Social Media Presence and Messaging: Best Practices for Communities

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Introduction

Social media has emerged, over the past two decades, as *the* space to communicate, connect, and interact with one's social network. Some recent statistics to illustrate this point: almost 90 percent of adults 18-34 have at least one social media account, and Facebook has the capacity to reach almost 97 percent of this age range. In terms of reaching young adults, social media platforms that are based on images and short videos, such as Instagram and Snapchat, continue to be immensely popular. This research review aims to provide useful information and strategies to help communities engage with new audiences, support increased interaction and involvement, and to build new partnerships. It offers a number of "best practices" that communities can adopt in order to develop effective social media messaging strategies. Through this review, communities can learn about how to design and implement effective social media messaging strategies through a series of questions that guide the process.

Context

Non-profit organizations are often small and run with low budgets with minimal staff members relying on the help of volunteers. Most of these organizations do not have a designated marketing, branding or social media departments. Even so, with planning it is possible to organize an effective social media presence that reaches a target audience to promote awareness throughout the community and find and maintain a growing client base, build partnerships with organizations and businesses throughout the community or even fundraise. Given the current social context of a global pandemic and ever-changing regulations and expectations for social interaction, using social media effectively is paramount for broadly sharing information in "real time" while alerting the community to events or activities. Organizations based around social justice and activism find social media to be a motivating force and use various platforms to share accomplishments.

Pre-Planning Work for Social Media Messaging

1. **Know the target consumer of your social media strategy:**
   - *Their age, Where they live, What languages they speak, How much they earn, How much they spend, What they buy, What they do in their spare time, What stage of life they're in (student, parent, retiree).*
   - Once the target audience is known, it is important to know how to reach them. There are a plethora of social media platforms that will be explored below. Our focus will be on younger audiences and, therefore, the following platforms: **Instagram, Youtube, Snapchat and Twitter** because of these platform user demographics:
     - 66% of internet users between the ages of 18 and 49 access **Youtube.**
     - As of 2017, 32% of internet users between the ages of 18 and 29 accessed **Instagram**, and that number continues to rise.
     - **Snapchat** reaches the youngest demographic, being most popular with 12 to 24 year olds.
     - 24% of US internet users are on **Twitter.**
   - Demographic information for each social media platform can be found here: *https://www.samhsa.gov/childrens-awareness-day/resources/digital-media-best-practice*
2. **Determine the purpose of social media presence:**
   - Consider the following questions: *What is the purpose of your online activities? How will your social media messages and content support your larger social marketing/communications strategy? What is the action that you want your engaged audiences to do? Is it to engage in services and supports? Do you wish to increase awareness about children's mental health or the systems of care approach?*
3. **Consider your resources:**
   - Questions to ask might be: *What resources do you have to devote to your social and digital media strategy? Consider potential writers, graphic designers, social media publishers, and community managers. Who are the key approvers on messaging and rapid responses as needed? How about paid media budget for social media amplification? How will you evaluate your efforts?*
   - Answers to these questions should be used to create guidelines for the organization around social media: who can post, what language should be used, what outside help your orgaization might be able to recruit, and who is responsible for follow up to content.

4. **Create a social media calendar of content posting, audit and reflection:**
   - Create a social media calendar that includes specific plans for posting about big events or forthcoming important organizational information. Hootsuite can help to create and maintain this calendar. Hootsuite nonprofit resources (https://hootsuite.com/about/hootgiving) are offered at a discount and your organization can learn Hootsuite for free here: https://education.hootsuite.com/collections
   - Next, a planned audit and reflection should also be included in the social media calendar in order to ensure you are reaching a target audience. Make necessary adjustments to social media strategy if information is not reaching members of the community that need your services.
   - What is a social media audit? The audit should look at each platform to see who is accessing information and from which source. Organizations should find information from each platform about which posts get the most attention, mentions, re-posts, likes, etc. Seek to find if calls to action, quotes, or images get more attention, for example. Tools to help gather analytics and demographic information for an audit are listed further in this article.

Building Your Social Media Brand

Create an intentional tone. Here's how:
- Avoid Jargon
- Use adjectives that develop your brand's personality
- Write from a reader's perspective. "Make the reader the hero in the story."
- Be sure to fill in as much information about your organization as possible in profile fields and always include your mission. Ensure the tone of all posting and content is "mission-aligned".
- Advice: "…if you're an animal rescue, you can leverage your furry friends to both delight and pull at the heartstrings of your followers by taking on a friendly and warm voice and tone. If your organization specializes in cancer research, you'll want to channel hope and empathy and ensure the information is presented in layperson terms so donors can understand exactly what their dollars are funding."

