

Win Debates on Social Media Using 10 Simple Rules

Shôn Ellerton, August 21, 2020

Ten simple rules to remember if you want to get the upper hand in an online social media debate.



Have you ever taken part in a heated exchange on social media? I certainly have and I can also say that I have made my share of mistakes while trying to get my point across. Reflecting on these mistakes, I came up with ten rules to remember when debating in social media that may give you the upper hand.

1. Do not use block capitals

When the heat gets turned up on an online social media debate, you may be tempted to type in BLOCK CAPITALS to 'shout' your message across. This is not a good idea. Not only do you portray yourself as someone out of control, you will probably be visualised by your opponent to be demonstratively frustrated, seething through your teeth and foaming at the mouth like a rabid dog. In the speaking world, my late Welsh grandmother used the tactic of softly spoken yet potent language to her advantage to quash shouty people into submission.

2. Do not go off-topic

From time-to-time, you could be engaged in a debate on a controversial topic, and we all know, that there are many of them floating around. For example, if the subject matter is about a controversial drug to cure a new disease and then you start discussing how bad the nation's leader is, you are going off-topic. This is not conducive to the debate and merely serves as being a diversion. As for

your opponent going off-topic, it is easy to be led into temptation to follow down this new line of discussion, but it is better to desist from doing so. Either steer back to the discussion or end the debate with your opponent by simply not replying. You need not worry that not replying suggests that you have lost the debate. Your opponent has, more than likely, changed the subject wanting you to continue down this new line of discussion knowing full well that you have already won the debate. However, word of warning. There are predatory trolls out there deliberately seeking posts from those that capture a large audience. In this clever but crooked strategy, the trolls, usually never having large audiences of their own, often look for a post in which to segue into a conversation that they want to pursue. This strategy often works well for the trolls because they are likely to get responses very quickly and often succeed in changing the subject entirely. I'm not a fan of deleting comments, but if responses are completely off-topic, it may be better to do so unless you want your post to be completely irrelevant to the thread of responses.

3. Do not use profane or foul language

Bad language or the use of *colourful metaphors*, a term famously coined in a Star Trek movie, is to be avoided at all costs. First, it makes you like an illiterate jerk with a limited vocabulary at your disposal. Second, it gives the impression that you are giving up in the debate and just getting frustrated. If you are on the receiving end, it is probably best not to respond, although, it can be very difficult to resist the temptation. For example, if you took the effort to express an opinion, however calm and controlled it may be, and the answer you receive is 'You f*%ng wanker!' Yeah, it's time to dismiss any conversation with that person on this particular debate.

4. Watch out for these four little words

There are four little words which you should be wary about. These words are *always*, *never*, *everybody*, *nobody*. Unless you are absolutely sure that these words apply, it is very easy to be caught out by them. I wrote an article specifically on this subject titled [Four Little Words to Watch Out for and Use Sparingly](#). You may be thinking that your opponent knows what you mean, but hey, this could be a controversial debate, and controversial debates are often targeted for the minutest nuances. For example, if you say that *everyone* knows what you mean? Everyone where? In the room? The world? Well, that is just a

grand assumption and patently not true if not delivered very precisely. Just be wary of these words.

5. If you do not know something, then say so

If your opponent asks you a question and you don't know the answer, there's nothing wrong with saying '*I don't know*'. Many respond to not knowing an answer by either, changing the subject, throwing abusive comments, or simply making up stuff. Don't do any of these things because if you do, especially if you make up stuff, you'll look like a complete cretin. If you don't know, then simply say so. You can follow up such a response saying that you'll do a little more research on the matter. With social media, it is often not very difficult to look up the information you need but if you are honest and state that you will do a little research, you actually earn kudos points with your opponent. This is not unlike using the classic 'forgive your opponent' strategy whereby making your opponent far more hesitant in being 'nasty' to you.

