

# Five Lessons

You Need to Learn About

# Social Media

By Dick Barton, APR



**President Obama showed the world during his 2008 campaign what it means to master the Internet by using social media to create a powerful appeal for change.** This new way of doing business — which he called “Webocracy” — helped Obama win the Oval Office in November, and now it’s helping him shape a new Washington, where even long-time senators like John McCain are sending Tweets via Twitter on their daily activities and connecting with constituents on Web sites like LinkedIn and Facebook. The president has even created a new position — White House director of new media — that’s charged with managing social media on behalf of his administration.

Thanks in part to the president, social media has gone mainstream. In fact, Web sites like YouTube, MySpace, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are mentioned daily on TV news programs and around kitchen tables nationwide.

Despite the presidential-sized popularity of social media, however, some associations have been slow to adopt it, and they're missing opportunities as a result. Never mind that it might sound intimidating to some. Associations must understand and explore social media in order to become more efficient at marketing and more effective at public relations. Take, for example, Twitter, the popular micro-blogging Web site. While teens use it to stay in touch with their friends, associations can use it to connect with their members — instantly and often.

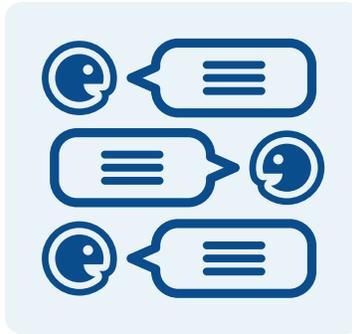
As a matter of fact, associations are ideally suited for social media. After all, they are the original social networks, formed by individuals of similar interests who want to connect, share information and speak with a collective voice in the world. This is exactly what social media is all about.

Associations understand the value of relationships, but not all of them appreciate the power and value of using new media to build them. If your association is among them, consider this: Because social media is slowly replacing traditional communication, now is the time to join the online conversation. Here are five reasons why:

### 1. It's Easier Than You Think

Understanding new media is intimidating, but not impossible, according to Corbin Ball, an internationally recognized speaker, author and technology consultant. "It is scary stuff to some association executives," he says. "The new social media is confusing and things like podcasts, blogs and Twitter can be intimidating for most. But this new media is natural for associations. It is part of a sweeping social change that cannot be ignored."

Because they're grounded in offline social networks, Ball adds, many associations will find the leap to online social networks that much easier. "Associations are grounded in basics such as meetings, seminars and conferences as a way



for those of similar interests to connect and share information," he says. "Associations have individuals who pay dues and belong for this benefit, so why not expand on the ability to discover new people, make connections, build trust and deliver content with the organization's sphere of influence?"

Although it's a vastly improved form of it, social media shares the same premise as traditional word of mouth marketing. Social media, for example, can help associations promote a speaker for a seminar or conference by building "buzz." Online videos posted to YouTube, meanwhile, can enhance event marketing efforts. Associations can even create their own pages on Facebook and Twitter so members and prospects can find each other and connect. Your members are spending time online already; why not meet them there?

### 2. Size Matters

If Facebook were a nation, it would be the sixth-largest in the world, according to Ben Wilson, co-founder of the Falkor Group, a Chicago-based IT consultancy that provides managed IT services, including social networking, to mid-sized companies. "There are 175 million Facebook users," he says, "so why wouldn't an association want to market to selected members of this group?"

Despite a popular notion that Twitter is just a "time waster for teens," Wilson says he's found that about half of all Twitter users claim to be doing business with it. "Use of Twitter and social networking has broken away from the fringe and has been adopted by all ages," he says.

While social media is good for communicating, it's good for listening, too. That's because some social media sites

offer the ability to collect opinions. Although not totally scientific, associations can use sites like LinkedIn to quickly, affordably and efficiently form mini focus groups for collecting opinions on topics, activities and initiatives that are important to their members.

Speaking of listening, podcasts — recorded audio broadcasts distributed online to computers, iPods and other MP3 players — are another form of social media that can help associations reach mass audiences, by carrying meeting content, for instance, to those who were unable to attend.

