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Going Social with Nonprofits: Using Social Media to Enhance Nonprofit Connectivity and Visibility in the Community

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Going Social with Nonprofits: Using Social Media to Enhance Nonprofit Connectivity and Visibility in the Community

Abstract

The use of social media in nonprofit organizations has increased in the past ten years. Social media has become a staple of information for communities to discover the resources that are offered by these organizations. Some organizations struggle to reach their proposed audience engagement with the community and need assistance when it comes to the integration of social media into their marketing plan. The “Engage and Ignite: Social Media 101 for Nonprofits” enables a current undergraduate student to facilitate a 90-minute workshop to local community partners about social media usage, their audience(s), and the content they share. The results of this workshop allowed the organizations to better understand how to increase their visibility and communication with their stakeholders and community. Materials from the workshop have been shared with those who could not make the workshop, but have organizations in the area.

Introduction

With the increase of social media usage among members of the community, it is important for organizations to establish themselves on these platforms. At SUNY Buffalo State, academic departments work with the Office of Civic and Community Engagement to assist a variety of community partners. Many of these partners work with students in Communication and Business courses to create campaigns or projects for the community partners based on what they learned in their courses. In the past four years, there has been an increased desire from the community partners to increase and improve their social media presence. This increased need inspired the creation of a workshop, “Social Media 101 for Nonprofits”, for organizations who want to better develop and use social media.

It was important for a student and faculty member to conduct the workshop to share knowledge of current social media techniques, trends, and analysis. Prior to the workshop, primary and secondary research was conducted in regard to the use of social media in nonprofit organizations and other marketing and/or engagement techniques. This research included articles from online databases, verified social media management websites, and the analysis of the social media of

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high performing nonprofit organizations. The process took four weeks to establish a foundation and develop a structure based on the findings from the sources and additionally from the student in the form of informal interviews, observations, and a survey.

The need for this workshop served as a service-learning experience for the student as she produced an educational experience and handouts for the workshop participants. As the inaugural workshop, it was titled “Engage and Ignite” to encompass the increased drive for engagement and interaction between the community partner and the Western New York Community. It outlined the basics of how organizations can tailor their posts to their specific audience(s), expand their knowledge of popular social media platforms, data analytics and insights, and ways to enhance their content and engagement. There were two workshops hosted on the Buffalo State campus to accommodate the organizations who registered online.

To promote the workshop, the Office of Civic and Community Engagement shared an event sign up through EventBrite with its community partners. The interested organizations registered for this free workshop and were sent a pre-survey to complete. The purpose of the pre-survey allowed the facilitator, the student, to better understand the level of social media experience, specific platform use, trouble areas, and concepts the participants would like to learn more about from the workshop. It established a foundation for the workshop and tailored it to meet the specific needs of the participants, which left room for discussion and new trends to be shared with the participants.

“Engage and Ignite” was presented to the clients the morning of March 26, 2018 at Buffalo State to twelve community partners from various organizations. Participants received a hand out of a “Quick Guide to Social Media” that included insights on how to access and obtain certain information about the top social media platforms. The two workshops both lasted around an hour and a half with opportunities for discussion and interactive activities. After the workshop, participants were sent a post-survey for the student to receive feedback on the workshop.

Method

Participants

The workshop catered to employees and volunteers at nonprofit organizations and institutions in the Western New York area. All participants of this service-learning project and research were over the age of 18. There were 22 participants total in this project. Participants consisted of the individuals who participated in the primary research survey (10) and the

workshop (12). Gender did not play a factor in this project and will not be used to justify results. Each participant gave their consent to participate in this project where they were not given any reimbursement and the right to refuse to take part in certain parts or withdraw their participation at any time. These participants voluntarily gave their time to share information and come to the workshop with expressed interest to learn more about social media use, marketing, and engagement strategies for their organization.

Those who participated in the on-campus workshop were compensated with a temporary campus parking permit for the day of the workshop and light refreshments provided by the Office of Civic and Community Engagement.

Materials and Procedure

Survey

An online survey was sent out through Qualtrics to non-participants of the workshop who currently work to manage the social media and communication for their organization. It consisted of ten questions to understand their perspective and social media usage. The purpose of this survey was to assess the organization's use of social media, the type(s) of social media account(s) used, their social media strategy, types of content they create, and what they struggle with in regard to social media use along with demographic questions. This data contains personally identifying information and will not be shared with anyone; all names and personally identifiable information have been deleted since the workshop concluded in March.

