

ASSOCIATION COMMUNICATIONS & SOCIAL MEDIA

Appropriate and Sustainable



Joel Fischer

We remain in the midst of a period of significant technological change, particularly when it comes to ICT. The phrases “information revolution” and “communications revolution” are not widely used when we speak about every day matters like social media, smart phones and tablet computers but they are important concepts to keep in mind. The turbulence, turmoil and opportunities for both significant change and new realities that are inherent in revolutions of one sort or another must be negotiated with an eye to stability and consistency.

Text Joel Fischer, Union of International Associations

Broadly speaking, associations with small staff and tight budgets have dual personalities: on the one hand these restrictions put them in a conservative framework when considering significant changes to standard operating procedures; on the other hand, they are often quick to take advantage of new opportunities and technologies which promise to facilitate their work through cost reduction, simplification of tasks and so on. This is, of course, in contrast to large and well-financed association offices which are often indistinguishable from commercial corporate operations.

In addition to changes in ICT, associations are also experiencing change in the expectations of how they are managed and how they interact with members, partners and the wider world. Professionalised association and nonprofit cultures have taken root through university coursework and staff training opportunities and the continued influence of corporate / business life in organisational life as a whole. In conjunction with modern business practices, associational activity is increasingly evaluated in terms of “value for money” and “return on investment” by all participants.

EVALUATION & PLANNING

As our business, professional and personal cultures negotiate and adopt new technologies so too do our associations. And as we negotiate the evolutionary aspects of these revolutions part of our mandate is to manage

change. Remember how Facebook was only a thing for young people and now it's a thing for everyone, for your business, for your association? Or Twitter, or Youtube or...

**“BE CONSERVATIVE IN WHAT
YOU SEND AND LIBERAL IN
WHAT YOU RECEIVE.”**

JON POSTEL (1943-1998)

Evaluation, planning and designated responsibilities are a broad framework for a conservative approach to new tools, technologies and opportunities. If your office is large enough then you have someone, or a committee, responsible for communications and information technology. You might depend on outside consultants to assist in redesigning the information/documents that are a daily part of your office life and in retooling your publications strategy to make use of digital publishing and new communication platforms. If you are under-resourced or all this online tech talk is completely new then how do you start to understand it, to make decisions and to negotiate change?

One of the benefits of the current information environment is that we have open access to a wide range of professional and educational materials on just about any topic. Marketing, publishing, online identity and services, public relations and more all feature in current discussions in online

videos, professional publications and more informal forums.

Two such helpful documents were easy for me to locate and they illustrate the approaches that we all need to take when considering our roles as individuals and associations on the internet.

Thorsten Strauss's article, *Digital First!*, for a recent edition of [Communication Director](#) provides a detailed business perspective on Deutsche Bank's theory and practice of integrating corporate communications and digital tools. While the article is written from the standpoint of a commercial enterprise in a competitive business environment there are points and principles which are applicable to all offices seeking to make best use of the current opportunities that technology brings.

[D]igitalisation [must be] a core topic for the entire organisation. Digital communications have to become an integral part of corporate strategy, which means they are emerging from a niche area to a company-wide function. The priority for content and channel management is to develop comprehensive concepts to achieve a consistent and significant digital footprint for the company. New formats must have digital DNA and communication content needs to be more tightly knit with topics that promise to appeal to a broad digital audience.

If we unpack the language a bit, we find some interesting universal points. In what ways is every component of an association now a potential creator of “content” (for newsletters, for press releases, for social medial updates)? How does your association maintain consistency in the digital materials it prepares for the membership and the wider world; how does it maintain consistency in visual identity, institutional personality and so on? How does an organisation transition its office practices into the fully digital age?

Strauss’ article also presents an examination of the “Five principles for successful digital communications” which guide their work at Deutsche Bank. These notes are excellent strategy topics for association staff to examine.

MULTIPLE AFFILIATIONS

The other document that readers will find useful to stimulate discussion and planning is Duke University’s *Style Guide – Social Media Guidelines for Communicators*.

This type of document is notably of interest for association people because they too carry multiple affiliations in their online interactions – either as association staff/officers or as professionals representing other institutions while engaging in association activities.

Reputation issues then become doubled or tripled for an individual participating in an online forum or presenting themselves in an online networking platform. If Bob doesn’t play well with others it might be quite problematic to have him trailing your association name, or company name, across the internet. Consequently, a conservative approach and fully briefed staff/membership are critical, particularly in a world where open communications have democratized who can speak, publish and present their views to the world.

In my experience consistency and stability are important elements of an association’s communication plans. The world is twenty years along in the life of the world wide web and yet some associations still struggle to maintain a basic online presence. In recent months I have come across numerous stale or stalled blog attempts which are the only visible presence of an association online. In other cases there are competing institutional presences on different platforms (blog site vs website vs Facebook page) some of which may be more up to date than the others.

The management of sites related to an association’s conference furthers the complexity with sites abandoned (but left online) as soon as the conference has taken place.

“What do we do with our archives?!” is a question many associations have faced, they must now face similar questions in the preparation, presentation, organisation and retention of their digital output.

The tools and technologies available to us should make our organisational lives easier, they will only do so if we approach their use in a planned manner.

Start small and plan for incremental growth; plan for sustainability - don’t announce your association on five different platforms if you don’t have the capacity to maintain your presence there; plan for transformability (can your online white papers or briefing notes be turned into an ebook?) and plan for transferability: your communications operations should be able to be transferred from one staff person to another with little need for orientation. The solidity of your day-to-day operations should be represented in the solidity of your presence and content online.

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