

Using Social Media to Mobilize Support

By Tim Shaw

We've all seen the recent stream of articles and presentations telling associations to get on the social media bandwagon. But many association executives are wondering, is social media all that it's cracked up to be? A fair question. The answer is that although most organizations are still exploring the **possibilities of social media, some have already demonstrated the practical benefits of using it to inform**, engage and enable members and the public around advocacy issues. The trailblazers include three associations from the CSAE Trillium community – the Ontario Long Term Care Association, Community Living Ontario and the Ontario Real Estate Association.

Importance of Advocacy

One of the primary services that associations provide is advocating on behalf of members. To do this effectively, they have to mobilize an audience around an issue or cause. The challenge is that no one likes being bombarded by emails, calls or letters. This is where social media – “pull” rather than “push” technology – shines. Social media allows you to pinpoint the people that share a passion for – or at least an interest in – your cause and then, with minimal effort, inform, engage and enable them to support it.

Informing Your Audience

Getting information out quickly is the first step toward motivating an audience to take action in an advocacy campaign. There's no way that they will respond to a call to action without first knowing

Social Media what the issue is about. Social media tools such as Facebook posts, tweets with links and YouTube videos allow you to do this with ease. The Ontario Long Term Care Association (OLTCA) is an example of an association that is using social media to inform members and stakeholders. OLTCA takes the content that virtually every association creates – stories written for its online newsletter – and vastly extends its reach through the association's Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook accounts. Stories are picked up by key stakeholders who in turn post them on their own websites and social media forums. Current Twitter followers include the Minister of Health and Long Term Care! As OLTCA members watch their information spread across the Web, they become more involved in the content creation process and provide authentic voices for the sector. OLTCA now receives more stories on the innovative programs and quality initiatives offered by long-term care homes than the association can publish. The result is a more engaged membership, enhanced credibility for the association and a positive image for the long-term care sector.

Engaging Your Audience

Once an association has established a social media presence and following, it can begin engaging its audience. There are a couple important points to keep in mind.

First, know your audience and where they are. Not everyone you want to reach will be in the same place. Community Living Ontario (CLO) began engaging like-minded organizations and the media with Twitter, but soon realized that it could also be used to inform MPs and MPPs as well. CLO then created a Facebook page to engage their members and the general public. They have found that different social media tools allow them to reach different audiences.

Second, make sure that your content is valuable. Quality will determine whether or not your audience becomes engaged. The offerings on CLO's Facebook page include links to information about members and related organizations; an opportunity for members to post and share content; and news about events and activities of interest. The popularity of the page — with its nearly 1,500 fans — is due to the organization providing valuable and engaging content and allowing visitors to actively participate in the conversation.

Enabling Audience Action

You've now informed your audience about your issue or cause and engaged them in discussion. The final step is enabling them to take action.

The Ontario Real Estate Association (OREA) used social media for the engagement phase in two recent campaigns — the potential impact of the HST on home sales and proposed mandatory home energy audits. Past OREA calls to action had been limited to traditional communication channels. For these two campaigns, however, OREA also used Twitter to drive members to their website, where a form allowed them to send an email to their MPP in less than a minute. Both campaigns were seen as successes by the OREA membership even though only the energy audit effort actually got legislation changed.

A Balanced Assessment

While for many the jury may still be out on everything that associations can do with social media, at least three Ontario associations are using this new tool to inform, engage and enable members and the public to become advocates. By providing relevant content, engaging audiences online and reducing friction in the participation process, they have shown that social media can be an effective means of rallying support and action for issues and causes.

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