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Social Media Strategies That Build Member Relationships *Communication News*, August 2009

By: *Sherry Budziak*

If your association is working hard on member recruitment and retention—and who isn't?—use your knowledge of social media to help. Give members an online platform, really listen to what they say, and use their feedback as an opportunity to improve and innovate. Plus: Five ways social media transformed communications.

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In this turbulent economic environment, associations are understandably anxious about membership. As potential members consider joining and standing members consider renewal, the value of their relationship with your association comes strongly into question. Do they feel an attachment? Do they trust your organization to serve them, and their profession or industry, well?

How can you, as a communicator, help build more durable relationships with members, encourage greater participation, and solidify your association's reputation as a trustworthy partner? The answer is to leverage the benefits and opportunities of social media. You can help your association understand who your stakeholders are and how they approach Web 2.0, since your target audiences' comfort with the new technologies will determine which of the many tools and strategies will best fit both your association and them.

To put Web 2.0 to work in support of your association's membership efforts, there are five basic pathways to success.

Build trust and community. Your ability to influence your members and stakeholders is directly tied to your credibility. How do you build trust? Meet your members online and engage.

Your reputation now precedes you electronically. That's why you need to give members an online platform where they can meet and discuss the issues affecting their work. If you don't, they will create their own (if they haven't already). Better they get together on your platform than somewhere you can't control.

Show up where they already search: [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#), blogs, and [YouTube](#), among others. Listen to what is being said about you online, engage when you can help, and create your own presence, or community, on these social networking sites.

Communities naturally generate engagement. Smart associations harness the excitement and enthusiasm of these communities so they can spread their message to others. Encourage your members to tell their stories and possibly help others facing the same problems. Don't try to drive the discussion yourself, however. The communities will tell you what matters most to them.

It is also important to enable users to provide feedback to you and others in the community. Do this by allowing them to rate content on your social networking sites. Don't shy away from possible criticism; keep in mind that your most challenging members can be your fiercest advocates. Be honest—transparency goes a long way. This openness bolsters your reputation with members, which, in turn, acts to further encourage the sense of community.

Enhance innovation by listening to the wisdom of groups.

Social computing forces companies to abandon top-down management and communications practices and instead weave communities into their products and services. It changes how enterprises innovate. It uses the accumulated wisdom of the group to identify challenges and opportunities. Groups of people make collective decisions much better than even expert individuals do, assuming that the groups are a diverse set of people making independent decisions. What counts isn't the number of experts in the group but the diversity of perspectives.

That's why members are your best source of ideas for product and service enhancements. Giving them a platform will provide you with the opportunity to not only engage your members but also create innovative products and services that really respond to their needs.

Encourage word of mouth rather than fearing it.

Consumers no longer rely exclusively on external marketing messages when making decisions. Rather, they use social media to gauge others' opinions and share their own experiences, too. This peer-to-peer information exchange—word of mouth—is a fast-growing and powerful marketing tool. According to a spring 2009 [Nielsen Online Global Consumer Survey](#) of 25,000 internet consumers, 90 percent of respondents trust recommendations from people they know, and 70 percent trust consumer opinions posted online.

The lesson here: You as a communicator must help your association get ahead of what is being said about you online. Tell your story the way *you* wish it to be told; don't let someone else tell it for you.

Associations can no longer dictate their brands; they must move to being influencers. Harness your members as brand defenders and brand champions. Give them the messages, tools, and materials they can use to build your brand. For example, generate content the community wants. Syndicate your content and make it easy for your community to syndicate. Even more important, make yourself findable online. Make sure you have a presence where your stakeholders are likely to go.

Finally, respond quickly to problems. If you disappoint one member or customer, thousands of others will soon learn of it. Show them you have their best interests in mind and will do whatever is necessary to make things right. Trust—bolstered by positive word of mouth—overcomes fear of risk.

Gain member understanding. Online communities can often tell you far more than web analytics. You can gain member insight based on how they interact within a community whether through a blog, polls, comments, friends, or groups. Learn what professional concerns they have, determine how they view your association and their membership in it, hear their ideas for new programs or services, and even elicit public statements of support that will help clinch their commitment to your organization.

Really listen! What are people talking about? What is important to them? How can you help solve their problems? Make sure your association finds out.

Improve member service and satisfaction. Association brands don't foster loyalty; people do. Members often can solve problems for each other—so give them a place to do that. Ensure that lessons of the past are easy to find and use. Then sit back and listen. What are your customers/members saying about you?

Five Ways Social Media Transformed Communications

Now that social networking and knowledge sharing are the engines driving business development, they've changed the way we communicate forever.

Time and geography no longer matter. The world is flattening with the 24-hour availability of the internet.

Interactivity. User input and opinions have democratized how content is created and decisions are made. Interaction among staff and association members is replacing the command-and-control model. The "chain of command" your association once used has become a web of peers and customers.

Organizational structure is becoming more virtual. Witness the popularity of WebEx, Facebook, and Second Life.

Communicating is easier. Digital technology makes cost-effective, two-way symmetrical communications possible. Direction from the top has given way to collaborative teamwork for innovation.

Instant gratification. The expectation that people can communicate instantly and get access to information immediately has converged with the creation of online tools that can deliver on such expectations. These tools are powerful and easy to use, meaning everyone can—and does—create online content.

The time to get on social media is now. Take a half-hour or so each morning to explore the hot topics in your business category in the blogosphere. Find out what the people who have tagged your products or events on del.icio.us are saying. Search sites such as [Technorati](#), Facebook, [IceRocket](#), or [Digg](#) to see what your customers and prospective members are saying.

Consider how to create engagement between you and your members. Participate and be a part of the conversation. Create valuable online experiences for your stakeholders. Then measure your results so you can evaluate and change your programs to better serve your members.

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Reviews

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 [Wendy Felt](#), August 07, 2009

Q: What is "Web 2.0"?

A: "Web 2.0" refers to the second generation of web development and web design that facilitates information sharing and collaboration on the World Wide Web. The advent of Web 2.0 led to the development and evolution of web-based communities, hosted services, and web applications. Examples include social-networking sites, video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs, mashups and folksonomies.

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