Workshop

Materials needed for this workshop range from the room that would be used, handouts, presentation material, and technology. The room needed for the project is a technology-friendly classroom with desk space for participants to sit with a visible projection screen. There was a need for technology for this workshop as the presentation was created on Google Slides and required a computer to load the presentation and projection equipment for it to be viewed. Stable internet connection was another need for this workshop as it allowed for the presentation to be shown, websites shared, and participants to use their devices to take notes.

The workshop itself was created based on the pre-survey created on Google Forms that participants of the workshop took after they registered for their spot. The pre-survey contained the following questions: participant name(s), email(s), name of organization, number of individuals attending workshop from organization, what they hope to gain from the workshop, if they currently use social media, the platforms they have/use and the platform(s) they want to

learn more about. This allowed for the student to learn more about the organization, observe their media trends, and tailor the workshop to their needs. She was able to take the information gained from this pre-survey to continue with her secondary research and obtain more information to support and add credibility to the workshop.

The student prepared the workshop through the concepts and principles she learned in her Public Communication curriculum at SUNY Buffalo State. The workshop was outlined to meet a 90-minute time frame with room for discussion. Main principles were derived from former Buffalo State professor Ronald Smith and his public relations texts in regard to formatting information and content to meet the needs of the target audience. Other information from Kivi Leroux Miller (2010) was shared from “The Nonprofit Marketing Guide: High-Impact, Low-Costs Ways to Build Support for Your Good Cause”, which was that “there is no such thing as a general public!” (p. 4). Material from Miller (2010) was utilized to help enhance this workshop as the author specializes in nonprofit marketing workshops and resonated with the challenges the workshops face in regard to the marketing, analysis, and campaigning efforts. Additional research came from The Pew Research Center and its general reports on social media usage and articles from Nonprofit Hub, Georgetown University’s Center for Social Impact Communication, Journal of New Media and Society, Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly which provided statistical data in regard to how social media is used by these types of organizations, how content changes, and new ways for organizations to use social media to improve advocacy and awareness.

To better enforce the workshop, case studies were added to build support for actions taken by other nonprofits and how they built relationships through social media and better connected with their communities. The student utilized case studies from the American Red Cross and Big Brothers Big Sisters NYC in the workshop. There was also the addition of a public relations and advertising campaign for a local event called BurgerFest that the student worked on for a previous service-learning course.

There were handouts available for participants at the workshop. The handouts were the “Quick Guide for Social Media”, note sheets, and a digital copy of the presentation and Hootsuite guide. These handouts were prepared ahead of time by the student with the exception of the Hootsuite guide which was created by her colleague from a campaigns course. The “Quick Guide” was created on Canva and consisted of six pages of useful information compiled from The Pew Research Center, HubSpot, Sprout Social, Hootsuite, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Nonprofit Quarterly, and the student’s personal and organizational social media experience. It took around four weeks to compile the information and condense it into this document to

distribute to participants. Moreover, the digital Hootsuite guide was a separate handout that the participants requested to be sent to them via email. It gave the basics on how to set up, navigate, and utilize Hootsuite to schedule posts and organize information for an organization.

Workshop Overview and Agenda

The day of the workshop, the room was set up with the projector, presentation, and handouts ready for the participants. There was a sign in sheet for participants to sign themselves in along with their information (name, email, organization). There were two workshops given on this day and they followed the same structure. The workshop was held in a technology-friendly classroom where light refreshments were available and attendees could socialize with each other before the presentation.

The presentation began with a welcome and introduction given by Dr. Deborah Silverman about the workshop. The student facilitated an overview of the workshop and its purpose to the community partners in attendance and began the workshop. She interacted with the attendees with questions regarding what social media they use and their level of comfort with that social media, then she asked them the questions about why they use social media and who they reach or hope to reach with their social media use. These questions and interactions framed the presentation and allowed her to work with the participants to tailor the workshop to their needs and immediate interests.

One of the main topics that were emphasized in this presentation regarded who the organization communicates with to share their message and services, known as their key public(s) and/or audience. Many nonprofits work with a variety of demographics and groups of specific individuals based on the services they offer to the community and this is an important component to understand who responds to what information and where they find this information based on the varied social media platform(s). It was important to stress that there is “no general public” as many organizations tend to post information for “all” and often forget to tailor their information to those in their specified audience(s). After this information was discussed, there was a discussion on what is appropriate to post and a conversation regarding intellectual property and information/image use of vulnerable audiences occurred. The ability to understand what to post is important as different icons and logos may belong to other individuals and organizations and should not be used or claimed as an organization’s own. This is similar to images and information shared in organizations with vulnerable populations, such as child-related causes, domestic violence, healthcare, that have different regulations on what can and cannot be shared.

