

Cyber Success

Connectedness
Sharing Favourite Broadcast Information
audience
Contributions Encourage Links
Distributed Audience
Transmitted group
Conversation
Interests blurs broadcast barriers
Services interested
Better Form Online
following
accessing effectively
people
open

An organiser's guide to social media by Stephanie Moss

Since the first meeting at Stonehenge, organisers have been looking for ways to spread the word. Today, we have a number of tools at our disposal but it seems as if few of us know how to beat the newest digital drums effectively.

Social media is a buzzword but the truth of the matter is that not many of us understand how to use it effectively when hosting or planning an event.

The starting point is 'fun' – social media is about likeminded people finding each other in cyberspace and sharing their experiences. Because social media is driven by private individuals, the content is usually presented in a less formal

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manner. There is also a significant focus on the lighter side of life and event organisers have to understand this quality if they wish to make use of social media successfully. Of course, you can ignore

social media completely but you will simply fall behind the pack – social media is here to stay and the popularity of networks such as Twitter and Facebook, Linked In and YouTube will only continue to grow.

A worthy investment

In numerous international markets, both independent event organisers and corporates have realised the value of social media and many businesses now have employees dedicated to disseminating information using these tools. This may not yet be a reality for us in South Africa and financial aspects still need to be considered. Using social media is free though and we need to get with the programme to realise the full potential of a huge marketing tool that is hugely cost effective in comparison to traditional marketing media.

At the same time, you need to be able to calculate the return on investment the client receives when you implement social media at an event. This is where the real value of social media comes in – an event is obviously a gathering of likeminded people. They want to network, generate sales leads or find potential business partners. All you are doing through the

use of social media is facilitating this process. Given the dramatic decline in attendance at major events following the global economic meltdown, social media can be used as a tool to mobilise potential guests. In addition, people are able to



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connect via social media, long after the collection of business cards have been pushed to the back of a drawer.

Besides the obvious benefits attendees receive, social media allows event organisers to add value to a client's conference as the content discussed will find its way onto the Internet and one wants to be encouraging this in fact.

Knowledge is power

It all comes down to spreading the word and social media is simply a tool that needs to be understood and then used optimally. Let us look at a couple of the most obvious examples. Facebook is one of the most popular online interaction sites around and a great tool for event organisers. Because so many people have profiles on the network, it is possible to create a group of people who will either attend your event, or who are interested in the topics being covered. LinkedIn is a social networking site for professionals and while it is more restrictive or less widely used than Facebook, it is a great tool targeting business-oriented individuals. For example, by setting up a workstation at an event and asking attendees to create profiles, you are able to communicate with them directly afterwards.

Blogs are yet another tool that is often underestimated. Creating a blog is easy and free, and can be linked to a client's or event's website. This tool gives you an opportunity to disseminate information and create a conversation around your event.

In addition, there are several blogs on the Internet with large followings. Overseas, it is common practice to invite famous bloggers to events and exhibitions as they will relate information to a larger audience.

Twitter, in turn, is a micro-blogging tool and its use in South Africa is rapidly increasing as Smartphone's such as Blackberry's and iPhones become more commonplace. Your 'tweets', as posts are called, can also be linked to Facebook profiles. The implications are vast for event organisers if one considers as many as 60% of urban cellular users – about 9.5 million – are able to browse the Internet on their phones. Understanding the different dynamics, pros, cons and restrictions are important to use the tools presented effectively. It is important to remember, however, that social media is taken very seriously by its users. As a result, they will quickly retort if they feel

that their privacy has been invaded. At the same time, it is extremely easy for users to move away from your page or profile so it is important to make sure that the content you generate keeps them excited and interested.

The flipside, however, is negative publicity and social media gives consumers and individuals the platform to raise their objections and opinions. If they feel violated, they will retaliate and they will usually win the battle. Ultimately, social media is simply another new tool in a marketer's arsenal. It should be seen the same way as e-mail newsletters for example. Some 10 years ago, this tool was fantastically exciting and easy to

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implement. However, recipients have realised that they do not need to be spammed and accessing an individual through a cold e-mail is extremely difficult nowadays. Nevertheless, even old tools can be dusted off and revamped and this is where viral marketing comes into the mix. This form of information distribution requires individuals forwarding your message onto their wider social and professional networks.

The key question to remember here is 'Why?'. Why should they forward your e-mail or why should they talk about your advertising campaign? Because it's funny, interesting, shocking or of extreme importance, or all of the above.

Social media provides new platforms for viral marketing because recipients can easily share the information, video clip or website link. At the end of the day, however, all online, viral or social media-focused campaigns have to be approached in the same manner as traditional above-the-line campaigns. This means setting goals and targets and making sure that you achieve these through your campaign while generating an adequate return-on-investment for the client.

Besides marketing and information dissemination, the growth of mobile technology presents an opportunity to event organisers to help the planet a little.

You can also promote e-cards at your events where attendees share their details electronically and business cards stay in briefcases. Traditional print campaigns should not be thrown out completely,



however, as this form of advertising is still the most dominant. Similarly, traditional PR campaigns also have a place in the corporate world. The goal with any form of marketing or advertising is to generate interest and to get tongues wagging.

Mobile technology and social media applications are new tools and will increasingly become more important as the operating environment changes.

Embrace these new tools and have fun creating bigger, better and more effective events and exhibitions. **35**