

## **The Role of Social Media at Your Next Conference**

By Kathryn Schwab

How many times have you attended an event and felt like you were simply ‘lectured’? Oh sure, a few people in the audience interacted with the speakers, but time was limited, and the Q&A session only allowed for three questions. Moreover, once the conference ended, that’s it... over... done.

Many of us have attended such events that, in the moment, the content seemed useful, but soon much of what we absorbed is gone from our minds when we got back to our day-to-day busy lives. The content, the issues discussed, and the opinions of others didn’t necessarily live on. Basically when the conference was over, so was the discussion. Even when you went online to talk about it with someone, there was no forum, no social platform, no medium to continue the discussion.

But that is changing and, for some, it has fully changed. Everyone is online, whether we’re searching on Google, or Facebooking our friends and family, mostly everyone turns to the Internet to learn and to engage. The proliferation of social media has made it possible for us to capture meaningful information and respond to it – in real time. Because of the tools of social media, we no longer have to wait for the newspaper to arrive in the morning, or rush home for the 6 o’clock news – because with social media, information isn’t scarce, it is abundant. Even better, we, the people, now get to add to it, create more of it, and deliver it to others in our own way, on our own time.

Social media tools have entered the world of conferences and meetings in a way that allows the issues and trends to build momentum in the hearts and minds of audiences before the conference, to ignite more engagement during the conference, and to continue long after the folding chairs have been put away.

### **Know your audience**

Social media platforms have proved to be a powerful mechanism to ensure that key issues are born, nurtured and mature through online participation. From the social media beginner to the sophisticated user, events and conferences have the potential to be more valuable to the audience when participants have the opportunity to interact with the issues and trends – before, during and after the event. How is that possible? Through careful planning, a strategic approach, relevant content and an inviting attitude toward audience participation, social media can deliver many results, such as: improved stakeholder communications, enhanced membership development, and stronger thought-leadership in your organization’s area of focus.

Where to start? Begin with the audience in mind. Who are they? The culture of your organization is also important. More conservative organizations may use a combination of LinkedIn and Twitter. Other organizations may have a more casual audience and culture and opt for Facebook. But before choosing the tools, also think long and hard about your own social media biases. You may be a whiz at using Facebook to talk to your family and friends and download games, but that doesn’t mean that your conference audience is a Facebook group too.

Don't choose your tools, "just because" you might know how to use them well. Give it careful thought.

### **Aim for quality, not quantity**

Also be mindful of the natural temptation to try to create quantity. Do you want to facilitate channels of communication, or are you looking to 'build' followers? In life, we tend to go for the numbers and forget the reason we started using the tools. Quality is the best policy, especially for issue-based conferences and meetings. Building followers means nothing if you haven't incorporated the tools in which to educate, improve communications, strengthen membership signups, increase donation levels or create media or membership 'buzz' around the topics.

As an aside, be wary of snake-oil salesmen who try to sell you on the numbers game. There are lots of people and businesses who will try to tell you they will help you bring in high numbers of "followers" and "likes" – and that's when you need to ask if numbers of random people will meet the conference objectives, both short term and long term? Chances are, the numbers really don't matter unless all the numbers comprise of increasing your membership, donors or other supporters.

Presumably, you want to build something sustainable through your conference, and you are trying to make the issues accessible to specific people. And that's precisely what the tools need to do – make the issues accessible, make it easy to weigh in, add value, and foster new conversations and ways to learn.

### **Planning is key**

But simply acquiring the social media tools is not enough. This comes back to a strategy. Planning is very important and determining how and when you want those channels to be open is key. Some organizations only flip the channels on for the event itself, others leave the channels on all the time. So that's an important decision, and it should be made based on the type of resources you have. If you are a lean, mean organization with few staff, it is an important consideration when it comes to social media, because the one thing that can be said about social media is that it requires care and feeding.

What makes social media successful for one organization and not another is having a dedicated resource managing the channels at all times or "most of the time". Just because you turn the channels on, it doesn't mean people will tune in and engage. Half (and sometime more), of the job belongs to you when those channels are on. Social media isn't a Ronco commercial - remember, "set it and forget it"? It is quite the opposite in fact. So remember if you can't care for your social media channel, it won't work for you.

### **Content is king**

This leads to the next most important part of social media, content. Content is king, and it will drive people to engage, and it can drive them away. When it comes to your event, it's not just the content of the conference speaker. There is much more to your organization's conference than the content experts who provide the presentations.

Topics are vast and dynamic, and they live beyond your event. Although you've chosen speakers and their topics based on what is most appealing to your audience (and given the timelines and the parameters of the event), what about the other speaking submissions that didn't make it into the event, simply because you didn't have room? Perhaps those submissions are still worthy of discussion on a social media platform. Quite possibly some of those who submitted great ideas would like to participate on behalf of your event through social media if you don't have room for them at the actual conference. There's always a way to add more value through social media.

In any case, with your audience, your culture, your content and your resources, it's now time to choose the social media channels that you want to implement. And once you get those accounts all fired up, remember one thing: nothing happens overnight. It takes time to build the audience, to get people engaging, and to amass raving fans that support your organization on social channels.

Specifically for your event or meeting, social media planning is key for pre-event, during-event and post-event activities. Your conference takes place at one point in time, but social media tools can be used to build momentum ahead of the event, maintain or build it further during the event, and sustain interest after the event. To achieve this, think of the following to help you plan.

**Pre-event:** Depending on your audience and content, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn can be used effectively to ask audience questions and create conversations with people as a lead up to the event. If you're bringing in guest speakers or keynote speakers, encourage them to use the channels to give 'teasers' about their topic or engage with the audience ahead of time. Use these channels to help build momentum and excitement, or as tool to help your audience engage.

**During-event:** Twitter is the best real-time social channel. If you plan really well, you can have a screen for the audience to watch the "tweet-stream" of conversations about the conference. Also, plan a hashtag for the event and claim it! A hashtagged event allows people to create searches of tweets specifically about or coming from that event (for example #CSAE12). Also, think about video recording and creating a YouTube account. YouTube is the second largest search engine and if your event is annual, people may want to search YouTube for videos of past conferences presentations.

**Post-event:** Twitter is by far the best social channel for activities before, during and after an event. Posting videos on YouTube is an excellent post-event channel, allowing your audience to view and comment on the event – whether they attended or not. Also think of posting meeting presentations on SlideShare for those who want to review the presentations. And if you've chosen to use Facebook or LinkedIn, keep the conversation going with your community, especially if you have an annual event.

Always keep objectives in mind and how social media can help you meet your conference goals: membership acquisition, education, fundraising, etc. Also think about how much time and effort you can put towards it. Doing something poorly is not worth doing at all. So plan your resources accordingly: members, staff, freelancers, etc.

Social media is about enriching what already exists for your audience – a great conference, a great organization, great speakers, great members and great topics for further exploration, all through the online world. Choose the tools that are going to enhance the experience both for your audience and for your organization.