

Groups turn to social media as new marketing strategy

From experimentation to enlisting outside-the-walls social media expertise, groups are now seeking to augment membership value with a subtle sales pitch

By Abraham Mahshie

The National Association of Broadcasters calls it "broader-casting," creating and disseminating content on any range of devices. When it comes to promoting their April trade show in Las Vegas, the extent that social media can be used as a marketing tool is being redefined.

"We want to be connected in as great a degree as possible to our marketplace wherever they are," said Chris Brown, NAB's executive vice president of conventions and business operations.

Mitch Arnowitz, managing director at Tuvel Communications, which has been contracted to help with the social media push for the NAB show, said they are helping associations go "outside the walls" to find people they didn't know existed.

"What we are doing is growing the pie by reaching into new groups of people in a shrinking economy because we are finding that they are participating in Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and other places," he said.

NAB's in-house convention marketing team

is also working closely with advertising agency Don Schaaf & Friends and Edelman public relations to use social media like never before. But associations across the spectrum are also tapping into the power of social media by simply walking down the hall and asking younger staffers to help test the waters.

"Sure, it's less expensive," said Don Schaaf of DS&F. "But that's not really the reason why people are adopting the technology. They're doing it because A—it's the only way to reach some people, and B—it's so quick to market."

Schaaf said social media is making for a new marketing "one-two-three punch."

"Traditionally, that meant direct mail, brochures and advertisement. Today that means Internet, print and possibly social media," he said. "If we can hit them three different ways we have an excellent shot of closing—getting them as an attendee."

Tuvel's Arnowitz went a step further, "Part of great communications and building relationships is not to broadcast, but to engage and to over-deliver in terms of value."

"The best PR sales forces are happy members," he said. "How can you marshal

these folks into spreading the word?"

Ben Martin, director of communications and new media for the Virginia Association of Realtors, and author of "Association Social Technologies Report," published last October by association consulting firm Principled Innovation, says member engagement is the name of the game.

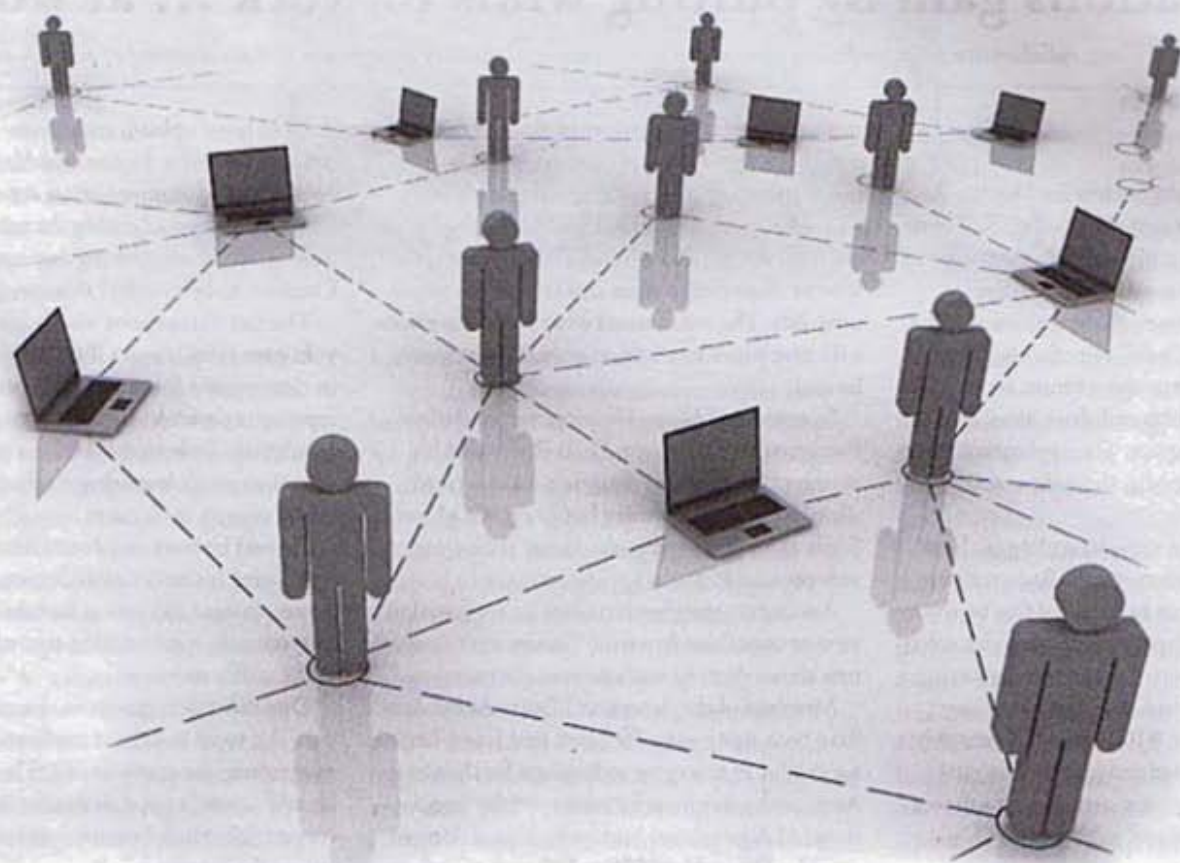
"As long as you're not exclusively selling or social networking sites a certain degree of shameless self-promotion is not taboo," he said. "In our case, we try to carry on a conversation outside of just marketing and advertising."

