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Twitter Ties and the Implications for Grassroots Professionals

At my recent Innovate to Motivate Conference, I asked each participant to share their top goal for 2012. A clear majority of the grassroots professionals in attendance stated that they want to “build or increase the size of their grassroots network.” While there are many options for doing so, one popular way is through social networks.

I believe that we can occasionally inflate that medium’s effectiveness as a recruiting tool because we believe that our online relationship reach and sphere is wildly different than our real world connections. New research tells us something different about that theory.

Twitter Ties are the Same as Off-Line Ties

New findings shed light on the reality of Twitter connections. According to the researchers, “Social ties in the real world powerfully predict what kind of connections we have in the online world.” (Gruzd, Wellman and Takhteyev, 2012) In other words, the majority of the ties that bind online are also the ties that bind off- line. They found that the majority of one’s Twitter connections, especially those who are “mutuals” (they follow each other and retweet content) are in the same geographic space or at least one plane ride away. They aren’t spread across the globe, unless you have real world connections across the globe.

That’s why it’s important to understand what is and isn’t possible (or likely) when it comes to building your grassroots network. I think many grassroots leaders feel that if they just post enough tweets, that star grassroots team members will fall into their laps and become committed stakeholders.

Off-Line Ties Promote Activism

From the Howard Dean campaign, to Organizing for America, to the Tea Party, the relationship between social ties and activism is clear. Interviews with members of these organizations reveal that a major motivator of their activism is friendships with fellow group members. Their anecdotes are supported by peer-reviewed research. No fewer than four studies have shown that “social ties are critical to propelling activism.” (Klandermans and Oegema, 1987; McAdam, 1986; Morris, 1984; Rockford, 1982)

In fact, as I wrote about in *The Underdog Edge* (www.underdogedge.com), according to the CIA World Factbook, only 25% of Egyptians have Internet access. Were the vivid street protestors who pushed Mubarak out of office only those who had Internet access? If not, how were those without Internet access recruited? Through

Implications for Grassroots Professionals

If you want to expand your network, start from your strengths. Random tweeting with hopes of recruiting an influential, engaged person absent of their real world connection with one of your existing evangelists isn't a viable recruiting strategy.

Take an inventory of your best advocate's off- line and online connections. Search for their online activity to determine if they are even a viable online recruiter.

To increase your online presence, seek ways to create off- line community ties among your advocates. If you have an off- line engagement structure, it will be easier to eventually leverage it in the online world.

The Bottom Line. . . .

As I wrote in [my last K St Café blog post \(/web/20141126045716/http://www.kstreetcafe.com/?author=95\)](/web/20141126045716/http://www.kstreetcafe.com/?author=95), social media is an indicator of what is going on off-line. It's the dependent variable. So pay attention to your stakeholders off-line activity. Do you know what they are doing, and to whom they are connected? Recruit from the existing real world ties of your committed members to expand your online presence.

Don't forget to sign up for K Street Café's mailing-list to receive news about exclusive content and events.
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