

So you think you want to use Social Media?

This bite size resource is for VCS organisations who would like to utilise the social media platform but don't know where to start.

The platform on which organisations place themselves is a vital part of gaining recognition and to generate enquiries. Social media is one of the largest platforms currently available, but what does it really mean to utilise this type of stage?

What is Social Media?

Social media is a growing concept and takes various internet-based forms:

- Facebook – Allows the creation of profiles, upload of photos and videos, sending messages.
- Twitter – A form of microblogging or news which can be followed by others.
- LinkedIn – Networking to share business information between trusted contacts.
- Google+ - A closer replication of the way people interact online.
- Instagram – Sharing of pictures and videos either publically or privately.
- Pinterest – Useful to save ideas around the web.
- Snapchat – An app for sending images and text that disappear after 10 seconds.

What are the benefits of Social Media?

Profile of your organisation is raised in the use of social media in the following ways:

- Twitter, Facebook and Google+ are an increasing way that people communicate. Having a presence on any of these sites will give your group a greater chance to listen to your supporters and beneficiaries.
- You can add a call-to action on your social media site to drive traffic towards a project, donation page or your website. This will divert attention to what your organisation is all about.
- By having various internet platforms an organisation will have a more active presence and as such this will help to improve your charities placing when searching online.
- Social media is equipped with various tools and once supporters are engaging with you online it becomes easier for them to spread the word about you; which can influence others to do the same.
- Social media can help to mobilise support faster than any other method. E.g. after the London riots of summer 2011 social media helped to gather thousands of people to support the clean up the next day.
- Two-way conversations can happen on social media; for some this is a preferred method of contact.
- Social media is a cheap alternative for small new groups who cannot afford a domain name for a website.
- Snapchat allows you to send pictures and text in a simple format to people who have the app. This is useful to let known contacts have a quick glimpse at something of interest.

Most forms of social media are free and a cost effective way to reach people; create new interest and in turn new stakeholders. By adding time delays on Facebook posts it is possible that half a day's work a week can appear as though there is a constant stream of information, keeping your project visibly current. This is also useful to make posts live at the optimum traffic time i.e. to reach students it is useful to post after school hours and on weekends, to reach out of work people post in day time hours.

Are there any disadvantages to using Social media?

Social media is something that once utilised will put your organisation on a large stage. The process of uploading and reaching the audience may have some food for thought:

Unlike other forms of marketing; once uploaded a social media post becomes out of your control. The information will be passed between interested people whether the feedback is good or poor. Social media use has been known to cause online rants that:

- Cause an organisation to look bad or even cause embarrassment. Poor reputation may push away potential supporters.
- It is time consuming to upload posts to social media and as a communicative tool; time is further taken to respond to any queries or comments. For a small team finding enough time can be problematic.
- It takes time to perfect an approach to social media. The consideration of relevancy of post in content and audience will leave need for some constraint and following of rules. As such it is useful to have a social media policy to ensure that the content is not only to support the project goal but also restrictions are in place to prevent any unscrupulous content. The policy should be well thought and uploads must be done by trusted individuals with confidential login details.
- Snapchat is one of the most popular media forms with young people, although to reach people with a snap you need their contact information and they need access to the app. Snaps do disappear after ten seconds, therefore, it can be problematic to get the reach and message retention desired by using snapchat.

Although social media can be used as a public platform, social media can also be used to directly target an individual with information. When social media is utilised with an element of direct marketing or any other way that involves use of personal data it is important to ensure the contact is GDPR compliant.

Audience and appropriateness

When utilising social media the following steps will help to ensure the approach is right for your message:

- Think of the beneficiaries you are trying to support and who this will interest to generate enquiries. Will it be useful to target the families of beneficiaries or even potential funders in your media? Therefore, ensure you connect with what their values are.
- How much does your service cost and what can your audience afford? Think not only if cost will effect potential enquiries but if the audience you wish to reach are likely to have access to social media. If not think carefully about the strategy.
- Where are the audience located, are they local or from out of town? Social media will reach an audience that is local or not, the only restriction is based on who is looking and when.
- The audience you desire may be of a certain age, gender, ethnic origin etcetera. Therefore, ensure content is language and visually appropriate. It is possible to add age filters on Facebook to prevent child views if needed and also tag twitter feeds of similar interest to help widen your appropriate reach.
- It is important to ensure appropriateness of all media. It is useful to have a policy to approve items before they are made live; to avoid potential embarrassment from incorrect or inappropriate content.

How do you know if social media is working for you?

For Facebook you can access page 'Insights' to measure success. This will show you usage of your site and what times the most usage occurs.

Clicking on 'Post Types' will show you what type of posts e.g. visual or text are getting the most views. The most popular times and types of post will help you target the highest reach.

On Twitter you can look at the 'Contributors' section. This will show the users who contributed most over the last 50 tweets. You can add the most useful contributors to a 'Twitter list' for re-engaging later.

You can also use 'Followwonk' to view what followers are on twitter at a time in the day. This will help to utilise the best time to tweet.

The general feedback, share of sentiment and any 'Shares', 'Likes', 'Tweets' etcetera will give a good indication of what social media is doing for your project and will be recognised in the rate of service uptake through your organisation.

Support

For information on how to start using social media or how to improve your current online presence, you can view the Small Charities Collation website: <http://www.smallcharities.org.uk/resources-social-media/>

It is also worth keeping an eye on the Voluntary Action Rotherham website for 'Audience with ...' sessions. These are free events and Social Media is one of the topics covered. <http://www.varotherham.org.uk/>