Humanizing the member relationship

NAB's Brown said in the past, his association has fought a "perceived distance" between the institution and its members that social media helping to break down, putting a human face on the relationship.

By setting up blogs, and Facebook and LinkedIn groups for the upcoming NAB conference, attendees can connect beforehand with other members and featured speakers.

"You have to be willing to put a slightly different side of yourself out there," Brown



said. That means empowering the marketing team to disseminate the raw message, giving members the opportunity to speak freely and developing a thicker skin about some of the feedback you get.

Lindy Dreyer, chief social media marketer for Social Fish, a nonprofit association technology firm that presented at ASAE's recent Association Technology Conference & Expo, said marketing can't be the only motive for an association to join or start a social network.

"It's really more about adding value to their community than getting your marketing message out. It's all about them, not about you," she said. Of associations with a successful social media presence, she said, "The two things they're trying to do are: One, build and energize their community, and that feeds into the second thing, which is energizing word-of-mouth."

"White-label" social networks

Paul Schneider, senior vice president of Socius, Inc., a social networking software developer, said having a presence on the free social networking sites should be part of an overall strategy to corral members to special, member-only networks.

"I think you need to have a presence on Facebook and LinkedIn and Twitter, but use those more as marketing to join your white-label, your member-only group," he said.

Chad Ohman, director of SharePoint Services for Protech Associates, helps associations link Microsoft SharePoint software with their association management system, which manages their member database, to develop a members-only social network.

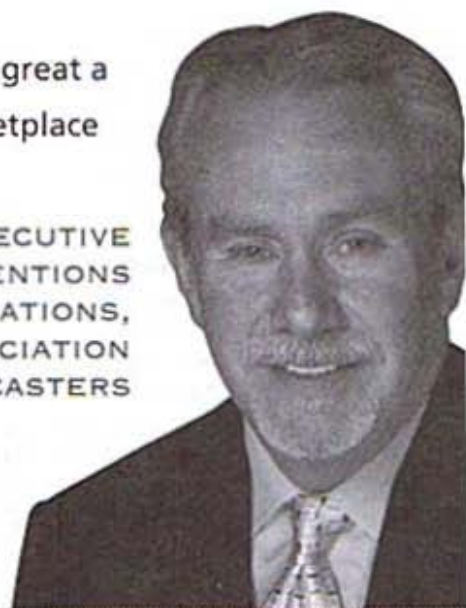
"It's like being able to tie Facebook directly into your contacts and accounts database, and driving it directly from your AMS system outward," Ohman said, explaining that members can then network, participate in discussion boards, join specialized communities and share documents. A public area can be added for non-members that allows restricted access to certain functions.

DSF's Schaaf said marketing through social media gives an association the capacity to reach the next generation of members simply by repurposing a core message.

"We are using the latest broadcasting technology—that's a feather in our cap here," he said. "NAB is investing in the technologies that their constituents are inventing, and to some extent that makes us cool." ■

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—CHRIS BROWN, EXECUTIVE
VICE PRESIDENT OF CONVENTIONS
AND BUSINESS OPERATIONS,
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION
OF BROADCASTERS



CONFERENCE TWEETING

twitter

Joan Broughton, vice president of Internet strategies for the National Retail Federation said the NRF has found that it can augment a conference experience and help members connect year-round thanks to Twitter, a social networking and micro-blogging service that allows "followers" to receive updated entries on computers and mobile devices, even as a text message on their cell phone.

"From a marketing perspective, it's great. It's one more arrow in your quiver," she said, also so new that we're trying to figure out how people are using it: Are they using it to meet each other? To stay informed if they are unable to come to the conference? Or, are they using it to review some of the presentations after?"

Ben Martin, director of communications and new media for the Virginia Association of Realtors, said he has some 600-700 Twitter followers. Aside from building a strong network through the social media realm, he said he asks core followers to forward messages about coming meetings. And he said those meetings always have special informal gatherings for the social media crowd.

Once members are at the conference, associations are finding the real-time fluidity of Twitter is helping to build relationships. For example, members sitting in the same conference workshop can tweet about the speaker from their cell phone, discover they have similar interests and meet up.

"You have to get out the word in as few words as possible," said Megan Shannon, meetings and expositions manager for the National Apartment Association, which is using Twitter messages, called "tweets," to help promote the upcoming NAA Green Conference.

Shannon said it goes beyond writing tweets. She also searches for people who would be good candidates for the conference and follows them on Twitter. When they see her start to follow, sometimes they follow back and learn about the conference.

When followers get to the conference, they can receive tweets about special events, workshop reminders and other helpful notes in real time.

Sara Kryder, web editor at NAA, said the association only jumped on the social media bandwagon in December, and began to use Twitter to promote a student housing conference in this month. Even though the conference has ended, followers are still signing up to read their tweets.

"We weren't spamming them, we were giving legitimate, good information," Kryder said of the tweets that went out to members during the conference.

Kryder said all of NAA's dabblings in social media are a way of gauging member interest and justify the association starting its own social network. ■

—Abraham Ma