Street and the other programs. However, when looking at the

social media accounts, specifically, the target audience is adults. Bisman elaborates, “Given COPPA regulations and the understanding of how damaging social media and extended screen time is for young people, we are very clear that our social channels serve adult audiences.”

Despite the acknowledgement that these posts are for adult audiences, Sesame Workshop has the unique task of writing through the voice of characters written for preschoolers. The identity of each of the Sesame Street characters has been defined, in many cases decades before the advent of social media – or even the internet! In posting on each social profile and platform, the writers are focused on staying true to the character. As Vittas explains, “Elmo’s social media is managed from his perspective and one of the most important parts of this job is maintaining the fourth wall. After all, in my heart and in many others’, Elmo is a real 3.5-year-old monster who lives on Sesame Street with friends, fairies, and beyond!”



An example of a typical post on @Elmo’s Instagram.

The bread and butter of these social accounts are fairly innocuous posts – often images from the show paired with simple captions written in the voice of the character.

Elmo likes making jokes and saying, “Elmo loves you!” Oscar the Grouch tends to be gruffer. The Count tweets (X-es?) a number of the day every day.



The X profile for @CountVonCount.

Part of the success of these social media accounts is, undoubtedly, the topical posts that are shared by each character occasionally. Without breaking character, these posts have referenced the music releases of Beyonce, Taylor Swift, and Harry Styles. They note holidays and national days or observances. They comment on current events. These are the posts that tend to go viral. For example, Elmo’s Instagram posted a reference to the premiere of *Ted Lasso*’s third season. The post featured Elmo dressed as Ted Lasso, Grover as Coach Beard, and real-life *Ted Lasso* star Brett Goldstein as Roy Kent. It received over 279,000 likes and more than a thousand comments.

By responding to current events and trends, these characters remain relevant in the lives of adults who long ago outgrew watching Sesame Street on a regular basis. These posts are often shared – by reposting on X or sharing to stories on Instagram. As mentioned earlier, the social strategy for Sesame Workshop is to build relationships with their audience. The overall brand strategy is, of course, to drive viewership of Sesame Street. If they accomplish their goal of building a relationship with adults through social media,

those adults will in turn be likely to encourage the children in their lives to watch Sesame Street.

To that extent, there seems to be little integration between these social media channels and other aspects of the organization. The relationship-centered approach means that the Sesame Street monsters are rarely posting links to products or promotion for upcoming television specials. However, this still leaves the viewers with an impression of brand synergy. It reminds many adults of the childhood friends they haven't seen in a while. Additionally, since the Sesame Street gang posts in the character's own voice, it strengthens the characterization of the brand without cheapening it with promotional content. These social media profiles are used as more of a storytelling tool than an advertising one. The strength of this approach, though, is it has the ability to keep characters on the minds of an audience that otherwise would have moved on long ago. Once the relationship is built through social media, this audience is more likely to engage with other aspects of the brand such as merchandising.

On January 29, 2024, @Elmo tweeted (X-ed?) a seemingly simple question. "Elmo is just checking in! How is everybody doing?" This type of post is fairly common for these accounts. However, this one went viral when Twitter (X) users began replying en masse. The post received over 200 million views, 20,000 replies, 61,000 reposts, and 165,000 likes. Although a post going viral is typically sought after by social media professionals, in this case the responses were, by all accounts, a public trauma dump. While a few users were sharing positive stories or thanking Elmo for asking, most responses consisted of lists of things that people were going through. People mentioned the death of loved ones, economic hardships, mental health struggles, and more.



@Elmo's now-infamous question.

It's hard to say how many of the responses were genuine, however, after a few of these replies started being shared, it effectively became a meme. Responses became

more and more exaggerated. Eventually, even other brands were in on it. At the time of writing, the top replies were from Jimmy Johns, Domino's Pizza UK, Sour Patch Kids, RITZ Crackers, Shake Shack, and even the IRS and the UN, to name a few. Celebrities were chiming in, and it was starting to be picked up by major news outlets.

When asked why the tweet resonated the way it did, Vittas mused "It's a weird place in the world to be right now...so there's a lot of question marks out there." Further, Bisman suggested, "In this particular moment in time, this simple, direct message from a childhood friend opened the floodgates. We learned that people really need their friends, family and community to check in on them!"

Whatever the reasoning may be, the Sesame Workshop social media team knew they needed to respond. Within five hours of the original post, the Sesame Street brand account began sharing #EmotionalWellBeing resources. They began linking to a page on the Sesame Workshop website that contained mental health education tools for parents to engage with their children about their emotional well-being. From there, the other Sesame Street characters began engaging with #EmotionalWellBeing as well, to great effect – even getting a reply from President Joe Biden, who encouraged readers to offer a helping hand and ask for help when they need it.

In reporting on the entire event, Daily Beast reporter Laura Bradley said it best by writing, "In these absurd and confusing times, there's a certain kind of poetry in realizing that innocent posts from a children's show can double as a kind of social barometer—even if some of the responses are less than encouraging. On some days, we're sweepin' the clouds away, and on others, we're all just standing out in the rain, cracking jokes about what it feels like to be soaking wet."

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