Online activism

Insights to guide social movement electronic communication

Most social movement organisations rely on online communication to achieve their campaign objectives. Websites, email communication, Twitter and social networking platforms such as Facebook definitely have a place in our community organising toolbox. But they can also be a fatal distraction, consuming people's time and energy without creating the kind of power and momentum we need. These insights emerge from the Change Agency's work with social movement groups.

List building

At the point of first encounter, ask people to subscribe for regular updates. This needs to happen online (casual website visitors) and offline (people participating in your group's regular community outreach activities).
Never miss an opportunity to attract new subscribers. Include Facebook, Twitter and other social networking links on your webpage and in your email updates. Routinely update your records and cull bounces.
Ensure an 'opt out' mechanism is always available and communicated.

Frequency

Keep your email communication regular and avoid long silences. There's no golden rule regarding frequency. Some community groups get away with communicating with their base (supporters) more frequently than others before their emails are considered spam or lead to people unsubscribing. If your campaign has built momentum, people will look forward to receiving your next email update.

Content and layout

Adopt a consistent format based on best practice (Avaaz, MoveOn!, GetUp!, AYCC, ACTU). This will most likely entail just one short page of text. Clearly identify and repeat the url link to the recommended action. Draw people to your website whenever possible. Often, subscribers to your email updates will want more information. Encourage people to forward the update to others. Provide useful information and link to events.

Voice

Be real. Adopt an informal voice and speak directly to your campaign supporters. Report on impact and success, demonstrating your organisation's power and follow-through.

Online-offline integration

Your most active supporters will appreciate opportunities to make personal contact with you and other campaign supporters (eg GetUp!'s 'get togethers'). Urge recipients to interact with you (e.g. tell you what action they taken with what impact)

Metrics

Closely monitor the number of recipients, the organisations they're affiliated with, the nature and frequency of feedback (e.g. do you get increased subscriptions or de-subscriptions in response to specific actions). Monitor the impact on your website's visitation rate and page views immediately following each update.
If possible, monitor the proportion of recipients who open or forward the email, and the proportion who click on urls embedded in your updates.

Focus

Stay focused on your campaign objectives. Be clear about your purpose. Does your electronic communication aim to educate and raise awareness, or mobilise supporters to take specific online or offline action? How do you intend your electronic communication to impact on your campaign targets (decision makers)?

Framing

In most campaigns, there are many different ways to communicate the problem your group perceives and the solution you propose. The challenge, of course, is to decide on the 'frame' that will motivate your supporters to take action. The most powerful frame communicates your issue in a way that is specific, immediate and winnable. Gamson and Ryan (2005) describe a frame as a 'thought organiser': "Like a picture frame, it puts a rim around some part of the world, highlighting certain events and facts as important and rendering others invisible. Like a building frame, it holds things together but is covered by insulation and walls. It provides coherence to an array of symbols, images, and arguments, linking them through an underlying organizing idea that suggests what is essential - what consequences and values are at stake. We do not see the frame directly, but infer its presence by its characteristic expressions and language."

Powerful online communication involves:
- Online tactics consistent with a coherent strategy
- Engaging and energising people who aren't normally involved
- Mobilising large numbers of people to take concrete action
- Providing choices about how people can take action.
- Viral, novel, new, different.
- Short, sharp messages that provide just enough information to inform analysis and
- identify actions people can take.
- Strong connection between online and offline organising; opportunities to connect
- locally.
- Combining lobbying, fundraising and community action.
- Funny: intelligent and irreverent; iconoclastic; ironic; courageous.
- Good timing (information updates, actions, quick responses).
- Collaborative; free of "turf-based territoriality"; built around alliances.
- Helping people feel they're making a difference.
- Reach (large and growing database)
- Generating funds to reach beyond the Internet (GetUp's advertising).
- Interactive (user-controlled content; creating a 'community' and a sense of being connected to and part of something dynamic; feedback and celebration of impact).
- Visually interesting interface (audio, visual, dynamic and static content).

Further reading
- DigiActive Guide to Twitter for Activism
  http://www.digiactive.org/2009/04/13/twitter_guide/
- DigiActive Guide to Facebook Activism
  http://www.digiactive.org/2008/06/28/guide-a-digiactive-introduction-to-facebook-activism/

References
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  http://www.publiceye.org/magazine/v19n2/gamson_elephants.html
- Lakoff G 2004, *Don't think of an elephant: Know your values and frame the debate*, Chelsea Green Publishing, Vermont.
- Whelan, J., Gell, P. & Hammond, H. 2009, *Building the Climate Movement Online*, The Change Agency, Australia, http://thechangeagency.org

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