Communication Strategy/Context Management

1. **Respond** to all activity in a timely manner
2. **Introduce** your staff, board and volunteers to your social media audience. This can include donors, too. Cover photos should be compelling and related to the work of the organization.
3. **Share stories** about people that make the work real. "Twitter research finds videos that include people in the first few frames leads to 2X higher retention. Another study by Georgia Institute of Technology and Yahoo Labs reports that photos that contain faces are 38% more likely to receive likes and 32% more comments".
4. Post **shareable content** and be sure to know **hashtags** and keywords relevant to the work you do and audience you both have and want.
5. Optimize messaging for each specific platform and **avoid posting the same content** to multiple platforms.
6. **Be sure to tag** donors, board members, clients and other organizations and ask them to share across their networks as well. This will help the organization to reach a larger overall audience.
7. More **advice** from Donorperfect.com includes the following ideas for social media content:
   - ***Mission-minded photos:*** *Make the most of opportunities like time in the field, follow-ups with people who benefit from your services, and community-based events to record moments that will matter to your donors through photos and videos.*
   - ***Constituent testimonials:*** *Let your followers hear straight from the people you're helping as well as the people who give to you about just how critical your mission is. Include photos with your quotes or short videos.*
   - ***Upcoming campaigns/opportunities:*** *Gather all of the assets you'll need to promote upcoming events, online fundraisers, and volunteer days. Be sure to stock up on photos and testimonials that will motivate followers to take the desired action.*
   - ***Inspirational quotes:***
     Who doesn't love a good inspirational quote? Compile a doc with your favorites from activists and authors to celebrities and visionaries. Align relevant ones with the appropriate holidays and pretty them up with a post designer mentioned above.

Community Partnerships and Donors

1. **Find** organizations with overlapping causes or interests and be aware of "conversations" that are happening on social media that are relevant to your work.
2. **Tag current and "wannabe" partner organizations.** You can search by using hashtags or keywords and spending time on social media and news platforms to research what other organizations are doing and what content is trending.
3. This includes competitors because you can ask and **borrow/steal ideas**. This will allow your content to reach a larger audience and be shared more frequently.
4. The most social media savvy organizations will also use content and posting to **generate funds.** Below in the platform-by-platform analysis, information is included as to how to create donor links in your social media profiles.
5. You'll want the ability to **pair your posts with ways to donate** to your organization, registering for fundraising or volunteer events, and setting up individual crowdfunding pages." Donorperfect.com provides forms to help pair social media with revenue generators and support an organization's brand.
6. To help with the aforementioned social media audits and analytics, organizations can "**stock up on free social media tools** to help you create, schedule, and track posts. Lucky for you, there are a plethora of free social media tools to help you and your team manage your channels more effectively and efficiently."
   - Stock photos: Unsplash, Pexels
   - Photo and video editor: VSCO
   - Graphic maker: Canva, Stencil, Venngage
   - Videomaker: Typito
   - Post scheduler: HootSuite, Buffer
   - Mention monitor: Google Alerts
   - Engagement tracker: SumAll, Google Analytics

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONS DURING COVID-19

- **Communicate early and often** with a calm tone that reflects current context without adding concern.
- Use social media **listening software** like Sprinklr, Sprout Social, CrowdTangle, and Brandwatch that allow you to set up keyword terms for mentions of COVID-19 or coronavirus in connection with your community.
- **Review pre-scheduled posts** and adjust as necessary to fit new information or to match emergent need within your community or necessary change in messaging tone

For more information, please visit: *https://www.civicplus.com/blog/ce/how-to-adjust-your-social-media-strategy-during-covid-19*

Platform-by-Platform Exploration and Analysis:

Below is a platform-by-platform analysis to help community-based organizations maximize social media efforts. In order to best support organizations reaching a younger demographic, focus is on the following platforms: Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat and Youtube. For other platforms such as Facebook and Linked-In, see the notes at the end of this document. As well as providing a free platform, most of the below social media platforms and outlets offer help for non-profits looking to use their services. This information will be listed under **"Help"**. Unless otherwise noted, the following information can also be found at: *https://www.samhsa.gov/ childrens-awareness-day/resources/digital-media-best-practices*

Instagram
Demographic: Now the second most used social media platform in the U.S. with 32 percent of adult Internet users, Instagram skews significantly toward younger adults (ages 18–29).

Best uses: Creative or aesthetically pleasing photos (don't forget to use the built-in filters and photo effects to maximize visual impact); humor and aspirational content; short-lived content known as "Stories."

Complementary apps: Hyperlapse: Allows you to make timelapse videos. Boomerang: Allows you to make one-second video loops to post on Instagram (but often work on other social networks too). Layout: Allows you to create collages of multiple photos in pre-designed grids.

TagsForLikes: Aggregates most-used hashtags to copy and paste into posts.
Hashtags: On Instagram, the rules of hashtags are simple. The more hashtags you use, the more likes you're going to get. The downside is your posts might look a bit spam-like to your most engaged followers, so consider balancing which hashtags you use. Best practice allows for up to 10 hashtags within a post.

Instagram Stories: A Snapchat-like feature within the Instagram app, this allows you to post photos and videos in a slideshow format that disappear after 24 hours. Already, the service has more daily users than Snapchat.

Some popular mental health hashtags include:
- #mentalhealth
- #mentalhealthmatters
- #ok2talk
- #bethedifference
- #mentalhealthawareness
- #wellness
- #mindfulness
- #HeroesofHope

- #behavioralhealth

Twitter
Demographic: 24 percent of U.S. adult Internet users are on Twitter. Internet users in urban areas are much more likely to use Twitter than users in suburban or rural areas. More men use Twitter than women. According to recent research 55% of people who interact with nonprofits on Twitter take action.

