Social Media as an Organizational Strategy
A Case Study of A&WMA’s YPAC

Marketing and advertising are important elements of organizational strategy. In years past, organizations have used numerous avenues to spread their message, including flags, street announcers, print media (newspaper, flyers), radio, film, and television. Over the past decade, however, we have seen the surge of a new type of marketing tool: social media.

I can still remember the reaction when my uncle suggested that the Canadian Field Hockey Federation should start using e-mail accounts. The collective response was “Why would we adopt that?” hinting that the superficial trend will pass—and this took place only 15 years ago. Of course, times are changing, and we have a plethora of social media tools available to us today. However, with an oversaturated market and a new social media product being released every now and then, users struggle with where to invest their time and resources. The availability of tools has no measurable use if they are not applied efficiently and correctly.

YPAC’s Social Media Strategy
Where is the line between taking advantage of a new tool and superficially following some new high-tech trend? This is a question that A&WMA has been investigating for some time in developing a new strategy for social media. A&WMA’s Young Professional Advisory Council (YPAC) is also working on its own social media strategy, with the aim of expanding and refining the way that the various Web-based platforms can help fulfill its mission.

2013 will indeed be a year of evolution for YPAC’s presence in social media. The plans remain under construction, but the project has been ongoing with fruitful intensity. Although this article may discuss ideas and paths that have worked for YPAC, the process of defining a social media strategy is itself a valuable subject for an environmental manager.

Two main axes have led the discussion about the use of social media: (1) how can each mission of YPAC be efficiently pursued via social media with a focus on the Council’s goals as social-media triggers, and (2) what can each social medium bring to YPAC’s efficiency, with a focus on the specificities of each social medium to suggest new activities? Great thought was given to which methods would optimize YPAC’s social media presence, including the number of visits or likes and the lengths of posted comments. YPACs need to feed various social media is motivated by a simple fact: Internet habits are varied. Everyone has their own preferences regarding its use: tweeting ideas rather than accepting Facebook invitations, feeding professional forums rather than quietly reading a newsletter. Feeding various fluxes is primarily a way of reaching more people without leaving blind spots. But, beyond this need, each platform brings its flexibility and qualities, its ability to enrich YPAC’s activities.

Chosen Social Media Platforms

LinkedIn
Starting a LinkedIn group (“A&WMA Young Professionals”) has been a great success. The group triggers networking for environmental professionals, a clear mission of A&WMA. It also enables discussion within a specific community, which is directly associated with the Association’s main goal of being a neutral forum. It also enables the promotion of related events. The momentum of the YPAC group on LinkedIn will be kept up and fueled in the months to come.

Facebook
Facebook is also a prominent platform for YPAC with the dedicated group (“Air & Waste Management Association (A&WMA) Young Professionals”). YPAC has been associated with the Facebook page dedicated to the Association’s Annual Conference.
& Exhibition, transmitted every year to the new hosting committee. A Facebook presence seems necessary, since it plays a big role in everyday planning for some users. Facebook is a great way to promote and build interest for upcoming events with regular updates that focus on specific details of the events. Almost two years later, I can still remember clearly the small advertising updates sent on Facebook by ACE 2011 and their Orange fruit logo—updates underlining the unique character of the Disneyland Orlando venue and not only the possibility of buying Mickey Mouse balloons.

Facebook is also highly flexible in gathering groups of individuals. It’s an easy platform for local Sections and Chapters to make use of. The central YPAC Facebook group should enable linking various YP Sections and sharing updates from local initiatives with wider audiences. It might also work as a direct way to give support to local YP Sections, a mission of the YPAC Local Support Committee. Such connections with local pages are not as active as they could be at the moment, and it seems a promising path to explore.

Twitter

The YPAC Twitter account is another platform that has been in use for the past two years (@AirWasteYP). It is efficient for repeating news and YPAC advertisements, as well as sharing links to relevant environmental articles. These features illustrate the standout feature of Twitter, as compared to Facebook, its ability to share content in addition to promoting catchphrases. Even limited to 140 characters, small messages are great sources of discussions and fuel for debates. This was obvious during the latest presidential debates, which triggered online discussions. We can view the YPAC tweets as a flow of consciousness about environmental matters, pieces of thoughts spread to the widest audience.

Twitter seems indeed a great tool to build up an oral history of a large conference like ACE, by sharing striking ideas and quotes in real time. This is an approach adopted by the French newspaper Liberation with its monthly political forums that feed quotes from various speakers to a specific Twitter account. It cannot replace the depth of full

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debate, but clever practice should make it useful: including links to full articles, proper hashtags to ensure visibility, tweet replies that could be shared during question session, and so on. Stretching the range of the YPAC Twitter account could be experimented at ACE 2013 in Chicago, then possibly extended to other events and training sessions.

Blog
The missing link in the YPAC social media strategy appears to be Web-based platform for extended content. That was the main motivation for a new YP blog (http://yp.awma.org/), dedicated to longer reads. Although a blog cannot replace a full scientific paper or report, it can unfold the extended summary hiding behind a striking tweet. The future blog would also be a full-time extension for the quarterly YPAC Newsletter. Why would YPAC tweets only link articles from external sources? Why would interviews of A&WMA members only be shared every three months via the closed box of a .pdf file?

YPAC will surely extend its role of neutral-forum host via deeper use of Facebook & co., but it is worth exploring active content creation, and to gather original texts from members. Such content should offer Web-friendly posts with easily accessible figures and references, as well as a format that can be enjoyed on smart phones and tablets. Such concerns are similar to the “use platform capacities” motto, valid for any kind of Internet presence. Online literary writers often complain that some editors only recycle existing texts in pseudo “official writer blogs” used for promotion; those do not take advantage of the writing innovations generated by blogs and social media, by direct comments, hyperlinks, and embedded videos. We cannot forget that movies rapidly evolved from mere filmed theatre; a YP blog will not thrive as a pile of photocopies available online.

At this level, another great added value of the blog will be its central place in the panel of YPAC’s social media. Thanks to space and flexibility of blog design, the future site should be able to draw connections to the other platform, send feeds to Twitter, offer more details on events promoted on Facebook, and gather resources important to YPs, such as contact information for local YP sections, and practical details for students, and YPs looking to join the Association.

Evolving Strategy
I am aware that such strategy will look both ambitious and abstract on paper, and that the stated ideas will keep evolving and maturing in the months to come. But the previous paragraphs have two primary goals: a modest one and a more crucial one. The modest goal: naively illustrating an early stage of development for a social media strategy, its backbone, and the various parts for various elements. The more crucial goal: showing that YPAC needs assistance in building up the various aspects of its online presence. Any motivated young professional will find stimulating tasks and projects to push further the online frontiers of YPAC and A&WMA. Please contact us at ypperspective@awma.org to learn more.