6. Never assume what the other person is an expert in

When debating over a topic and you suspect that your opponent may not be an expert because he or she works in another industry or trade or doesn't possess any formal qualifications, it is wrong to assume that this person has scant knowledge on the subject. In the trade, this is called *pigeonholing*, which is another subject I wrote about titled, [*Pigeonholing and Little Bits of Paper*](#). For example, I work in an IT environment, but little did I know that the guy sitting next to me programming mainframes is also an epidemiologist. Arguing with someone in a debate that he or she has no right to discuss pharmaceuticals because that person is not a pharmacist can, not only be embarrassing if they are indeed experts in pharmaceuticals, but also quite insulting.

7. Respond meaningfully and with context

One of the most irksome situations I've encountered are those which you took the time to research something and then to reply in detail only to find that your opponent responds back with a short vague answer that is difficult to decipher and has absolutely no meaning whatsoever. This behaviour is lazy and can be disrespectful at times. However, it also shows that the debate has effectively been won unless your opponent quickly follows up with more substance to add context to the debate. This can also be extended to hyperbole and over-

generalisations. For example, if someone responds to you that *millions* of people will be killed if someone is elected into power without giving any particular reason why, you would naturally respond as to why. However, if no reason is given, the statement is not meaningful and, hence, delivered without any context.

8. Take and acknowledge constructive criticism

When engaged in a heated discussion online, taking criticism is all part of the game. Seasoned debaters have earned their Teflon skins by having been through the gauntlet of whip-yielding opponents and irritating trolls time and time again intent on taking you down in each debate. However, accepting *and acknowledging* constructive criticism in a debate is often held in high esteem by your opponent and by others in the discussion. *Destructive* criticism is never worthy of esteem nor is it polite. This negative behaviour usually does not resonate very well with others on the thread if there are any. It simply illustrates disrespect.

9. Distinguish between facts and opinions

If you want to express an opinion, a simple rule is to ensure that you preface what you want to discuss by being clear that it is an opinion. This may be more difficult on mobile devices where texting is often more cumbersome for most than typing on a keyboard. Some get around the problem, by adding *imho* (in my humble opinion) in the text. If you are a little unsure of the facts, then either refrain from citing them or start off by stating something like '*I could be wrong but...*'. In a nutshell, do not give your opponent a weapon to gun you down because of misinformation or simply that you are not aware of the facts. There is nothing wrong in expressing an opinion, but make sure that it is understood by your opponent that it *is* an opinion.

10. Be nice and respectful

What can be more important than being simply nice and respectful? In the speaking world, I've come across many good debates between people with very different, even extreme, views who exercise respectful and courteous behaviour all the way to the end of the debate. In social media, those who exercise respect and courtesy are those who tend to be more successful in getting the upper hand in a debate. Unfortunately, there are many who confuse disrespect with their

disapproval of the content of the post. For example, if I posted an opinion as to why a controversial presidential candidate will win over an election and my opponent then finds *me* disrespectful for posting it, that is just complete and utter nonsense. Good opponents worth their grain of salt should be able to make a rational case why they are not in agreement with what you posted. Worse still are those who make a generalised assessment of *you* because they do not like what you posted. Provided the contents of your post is not directly aimed at an individual or a group of individuals in a generalised negative way, this behaviour shows cowardice searching for an easy exit from the debate. Remember, it is the *content* that you are debating about, and not about the *person*.

Bonus. Offer a one-on-one debate

This is not a rule but more of a suggestion.

I was once embroiled on a social media ‘fight’ and it got to the point that expressing thoughts through social media bubbles was becoming untenable. Half the responses were misconstrued and lost in ambiguity and it got all very tiring. At this point, I offered a challenge of doing a one-on-one debate through online video, after which, I heard nothing from my opponent. It was as if, he dropped off the edge of the world. This kind of offer is very powerful because you are offering your opponent the chance to continue the debate. This is an especially useful tactic with opponents who are doggedly insistent to get the last say in a thread come what may. If your opponent decides to ‘cancel’ the debate by stating that they wish to continue no further in the debate, or worse, delete comments or the post if able to, this act of resignation galvanises your victory. If the topic of discussion is advancing no further and the thread is ‘exhausted’, offer the challenge and then reply no more on the post. This can go either two ways. If the offer is accepted, set up the challenge as promised. Face to face discussions are usually far less inflammatory and quite refreshing. However, it is seldom that opponents take up the challenge which, of course, secures your victory.