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Let's get social!

Using social media to build and maintain active living communities

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The interactive nature of social media offers a unique form of communication between organizations and their various targeted and non-targeted audience. Traditionally, organizations promote physical activity using their website, monthly e-newsletters, publications, presentations, conferences, and meetings. These continue to be important mediums of communication. Social media is unique from these forms of communication, as it has the potential to reach a larger audience, allows for two-way communication and fosters brand personality, awareness and recognition. This WellSpring article will provide an overview of factors to consider when using social media to promote active living and build communities in the field.

What is social media?

Social media refers to various interactive digital platforms that allow users to share ideas and information with a network of contacts and beyond.¹ Various online social media platforms exist that allow people to communicate and share information using conversational media in the form of words, pictures, videos, and audios.² Examples of common social media platforms in the field of health promotion are listed in Table 1.

Social media is unique from other forms of communication and marketing as it allows the organization to engage in two-way communication publicly or privately; rather than exclusively "talking at" people or organizations. Social media platforms can be used to help organizations learn, listen and exchange ideas with others. This can help organizations develop a better understanding of their communities' overall needs and their role in the community.

Getting started in social media for health promotion

The following are some factors to consider when developing, maintaining and expanding your social media strategy.

1) What are your organizational social media objectives and goals?

Developing a succinct social media strategy is important in both the development and implementation stages.³ The first step in developing a social media strategy is to

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develop clear and concise goals and objectives that are consistent with and support the organizational business and communication plans.

Your organization may have various social media objectives ranging from increasing awareness, changing behaviour, educating, marketing events, exchanging ideas, collaborating with partners, or directing people to the organization’s website. Developing an overarching social media objective with more specific SMART goals (see sidebar) can help an organization stay focused in the development and maintenance of their social media presence.

SMART goals are:

S - Specific: Identify the “Who?” and “What?” of the social media goal.

M - Measureable: One can determine if the goal has been attained or not.

A - Achievable: In consideration of the steps required to attain the goal, is the goal attainable?

R - Realistic: The organization must be willing and able to do the steps required to achieve the goal and this should fit under the scope of the overall social media objective.

T - Time-phased: The goal should be grounded within a specific time frame in which it can be met.⁵

Example from ACAL’s social media plan

Objective:

- To use social media as a knowledge mobilization strategy to support practitioners, organizations and communities to improve the health and quality of life for people through physical activity.

Goal:

- To share key findings from academic articles with practitioners and organizations who have medium to high engagement on Twitter weekly.

Table 1. Common social media platforms used in health promotion

Platform	Description	Sample of platform in health promotion
 Facebook www.facebook.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows users to create an organizational profile to share information, interests, photos or videos. Users can find and accept people and organizations with whom they wish to connect. Facebook allows for status updates, instant messaging and posting content found on the web. 	Healthy Canadians: www.facebook.com/HealthyCdns ParticipACTION: www.facebook.com/ParticipACTION
 Twitter www.twitter.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows users to create a brief profile with a photo. Users can share photos, videos and brief 140-character status updates referred to as “tweets”. Twitter users can follow people or organizations to stay connected. 	Ever Active Schools: twitter.com/EverActiveAB Parachute Canada: twitter.com/parachutecanada
 Instagram www.instagram.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This is a photo and video sharing app. Users can take a picture and select different filter options to share their picture with their followers. Users develop their own profile and can select to follow specific people or organizations to get photo or video updates. 	Why I Move: www.instagram.com/whyimove World Health Organization: www.instagram.com/worldhealthorganization
 Pinterest www.pinterest.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> An electronic pin board where users create a profile and “pin” content from the Internet to their board. These pin boards facilitate social bookmarking where users can organize information on their own board and follow other users. 	YMCA Calgary: www.pinterest.com/ymcocalgary Healthy Canadians: www.pinterest.com/healthycdns
 LinkedIn www.linkedin.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A professional social media network that connects people to increase access to people, jobs, news, updates and insights. 	Alberta Workplace Wellness discussion group: www.linkedin.com/groups/5186591
 YouTube www.youtube.com	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YouTube is a video sharing website that provides people with a forum to distribute originally-created videos. 	DocMikeEvans: www.youtube.com/user/DocMikeEvans

This table was adapted from Vaterlaus, Patten, Roche & Young, 2015.⁴

2) Who is your audience?

Social media platforms should be built in consideration of the target audience and community. If more than one audience is targeted, separate streams for each type of audience may be considered (e.g., practitioner versus general public Twitter accounts). Or using hashtags to target a specific community may improve clarity and reach.

Social media messages should be developed using more informal, social and entertaining language that fosters engagement.⁶ Developing quality messages and conversations that stand out and resonate with the audience are key to engagement. Acknowledging the audience by retweeting, messaging and mentioning the audience in tweets allows the audience to know someone is listening and that the organization is interested in them.