As a social media focused workshop, the student delved into the social media platforms of

Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube. For each platform, she discussed its main purpose, what types of posts can be shared, the creation of a business/organizational page, analytics, and how to schedule posts. There was time for discussion about how the organizations use their social media and if they were either aware of or used any of these features.

Organizational distinctions such as hashtags and branding were discussed to better help these organizations understand different ways they can market themselves in the community and how they can connect with other organizations to promote their services. Additionally, a brief discussion about Google for Nonprofits arose which allowed nonprofits who have not used Google as a resource to manage their emails, social media, and other documents to be aware of the free services offered to those who meet the requirements. It is pertinent to share these ways for nonprofits as many of their social media managers hold other roles in the organization and may not have time to manage each individual account. HootSuite and Buffer were discussed as websites these organizations can utilize for a free or low cost to create, schedule, manage and analyze their social media platforms. The purpose of these three sites is to have the most used social media accounts in one area to be managed and analyzed. It enables the social media person to access their sites, schedule posts, and interact with followers. Likewise, all participants were interested in how they can simplify their user experience and requested a copy of the HootSuite Guide to be emailed to them after the workshop.

To conclude the workshop, examples of local high-performing social media accounts for nonprofit organizations and agencies were shared with the participants. This provided them with an idea of what it looks like to engage with a particular audience for specific organizations. The participants were welcome to ask questions about how they might use these examples to help build their image and connectivity with their followers. There was ten minutes between the first and second workshop, which mirrored the same material and conversations, that allowed participants to ask the student questions and exchange contact information if future questions surfaced. After the workshop, all participants were sent a thank you email with the PowerPoint, discussion points, Quick Guide, HootSuite Guide, and a post-survey evaluation form.

Results

Feedback & Impact of Workshop in Community

As an inaugural workshop for community partners connected to the Buffalo State community, it allowed for the student to understand the increased need for social media, marketing, and promotional assistance. The workshop was able to provide intermediate level information on social media usage to several nonprofit organizations and institutions in Western New York. The information shared was well received by the participants and non-participants of

the workshop. A post-survey was sent out to the participants for feedback. Five out of 12 participants responded to this post survey and their responses reflected positively on the workshop. All five respondents reported back satisfactory comments in regard to the information shared in the workshop and were able to learn more about the platforms. One respondent would like to see more “increased difficulty” as they found it was more “introductory” for those who work on the social media, but understands that some people at the workshop may not have the background or experience working with platforms like these. The same respondent would like to see how to use social media to drive action in the form of a campaign. Another respondent would like to have more time to network with the other organizations after, and the student agrees that this is a great way to increase the communication and connectivity among various nonprofits in the area for the future of the workshop.

The non-participants are individuals from the college community who are either alumni and/or faculty or members of the community who found interest in the workshop and its materials after it took place. They discovered the information through the college’s communication department Facebook page or the student’s social media profiles. The PowerPoint, handout materials, and script of the presentation were shared with them via email. These individuals reported back with positive feedback to the student and she was able to work with some of them to answer their questions and concerns via email. One individual, in particular, requested information about the workshop to build her organization’s social media and utilize sources like Google for Nonprofits to establish an email database and secure email for interested members of the community to connect with the organization.

Discussion

The workshop allowed for community members who manage their organization’s social media to take action to improve their posts, understand analytics and observe how other local organizations utilize social media. As a service learning project, it allowed the student to work with a variety of organizations and reflect on past experiences from service-learning courses to incorporate into the workshop. The ability to understand one’s community and interact with a diverse group of leaders enabled her to make connections and immerse herself in the changing culture of her area. Without this understanding, people do not realize the services and support available to those who need it. Though this opportunity, it enabled the student to learn more about the variety of organizations, services, events, and support groups available to people in the Western New York area. Therefore, this workshop has allowed those in the organization who manage social media to consider how, in what way(s), and to whom they market and promote their services.

To be able to participate in a service learning project and work with a community partner to help them understand and overcome a challenge allows for students to get immersed in their

community. It allowed the student to share her knowledge of social media, marketing, campaigns, and promotion and apply it to real-life situations. The experiences from her service-learning opportunities have peaked her interest in urban and civic education with a focus to connect college students to organizations in their area to enhance their skills and experiences through projects like this workshop

Works Cited

Miller, K. L. (2010). *The nonprofit marketing guide: High-impact, low-cost ways to build support for your good cause*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.