Best uses: News and announcements; customer service; links to articles or blog posts; micro-blogging; live tweeting from events; participation in trending conversations.

Hashtags: Use #hashtags on Twitter—but only up to two at a time! Any more than that and you run the risk of your content appearing to be spam. Be careful when creating new hashtags for your campaigns. Do quick research to ensure that the hashtag has not been taken or can be misread. When tweeting within the context of a larger conversation, use hashtags that already have established user practice or communities behind them. Don't hashtag random words

Twitter Moments: Consider using Twitter Moments, a feature within the Twitter app and website, to aggregate and publish a series of relevant tweets from a tweet-worthy moment together in one place. For your Twitter Moment, you can aggregate a mix of your tweets along with other relevant tweets from other accounts

Help:
Twitter nonprofit resources:
- Twitter's Flight School (https://www.twitterflightschool.com/student/catalog)
- Read the Campaigning on Twitter Handbook
- Follow Twitter Nonprofits for case studies, training, news and opportunities (https://twitter.com/nonprofits?lang=en)

Snapchat
Demographic: Snapchat is the youngest social media platform on this list. It is a mobile-first on-the-go social media community but boasts strong daily engagement among youth and young adults (ages 12–34).

Best uses: One-way conversations (though you can snap with other users, for brands and organizations, it's best to keep your communication limited to your one-way story); humor; behind-the-scenes of events, meetings, or conferences; storytelling.

Best times for engagement: Content on Snapchat is ephemeral and lasts 24 hours. The best time to post is whenever the content you're recording is happening!

Snapchat Memories: A feature within the Snapchat app now allows you to save Stories in the cloud or your phone and to share photos and videos taken any time in the past that are saved on your phone.

Tips and best practices:
1. Snapchat is an engaging storytelling tool—but it's easy to use that to your advantage. The best Snapchat Stories let us peer into a sector of someone's life or an organization's process that isn't normally showcased, all while telling a good story.
2. Consider finding influencers in your community for a Snapchat takeover.

YouTube

YouTube (the world's second largest search engine) continues to be a strong social media platform for organizations to leverage. In addition to using YouTube as a way to host videos for the purpose of embedding them elsewhere, many organizations miss the opportunity to tap into the attentive audiences the platform has cultivated.

Demographic: 63 percent of U.S. internet users are on YouTube. Among 18–49 age group, YouTube accounts for 66 percent of videos watched across devices and platforms.

Best uses: Short-form videos; shareable and discoverable content; popular content (e.g., How-to, Music, or Animals).

Tags: Similar to hashtags, YouTube tags are used to index content on YouTube. There is no limit! Also, be sure to add concise descriptions to your videos to quickly inform your viewers whether or not the video content is indeed what they are looking for. The descriptions also contribute to discoverability in both YouTube and Google searches.

Tips:
1. Consider the feedback you get from YouTube (be it actual comments on your videos or when your videos get the most engagement, what types of titles work best, how your videos are upvoted or downvoted, and so on).
2. Build a channel and playlists with a specific content area in mind.
3. Have a schedule. Viewers are much more likely to subscribe if they know you will be publishing content regularly (for ex. once a week on Tuesdays) than if they think you're just uploading content whenever it suits your need to embed a video on another website. Advertise your new videos in Instagram and on Twitter.
4. Include relevant links in your YouTube description as a way to pull audiences who are interested in learning more.

Help: YouTube nonprofit resources:

- Enroll in YouTube Creator Academy (creatoracademy.youtube.com) courses, especially: Activate Your Nonprofit on YouTube
- Check to see if you're eligible for YouTube's Nonprofits Program
- Enroll your channel for the Nonprofits Program (https://support.google.com/nonprofits/answer/3367463)

Use these in-app tools across multiple platforms to aid in organized messaging:
- Planoly is a visual planner for Instagram to see your grid before you post.
- Canva is an app to (easily) create beautiful images for your posts. No graphic design experience required. Here's a guide to social media image apps.
- Story Slicer allows you to cut, edit then post videos for Instagram, Facebook, Whatsapp, or VK stories. It's easy to use, for the novice or pro videographer.
- Campsite. The problem: you only get one link on your social profiles. The solution: a collection of links with images to send users to exactly the right place.

Conclusion

Considering the plethora of social media platforms available, non-profit and community-based organizations need a focused, research-based strategy to best interact with key constituents and partners. Given the low-cost and broad-reaching nature of almost all social media outlets and platforms, organizations are reaching ever-growing numbers of possible clients and community members with messaging and news. In today's world, news is generated and disseminated so quickly, that social media and smart devices are the best way to keep your organization and its mission on the minds of community members. This guide to "best practices" for social media messaging aims to provide strategies and resources to help your community maximize its positive outcomes and initiatives. This review has attempted to illustrate four powerful social media platforms to reach adolescents and young adults—key demographics on social media.

Author Information

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