

## **Using Social Media for Events ...Without Wasting Your Time**

By Randall Craig

Today's conventional wisdom is that if you're not Twittering, YouTubing, Facebooking, and LinkingIn your annual conference, you've missed the boat. While this is for the most part true, the excitement of using the new tools can get in the way of applying them productively. In this article, we review practical ways to use social media for your event — planning it, promoting it, delivering it as well as after it's over.

### **Planning the Event**

How are event themes, speakers and educational tracks determined at your association? Usually this is delegated to a committee composed of volunteers, staff and perhaps trusted advisors. If the committee chooses the right combination for the program, the perceived value of, and attendance at, the event rises.

If the committee makes the wrong choice, your event is in trouble. While it may seem risky to ask members directly, using social media tools to reach out to members and other potential attendees can generate buzz, collect data and enhance affinity. People are more likely to attend if they have a say in setting the agenda. How to do this? Conduct an online survey on key issues in the industry, asking about preferred topics and soliciting speaker recommendations. Or start up discussions in a forum or blog. Blogs have the advantage in that they are automatically syndicated across the Internet, spreading awareness even farther.

Your planning committee can consider the feedback when making its decisions. The information will validate great decisions — and help avoid bad ones.

### **Promoting the Event**

One of the basic tenets of web marketing is that instead of being broadcast from one point, a message should be designed so readers can pass it on. Consider these ideas:

- Create an event blog to keep everyone up to date. In addition to posting text, ask speakers to supply value-added content such as video clips. The blog can be easily syndicated across the Internet to promote awareness of the event, and improve the search engine rankings of the event website itself. Be careful not to allow the blog to be perceived as an advertising channel rather than a preview of the great value offered by the event.
- Announce your event on relevant discussion forums, including LinkedIn groups.
- Create a family of social media sites (YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter) tied together so that when one is updated, all are. Since you don't know where on the Web your attendees spend their time, creating a broad, integrated presence ensures that attendees will find you when they come looking for you.

- As a speaker, I spend time researching each audience to whom I present. What are their key issues? What are they hoping to learn from me? What are their challenges? While the answers can be gathered through one-on-one over-the-phone interviews, if your meeting planner establishes a forum, prospective attendees can share directly what they are looking for — and I can immediately respond. The result is in a more customized presentation coupled with audience pre-engagement that translates into more registrations for the event.

- While associations use their magazines and newsletters to promote conferences, they should engage other media as well to get out the message. Mainstream media (including trade publications) can generate articles that can be linked to or cross-posted. Bloggers may want to do pre-interviews leading up to the conference. And, of course, the board, staff and key volunteers can comment on each other's blogs and tweets, driving interest further.

A word about the registration process: The user interface is generally designed by programmers, not marketers. While making it easy to transact is the primary goal, the opportunity to build in social media functionality — tell-a-friend, up-selling, cross-selling, access to “private” content and discussion groups — should not be overlooked. The most powerful salesperson for your event is someone who has just made a purchase. Why not generate a testimonial just after a transaction by asking why the registrant decided to attend the event?

## **Delivering the Event**

Social media can play five important roles during a conference:

- capturing content to be used to market future events
- enhancing the learning process of attendees
- expanding the event to include remote “attendees”
- capturing information for a post-event virtual event
- generating publicity for the event and the association

**Future marketing:** Much of the content and other information generated during an event can be repurposed for future event marketing. Testimonials are particularly important. Quick tip: For video testimonials, instead of presenting a waiver to be signed, ask for permission right on camera before posing your first question.

**Learning process:** In addition to creating discussion forums for educational tracks, consider having a “Twitter wall” for each presentation. This is a projection screen off to the side, with a computer running a Twitter management program (HootSuite, TweetDeck, and Seismic are examples). This will display tweets about the presentation from both local and remote attendees. This, of course, only works if the speaker is

comfortable receiving feedback on the fly. Hint: Place a separate monitor in front of the speaker so he or she can follow the feedback without having to turn away from the audience.

**Remote attendees:** Technology now allows live event streaming, and some events now provide a “remote registration” option for attendees who can’t attend the event in person.

**Virtual event:** Using inexpensive Flip-style video cameras, a team of roving “reporters” can interview speakers, dignitaries and audience members throughout the event. The snippets can then be uploaded to YouTube, Facebook and elsewhere. Microbloggers can give a running commentary on particular workshops, and bloggers can do summaries and session reviews.

**Publicity:** Invite influential bloggers as well as mainstream media to your event. Doing this early allows them to publicize the event, further driving attendance. Finally, instead of a traditional news release, use a “social media news release.”

## **After the Event**

The goal of the annual event is to bind attendees closer to the organization through networking, professional development and community building. Social media can play a powerful role by capturing the excitement and learning for those who couldn’t attend in person. At the same time, it can provide an interactive extension of the conference for this same group. One way to do this is to ensure that the event’s pictures, videos, speaker hand-outs, transcripts and interviews are recorded and archived. Another is to establish a discussion forum where communities of interest can develop.

## **Summing Up**

Through the proper use of social media, an association’s annual event can provide a new jolt of energy for its emerging online learning community. In turn, the community becomes the planning and marketing arena for next year’s event. The cycle then continues year after year. Social media thus forms an essential ingredient for today’s successful event planners, but only if applied strategically and if associations don’t let the excitement of using these new tools divert attention from using them strategically.

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This article was originally published in the September 2010 CSAE Trillium Chapter FORUM E-Newsmagazine <http://www.csaecanada.com/Chapters/Trillium/Newsletter.aspx>