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Hashtag heroes: Social media tags help spread the word about great things in Reno

By Mark Robison (<http://blogs.rgj.com/renorebirth/author/mdrobison/>), November 2, 2013

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Vanessa Simpson grew up in Gerlach.

"Every morning in elementary school, the whole school would go out around the flagpole in the schoolyard and we would say the Pledge of Allegiance," said the owner of the local photo business Focus in Photography.

"And every day in October, we would sing a verse of 'Home Means Nevada.' Consequently, I have that song stuck in my head. I love it here. This is where my heart is, so I started tagging photos like that."

She means she uses the hashtag #homemeansnevada when she posts photos online.

Simpson is just one of many private citizens, organizations, businesses and government entities who are using hashtags to improve the image of Reno and Northern Nevada.

She also uses #biggestlittlecity and #thisisreno.

"I think Reno gets a bad rap," Simpson said. "I have a good following on Instagram and Flickr from all over the country and the world, and I want to get people past the 'Reno 911' stigma. There are so many awesome things in this town that are happening."

#biggestlittlecity

Abbi Whitaker is a community advocate with the Biggest Little City pride movement that aims to improve Reno's image by getting people who live here to talk about why they think this is a great place.

The biggestlittlecity hashtag was already being used.

"There's been a 350 percent increase in use since we started using it in June," she said.

"I think hashtags are going to become the new dot-com. They're like the new www because it can connect everything on a particular topic."

She said that if you search for posts using #biggestlittlecity, they are 99 percent positive. Tourists and locals seem to be using the hashtag mostly for three things: scenic pictures, pictures of people doing outdoor activities and people out at night.

"I see it helping Reno's image because when you click on those hashtags, you see beautiful pictures of Reno, people kayaking, great food, skiing," she said. "You don't see negative things associated with Reno."

"We know people click on a tag to find out about a place — it's the future of marketing."

"Hashtags allow people to start conversations with other like-minded people," Whitaker said.

"And when people talk to other people who care passionately about this community, they are going to inspire each other, and that can only lead to great things."

City hashtags

If you're not sure what hashtags are, you're not alone. The city of Reno has embraced hashtags — such as #thinkreno for citizens to suggest innovative or strategic ideas — but not everyone is down with them.

"Some people are scared of hashtagging," said Deanna Gescheider, Reno's director of communications and community engagement. "We're finding we still need to educate people about how to use them, why to use them and when to use them."

She said the city has hired a new "digital engagement manager" — Monica Thompson — who starts Monday and will oversee citizen engagement through the city's website, social media efforts, email and other online strategies.

The city gets a lot of feedback wanting postcards to be sent out or to have people knock on their doors.

"The reality is that government resources are so slim, we have to rely on these more innovative approaches because they are more cost effective — but they can also be intimate and require less of your time," Gescheider said.

"If you can engage with a hashtag and feel your voice is being heard, then we would consider that a success."

In addition to #thinkreno, some other main hashtags the city uses are #cityofreno (for announcements, news and agenda items) and biggestlittlecity (for positive stories).

"(Hashtags are) a really good way for us to track discussions in social media and hear about issue-related topics so we can gain feedback and directions from our constituents," she said.

"It's just one more way for us to do outreach, so it's a very important tactic we've adopted and will continue to embrace."

#thisisreno

Bob Conrad and Ryan Jerz started thisisreno.com in 2009.

"We saw the downsizing of newsrooms in the Northern Nevada market, and we were seeing a lot of news distributed and not a lot published or aired, so the idea was to give a voice to individuals, businesses, government agencies and politicians that weren't being heard in addition to a lot of their other media efforts," Conrad said.

Although unintended, the result is that a lot of thisisreno's content is positive.

He said a hashtag is an easy way to identify a particular topic on a social network, so rather than following individuals, you can follow a topic or a subject based on that hashtag.

Conrad sees #thisisreno being used on Instagram quite a bit.

"I can't say whether it's the most popular Reno hashtag, but I see it increasing in use, and I see it being used with a lot of other hashtags related to Reno and Northern Nevada," he said.

The site's staff also uses #homemeansnevada and #battleborn a lot.

"And the biggestlittlecity hashtag, of course," he said.

#homemeansnevada

Bethany Drysdale, director of public relations for the Nevada Commission on Tourism, said her staff uses a lot of different hashtags. An important one is #homemeansnevada.

"When we see something popular catching on, it's good to be a part of the conversation," she said. "I think our staff here knows some of the best treasures in Nevada, so we lend our voice of authority by calling out some of these great places."

The hashtag is intended for anything positive about Nevada or that makes you proud to be a Nevadan.

"If people from the outside see how much residents feel pride in living here, of course they're going to want to come here and visit themselves," Drysdale said.

"It helps you latch on to something positive and learn about the wonderful treasures around the state. (The hashtag) can only benefit us in attracting people to the state."

#renofoodporn

Mark Estee of Campo restaurant in downtown Reno helped start the renofoodporn hashtag.

"The idea is to show other people what you're eating that is beautiful or cool," he said.

"I think it helps Reno because it's kind of fun, doesn't cost any money and gives people a chance to show their inner photographer and to show different restaurants they're eating at.

"And the more we show all our (restaurant) offerings and all our food, we're raising community awareness as well."

A contest is raising awareness for the hashtag. People are encouraged to take photos of their food arranged to look like a hashtag and post them tagged with #renofoodporn. Winners will get gift certificates to Campo or Estee's French-inspired restaurant Chez Louie inside the Nevada Museum of Art.

#renorevival

Reno mayoral candidate Jessica Sferrazza has started a hashtag that she hopes lives on long after her campaign is over: #renorevival.

"The hashtag symbolizes two things: one is all the good things that are going on in Reno, and No. 2 is the potential that Reno has moving forward," she said.

Sferrazza plans a big kickoff to really introduce the hashtag to the public soon, with a major policy plan called "Reno Revival" unveiled early next year.

"I wanted to do something that symbolized Reno in a positive way," she said.

Some hashtags promoting Reno and Nevada

- #homemeansnevada
45,221 accounts reached
- #biggestlittlecity
18,733 accounts reached