Whether they're looking at blogs, polls or podcasts, the benefits of social media to associations are as large as the audiences they can reach with it. They can use social networking tools to spread the word about their achievements, their political agendas, their mission statements and more.

### 3. Online Is Organic

With social media, associations can broadcast their messages not only to more people, but also with more potency.

Indeed, because social media is cutting-edge — and more importantly, grassroots — it's often more effective than other, more traditional Internet marketing tools, which many marketing and public relations professionals feel are becoming obsolete.

Among them is Scott Schiave, who was hired last August as the director of marketing and communications for the Association for Manufacturing Excellence. Part of his assignment was to launch a new Web site using social media as part of an integrated marketing and public relations program.

"The whole thing started with a group of AME members becoming connected on LinkedIn," Schiave says. "The members liked networking and exchanging information directly in a discussion group. This came to the attention of our leadership, who decided we should pursue such media more vigorously and effectively."

Chris Rollyson, a social media consultant and speaker, calls LinkedIn "the *Wall Street Journal* of social networks" because of its upscale demographics. It has about 36 million users and is expected to have

more than 50 million by the end of this year. Rollyson says LinkedIn is therefore a natural place for business executives to organically connect, form discussion groups and develop relationships.

“The keys to making LinkedIn or any social media valuable are to first discover people, then start building a relationship, then develop a level of trust,” Rollyson says. “If successful, business comes along eventually.”

#### 4. Links Beat Ink

Social media isn't just about marketing. It's about public relations, too. In fact, there are media experts who suggest online exposure is now more important than “getting ink” in a print publication.

The main advantage of online publicity — even from blogs — is that it creates inbound links to your online materials, including your association's Web site, that in turn allow your online relationships to grow exponentially.

In spite of the opportunities it presents, one of the fears association professionals have about social media is that it will make them more vulnerable to critics, who'll be able to fault them via blogs, online discussion groups and more. Overall, however, it's worth the risk, so long as you're prepared to engage in dialogue, answer criticism and make reasonable changes to products and policies when needed.

Whether you're online or not, you can be sure supporters and critics alike are already talking about your association. It's up to you whether or not to join the conversation.

#### 5. Content Is King

One reason members value associations is for the information resources they provide. Thanks to social media, associations have a new way to distribute those resources, Schiave says.

“Associations are rich in content but need these new ways to deliver shared learning via the Internet, market programs and conferences, and manage their public image,” he says. “Our new social media site allows our members to share information at an astounding rate. AME members, regional boards and committees can set up groups on interests, topics or projects. They can post documents for downloading and editing and utilize features such as a resource library. It's also fully



integrated with our main Web site.

“We are also doing much more video work these days. Our streaming videos of testimonials from conference attendees as well as excerpts from select speakers are being posted on our conference Web sites as well as on YouTube. They provide additional information, encourage event registration and can be used for membership recruitment programs.”

At your next association conference, try producing video interviews of planning committee members speaking about the meeting's programs, entertainment and other features. Post these on YouTube and stream them on your Web site. You can also use RSS feeds, which members, reporters and other interested parties can subscribe to in order to be “fed” information automatically.

However they decide to deploy social media, associations shouldn't be afraid to experiment. As long as something's cost-efficient, it's worth trying. Associations should therefore seriously and immediately consider all their social media options — by appointing a director of new media, perhaps, or by publishing a blog.

No matter what you do, if you stay up to date on the latest social media trends, you will be well positioned for many new opportunities — whether you're an association professional or the president of the United States. ■

---

**Dick Barton** is president of Barton and Barton Ltd., an integrated marketing agency located in Park Ridge, Ill. He may be reached at **(847) 698-5069** or [dbarton@bartonchicago.com](mailto:dbarton@bartonchicago.com).

---

Join the conversation at [www.theforumeffect.org](http://www.theforumeffect.org).

The logo for 'THE FORUM EFFECT' is centered within a dashed-line rectangular border. The text 'THE FORUM EFFECT' is in a blue, sans-serif font. The word 'FORUM' is the largest and most prominent. The letter 'O' in 'FORUM' contains a stylized blue icon of a person standing on a podium, with a microphone and a small flame or light above their head, symbolizing a speaker or a forum.