3) What to post, tweet, and share?

To foster engagement with the audience, the messages should be short, personalized and easy to understand.⁶ People are less likely to engage in feeds that seem robotic.⁶ Some helpful tips when writing content include:

- have meaningful conversations,
- include hashtags,
- think visually,
- be consistent,
- be concise, and
- plan your content.

One aspect of the social media plan should include the scope and criteria for posting messages. The scope of content should be centred around the organization's core business and the targeted community. Additionally, criteria identifying appropriate sources of knowledge for the posts should be considered. On social media platforms, such as Twitter, at least a third of the posted content should come from sources external to the organization. These could include retweets of others' information from your feed, news about other organizations that you partner with, and other external information that your community may be interested in, passionate about, or have a strong opinion on. This type of content can help start social media conversations. Organizations should be cognizant that tweets, retweets, posts, links, etc., are viewed by others as an endorsement of the message and the source of the information.

4) Who are you?

How social media messages are written is a reflection of the organization's brand. Consider the most appropriate character, tone and language when forming social media content. The character of the organization can be captured by writing professionally, playfully, authoritatively, friendly, or in an inspiring manner. The tone of the brand can emanate a personal, clinical, direct, or scientific feel. The language can be complex, simple, fun, or serious. Generally, an organization's social media presence is less formal than other channels of communication.

5) How do I know if anyone is listening? (analytics)

In order to assess the degree of social media engagement, various factors can be assessed ranging from exposure, reach and degree of engagement. See Table 2 for a list of some methods of assessing the degree of engagement on social media.⁷

Example from ACAL's social media plan

Target Audience:

- Physical activity practitioners, decision-makers, researchers, educators, advocates, and organizations.
- Practitioners, decision-makers, researchers, educators, and advocates that are not physical activity experts but use physical activity as part of their work.
- Note: The general public is not the intended target audience.

Scope of information shared:

- Physical activity.
- Sedentary behaviour.
- Centre activities.
- Active living partners' products and activities.

Sources of Knowledge/Information:

- ACAL publications, work and activities.
- Key research abstracts and articles from ACAL and Alberta researchers.
- Key research abstracts and articles from other physical activity researchers.
- Messages from Alberta based NGOs (main focus is provincial; national and international will be included if highly relevant).
- Information from kinesiology, physical education and health promotion faculties of Alberta universities.
- Further materials of interest: guidelines, FAQs, events, etc., related to physical activity.

Table 2: Methods of assessing social media exposure, reach and engagement.

<p>Exposure</p> <p>The number of times content on a social media application is viewed</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visits • Click-throughs • Number of comments, ratings or reviews on rating site • Facebook impressions • Views of a video or blog posts
<p>Reach</p> <p>The number of people who have contact with the social media application and the related content</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fans/page likes • Number of people participating in discussions • Number of followers or subscribers • Demographics of subscribers/fans/followers • Virality (growth rate of fans, followers and friends)
<p>Engagement (low)</p> <p>The number of people who acknowledge agreement or preference for content</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ratings • Likes on Facebook posts • Frequency of favorites • Likes or dislikes on videos
<p>Engagement (medium)</p> <p>The number of people who participate in creating, sharing and using content, and the degree to which they influence others</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Posts or tweets by users • User-generated content • Comments on posts • Number of threads on discussion topics • Frequency of new discussions, new topics • Downloads and uploads • Klout scores (see Klout.com) • Number of retweets and mentions • The number of times a post, video or link was shared
<p>Engagement (high)</p> <p>The number of people who engage in offline events (which may be in addition to continued online activity) as a consumer or as a program partner, volunteer or sponsor</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of people who register for events or visit your site from a link • Number of people assisted • Number of participants satisfied

Table adapted from Neiger et al., 2012⁷

In summary

Various social media platforms exist that can effectively help organizations engage with their community and increase the potential reach of their messages. To maximize the benefits of social media, organizations can disseminate information, share information from others that is important to the community, and participate in two-way conversations. Taking some time to develop, implement and evaluate social media efforts is critical in establishing and maintaining meaningful social media relationships.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christina Loitz works as ACAL's research associate and knowledge mobilization (KM) scientist and consultant with researchers and active living organizations to develop, implement and assess KM plans to intentionally share knowledge effectively with targeted audiences. She leads ACAL's evaluation and research activities, and works with organizations to support their evaluation needs.

USEFUL LINKS

Canada Health Infoway
www.infoway-inforoute.ca/en/component/edocman/2754-social-media-landscape-infographic/view-document?Itemid=101

Writing SMART Objectives – CDC 2009
www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/evaluation/pdf/brief3b.pdf