

Publication: Association Trends**Title: How Associations Can Use Social Media to Boost Success for Events****Author: Bob Alves**

“Very rarely is a new invention so innovative that it replaces what came before,” says Tom Lehman, founder of Lehman Associates and author of the Lehman Reports™ industry studies. This is certainly true for social media. While it is a powerful tool that is transforming the way associations do business, it is best used in tandem with - rather than in the place of - more traditional marketing and communications activities.

After all, associations have been in the “social networking” business, long before Facebook and Twitter became household names, Lehman says. At their core, associations are communities in which people of like interests and goals gather. This is why social media has been so successfully adopted by associations and integrated into their existing marketing mix. It amplifies what they have been doing all along.

Social networking can particularly enhance member engagement, especially for associations that anchor their member activities in conferences or trade shows. For these associations, social networking can be used to encourage attendance and cull new attendees for these events, which are often a crucial revenue source. To be most effective, social media should be integrated with an association’s membership management software, enabling it to customize and maximize its engagement activities.

“For many associations, about 20% of their members are active in the sense of attending conferences and trade shows. With social media, you can engage the other 80% of members in ways that enhances their connections to your association,” says Lehman.

This deeper engagement with your association and fellow members will inevitably build momentum for your in-person events. As 80% of members engage more regularly on your association’s social platform, many of them will consider taking the next step in their engagement by attending in-person meetings or events.

Integrating social media with your other activities, however, does not have to be at the expense of other outreach tactics. Rather, you should offer your members a menu of options that they can select from to determine how they want to engage with your association. Offering options will result in a broader segment of members responding to your outreach, as more people will find what works for them and stick with that.

For instance, consider the Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS). The organization offers its members several options for learning about its annual Build Business conference. For members that prefer email, they can opt into inbox alerts about conference news and speakers. For those who prefer more interactive platforms, SMPS provides a social network for potential conference attendees to chat with other

members, learn more about the various panels and sessions, and in some cases, communicate directly with the speakers.

“The members’ number one reason for attending is networking,” says Michele Santiago, marketing director at SMPS National. “Social networking is another layer that enables that. Some members like to learn about conferences via email, but others would rather engage on a social network with speakers and other attendees to decide whether to attend.”

In addition, the association also maintains another channel for those who have already signed up for the conference. This channel allows attendees to discuss more minute details of the conference, like sharing tips on the best places to catch a taxi or the attire for various networking events. This social network has also cut down on the amount of papers members haul around with them during the conference.

“We’re certainly not looking for social networking to replace our other member engagement activities. It just adds another layer,” says Molly Dall’erta, Web project manager at SMPS. “People are looking for the best engagement tool that works for them. If you’re looking to create groups or look for specific people within a community, social networks offer a way to do that. For our conference attendees, they used to have to carry around notebooks and papers that had information about events and people to meet with. Now they don’t have to do that.”

Using social media at on-site events to connect with other members or access information is another way social platforms can enhance “real-life” events. The Defense Research Institute (DRI) recently created a mobile application for members to use at its annual meeting. The application allows attendees to view the conference schedule, floor layout, and session and speaker information. Members could also see who was attending, message other members, and create their own schedule for the conference.

“What we find is, for broadening your network and maintaining connections the e-world and social media work better,” Lehman explains. “But to build trust and solidify these relationships, you need that face-to-face interaction. This is why social media and physical events work together so effectively.”

Whenever a new method of engagement surfaces, it’s easy to think perhaps the new will supplant what came before. In the case of social networking, some speculate that it will threaten conferences and trade shows. But in reality, social media is a boon to physical gatherings. Social networking allows members to connect with others who they never would otherwise, broadening their network and giving them more reason to attend conferences and shows. And, social media enables members to continue the conversations they begin at the conference, keeping the momentum going until next year’s show.