

Why unions should embrace social media

The new social media is a very powerful tool. It allows unions to have intimate, personal conversations with hundreds, if not thousands of members, potential members and supporters. **Alex White** explains how this can be done.

No longer are unions reliant on the old forms of media (newspapers, television, radio), or on face-to-face conversations between organisers and workers. Social media allows for unmediated communication and dialogue across vast distances, and at any time of the day or night. Unions can now campaign globally, raise awareness of issues locally or build support from non-traditional regions or geographic areas.

Unions can utilise very powerful and flexible social networking tools, but like any organising and campaign tool, they must be used properly. Tools such as Facebook and Twitter should not be just an afterthought. A union cannot just set up a Twitter account, make one or two 'tweets', and then expect hundreds of its members to start 'following'.

Like any endeavour, the effective use of social networking requires practice, and trial-and-error. Consumers of social media (union members, potential members and supporters) can interact with corporate and commercial users that have a high standard of professionalism. If a union is going to start using social media, it must be prepared to invest time and human resources to do so properly.

Of course, traditional media is still very important, and by no means am I suggesting that unions stop engaging in traditional media strategies.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA WELL

Social media and the social elements of 'Web 2.0' are characterised by conversation, participation, openness and community. Unless your unions understand these principles of social media, you won't get very far, and many of your efforts may be wasted.

1. Engage in conversations

Social media tools allow you to have conversations. People who visit websites these days expect to be able to interact with you on that website. The content you put on your union's website is no longer one way.

Even if you don't have a website that allows comments, users are still able to have their say, using tools such as Facebook or Twitter. Smart unions will engage with those people both on their chosen platform, as well as on the union's website.

It is no longer enough to simply use your union's website to broadcast your message, such as media releases. Members and non-members should be able to leave

comments directly on a page, and expect someone from the union (yes, even the national office bearers) to actually read and reply to the comment. The more personal the interaction the better.

Similarly, if you discover a blog, website or twitterer that is discussing your union, or an employer where you have coverage, use the opportunity to join in. Leave a comment on the blog. Send an '@ reply' to the twitterer. This is especially important if you encounter criticism of your union online – the new social media rules mean you can interact with your critic directly and others can participate as well. Of course, make sure any response to criticism is polite.

Your members and supporters will start to engage with you, and feel a greater level of ownership over your union's online presence. As you build your relationships with people online, you will find that people will start to promote your future campaigns.

2. Be active and involved in online communities

No one will read or follow a Twitter account with only one or two tweets. Similarly, if your Facebook feed is only taken up with media

releases or links to the news section of your union's website, then you aren't really engaging.

Social media is on and active 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Twitter and Facebook operate in real-time. Members, non-members and supporters quickly stop checking a campaign site that hasn't been updated in a week.

Being active means responding to comments, tweets and Facebook messages. While most unions may not have the time and resources to have someone full-time on social media, it is important that someone checks the union's Twitter and Facebook account regularly. Most social media sites have a bunch of tools to help (for example, Twitter's search function can allow you to see if people are tweeting about your union).

Social media tools can't be used once in a while. If you are only sending out a tweet every month or so, it will get lost in the many updates that users experience. The 'live' nature of many social media networks means that you need to check your union's accounts daily at least.

3. Choose your social media networks carefully

With the hundreds of sites out there, and more growing all the time, it can be tempting for a union new to social networking to jump on as many as possible.

There are several reasons to limit your interaction with only a few social media sites.

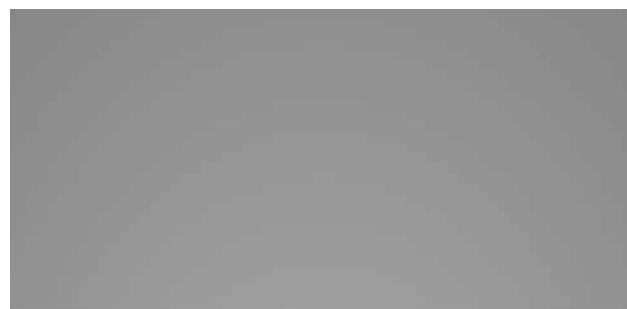
Firstly, choose the site where most of your members and supporters are (or most of the workers in your union's industries). Most social networking sites allow you to do searches - for example, on Facebook, you can search for your existing members, but you can also search for people on Facebook by the information on their profiles.

Secondly, unless your union can afford to have dedicated social media officers, it is likely that you simply won't have the time or resources to adequately maintain your presence on lots of different social media sites. Having an engaged and vibrant presence on one, two or three sites is better than having an inactive, disengaged and infrequently updated presence on hundreds.

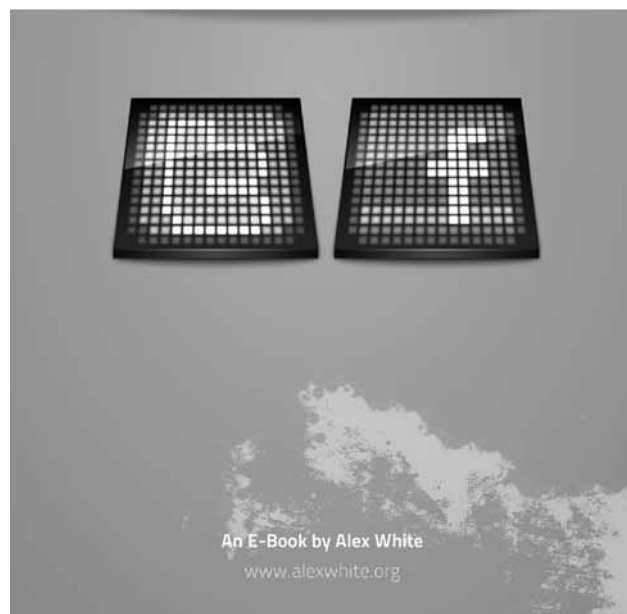
Thirdly, choose sites that fit in with your campaign or organising plan. Hundreds of your members may be on sites like LinkedIn or Facebook, but those sites are like straightjackets for campaigns. You have almost no flexibility to export data, or take control of how your profile looks. Simply put, some sites are more useful for specific campaigns or activities than others, and you should consider the feature set of each social media tool before you jump into it.

4. Open up the union to socialising

Many unions run tight ships when it comes to communications, media engagement or interaction with members. Only media officers speak to the media, only



Social Media for Unions



organisers speak to members, only the national office bearers make official statements.

The rules of social media don't allow for such rigid structures. Members, supporters and non-members want to hear from a range of voices within their union. Organisers could have Twitter and Facebook accounts. In fact, social media should be embraced by everyone in the union, rather than just one or two people.

Openness and interaction are a major part of social media. Embrace it. You will be rewarded for your transparency and openness.

Of course, be prepared to make mistakes, and be big enough to admit when you have screwed up, then move on. Have a social media policy, or set of guidelines for union officials. Make sure everyone knows what the policy is. ^{LB}

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