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Carpe Colloquium! The Best and Worst Trends in Social Media

There are a lot of grassroots advocacy social media trends, and many of them won't help you reach your grassroots persuasion goals. As you plan your 2014 outreach, you should be aware of the social media trends – the good and the bad. I had the opportunity to engage Alan Rosenblatt (@DrDigiPol / [www.TurnerStrategies.com \(/web/20140311210639/http://www.turnerstrategies.com/\)](http://www.turnerstrategies.com)) to teach at my annual Innovate to Motivate Conference. I don't get to attend every I2M workshop, so I wanted to interview him about the best and the worst in the grassroots advocacy social media arena.

Q: What would you say is the biggest rule for organizations engaging in social media to advance their cause politically?

A: Carpe colloquium! You have to seize the conversation before it seizes you.

Q: How do you seize it?

A: There are three things you have to pay attention to. First, you have to have an existing presence on social media and in various conversations before you actually need to mobilize the public or your stakeholders. Second, you need to be proactive in talking about news events that impact your stakeholders and/or the public who could be affected by your issue. Three, you have to establish the ability to be part of the conversation and manage chaos. This establishes your credibility in your social media space.

For example, you have to jump on trends when they're relevant. When Nelson Mandela died, the NAACP posted several items about Mandela with pictures and links. Their weekly interactions on their Facebook page jumped from 11,000 to 91,000. Other civil rights groups posted nothing about him and their interactions actually dropped in the week Mandela died. That's a perfect example of failing to be proactive during a major event.

Q: I know that you mentioned that many groups are quite “vain” when they are want to gain a foothold in social media. Define “vanity” for us.

A: It's vanity followers. . . . it's focusing on the number of Twitter followers, the number of Facebook page likes, etc., that are easiest to measure and the least indicative of your success. Page fans are notorious for liking a page and then never returning. You have to keep them engaged in order to keep them fed. What you really need to focus on are engagement levels.

Q: I totally agree, and I find that organizational executives are misled into thinking those kind of stats are really important; when they find they're not and all of their likes and followers do not produce a result, then the government affairs shop gets the blame. So what should they be measuring?

A: You need to focus on different aspects of social media depending on what you want. If visibility is your goal, retweets and shares are good because they are more likely to be seen by your friends. To deepen relationships with your existing stakeholders, examine your shares and Facebook page comments and questions coming to you from Twitter. Comments to your Facebook page and @mentions on Twitter require more thought and time than a simple follow or like.

Q: That is an important nuance! One of the constant refrains I hear from government relations professionals are how to “mine” social media engagement; how can we convert those online activists to offline evangelists. What advice do you have on that goal?

A: If you want to convert people to offline activity, it's much more important to pay attention to comments. Comments indicate that someone has taken the time to put together a cogent (hopefully) thought and write something of interest. It means it's definitely an indicator that they feel more strongly about the topic than someone who just retweets or likes something. You have to remember that only 10% of your page fans or friends see your wall posts in their newsfeeds. If they haven't clicked on one of your posts in a while, they stop getting them in their feed. You have to get them to reconnect by promoting a wall post to all of your fans or get existing fans to recruit their friends.

Q: Back to your admonition that we not emphasize the number of fans and followers in the “vanity” category, how can someone know if their opponents' followers are legitimate? I can envision an executive berating the government relations/advocacy team because their opponents have more vanity followers than they do.

A: You can go to followerwonk.com and that will give you information on how frequently their followers tweet, where they live, and in general their activity level. So that's one way to verify what's really going on. What people have to remember is the easier something is to measure, the less it can tell you. Klout engagement stats are adequate, they're not perfect, but that can be of help as well. You can get a sense of who influences who online and it can help you see the relationship between certain groups and individuals online that may not be apparent offline.

Q: What's your prediction relative to social media practices for 2014?

A: I think we'll definitely see more elected officials and candidates using it. My hope is that they use it to truly talk to voters, rather than just post links to press releases. They have many great opportunities to use it to follow-up and answer questions they didn't get to at town hall meetings or something they wish someone would have asked them at a press conference, etc. It's a great way to show that you're accessible.

Q: I can't resist asking you which groups are the best on the “left,” on the “right” and why?

A: On the left I'd say thinkprogress.org is really good because they have a different perspective. They are usually first with new information, and sometimes their content can be edgy but that's what gets attention.

Q: On the right?

A: I'd say Michelle Malkin and her twitchy.com site really sustain a conversation. She's also edgy, a little snarky and controversial, but her people really keep the conversation going.

I'd also add that the Upworthy.com team is doing a wonderful job because they are trying to give people a good reason to share online content. Their goal is to make worthy, positive content viral.

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