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Aug 18, 2011
How To #HOW31988:

Social Media Marketing: Brand-powered social site is 4th-largest traffic source for nonprofit

SUMMARY: Blogs, forums and social profiles typically require a steady stream of content to keep your audience engaged. But what if you offered an entire social network? Would you have enough content to keep the site going?

See how a nonprofit organization launched a branded social network that has 23,000 registered users, and is mostly powered on repurposed and user-generated content. Also, learn how the team fights off spammers, and how a single employee manages the network.

by Adam T. Sutton, Senior Reporter

National Peace Corps Association (NPCA) maintains a branded social network where members can start groups, share photos, blog, chat, and interact on a forum. Hosting the community is one way in which the nonprofit organization helps connect people who have returned from volunteering overseas.

The site is mostly powered by user-generated content and takes about 10% to 15% of a single person's time to maintain. That person is Molly Mattessich, Manager of Online Initiatives at NPCA. (Note: NPCA is not affiliated with the Peace Corps agency of the U.S. government.)

"It's serving as a great way to get content from our audience, and to use that content to give back to our audience to further engagement there. That attracts more people to the organization in general," Mattessich says.

Highlights of the site's results include:

- o 23,000 registered users (membership is free), compared to the association's 11,000 Facebook fans
- o The most registered users of any site that focuses on alumni of the Peace Corps
- o 4th most-popular source of traffic to the NPCA's main website
- o The visitors who come from the site to NPCA's main website spend an average of 4 minutes and 30 seconds of time there.

Below, we touch on the challenges NPCA encountered by having its own social network, as well as the key features and tactics it used to grow and maintain the site on a limited budget.

Tactic #1. Provide ample tools to interact

The NPCA's social site is more than an online forum or a blog. It is a branded online network that offers members a variety of tools and provides an online environment for Peace Corps alumni to connect, interact, and share stories.

Key features include:

- Profiles and sharing

Members are given a [profile](#) to hold their basic information, such as name, location, and groups to which the member belongs. Each profile lists a member's most recent activity, such as comments written or photo and videos uploaded.

"Posting pictures is far and away the most popular activity that people like to do. Peace Corps volunteers like to show where they have been and what they have done, and photos are one of the best ways to do that," Mattessich says.

- Groups, forums, chat

Members can also form [groups](#), such as Friends of Afghanistan, and interact in public or group-specific forums and chat sessions.

- Community homepage

The social network's [homepage](#) features content selected by Mattessich's team to highlight, such as information on up-coming events or videos of the team's content. The homepage also features thumbnail samples of the site's groups and members, and provides select updates on members' activity and recent uploads.

The entire site is branded with the NPCA's imagery and messaging. To maintain control of the messaging, Mattessich's team keeps the majority of the site's content accessible only to members, and all of the site's content is able to be moderated.

Tactic #2. Focus on user-generated content

Maintaining a profile in a social network such as Facebook or Twitter typically demands steady stream of content to engage the audience. One might assume that maintaining an entire social network would require tremendous volumes of content from the marketing team, but Mattessich says the audience provides ample content on its own.

"The beauty of it is that a lot of the energy on the website is created by the users ... We are lucky where our Peace Corps community does want to tell everyone where they have been and what they have done and share that experience."

The site has also benefited from the natural tendency of Peace Corps members to want to connect with people they either have met or will meet while volunteering overseas, Mattessich says.

"It has been very organic and I haven't had to do a lot of begging and pleading for people to post on here. The groups are finding it very useful for their own needs and are posting messages in their different groups to plan events and network. It hasn't been super difficult."

- Content management is the challenge

Instead of focusing on content creation, Mattessich repurposes the NPCA's content and highlights content from the site's audience. This can be an effective way to cut a workload and increase efficiency.

"A lot of the [social site's] homepage content comes from our other websites. We highlight some of the blogs or the news pieces from our main website ... In terms of timeline, it is pretty ad hoc and it just happens. We change it to be whatever our latest campaign or event is, and it is extremely easy," Mattessich says.

Tactic #3. Encourage users to contribute

New members are encouraged to upload content and help grow the network immediately after signing up. For example, the team's [welcome email](#) lists four actions new users can take to get started:

1. *Invite friends to join* -- links to a tool to send invitations to the members' contacts via Hotmail, Gmail, Yahoo! Mail or AOL Mail. This helps the team add more members (who can then add more content).

2. *Add content* -- links to an [overlay](#) on the member's profile, which contains links to tools to upload photos and videos, start a blog, join a discussion, and more.

3. *Add a profile photo* -- self explanatory.

4. *Tell your Twitter followers* -- links to a page where Twitter members can log in and tweet this preloaded message: "Just joined <http://community.peacecorpsconnect.org>"

Each new member profile also includes a large [banner](#) listing "a few things you do right now" and provides links to invite friends, add a profile photo, and add content. This banner can be removed by clicking an "x" in its upper right-hand corner.

Members can also link their profiles to their Facebook or Twitter accounts to automatically send updates of their activity on the NPCA's network to those channels. This feature can help the organization call more attention to its network on these popular social sites.

Tactic #4. Combat spammers by moderating

Online comments and forums are havens for spammers, and the NPCA's network is no different. The site received a flood of phony members soon after launch. Mattessich's team could not afford to allow the site to become a headache for its audience or negatively impact the brand.

Two steps the team has taken:

- Moderate registrations

The team switched from an open-membership policy to a multi-step, moderated process. Here's the process new members follow:

- o Fill out a form with email address and birth date
- o Click a link in an automated email to verify email address

- o Fill out a longer registration form
- o Wait for membership approval

Mattessich's team reviews each registration and approves or denies them individually. The process might seem laborious, but it has gone a long way in building a network the audience feels safe using.

"That has actually helped our community be much more spam-free and more trustworthy to our members."

- Control the homepage

The network's homepage is one of the few areas that can be seen by people who are not registered with the site. Since the page is public-facing, it's important that its content is the "cream-of-the-crop," and not embarrassing.

By manually controlling the page's content, Mattessich's team can be sure that messages from spammers or other malicious users will not be seen by the public at large. This degree of control would not be available if the homepage's content was selected by automated tools from the audience.

Tactic #5. Clearly explain the site's features

Any feature on your website will generate questions from your audience. Once you multiply the number of features on your site, you can expect the number of questions to multiply as well.

To avoid frustrating its audience or overwhelming its team with questions, the NPCA strives to explain its social site in the following areas:

- FAQ and tutorials

The site offers a page of frequently asked questions and a list of tutorial articles to answer many of the questions members have for the site's features. Tutorials cover topics such as how to start a group and creating a photo album.

- Forums

The site has forum topics that are intended to receive questions from the audience, such as the "Site Feedback" topic. NPCA's team members check these pages for usability issues and to answer questions directly.

- Lead by example

Mattessich and several other NPCA team members maintain profiles on the site and regularly interact in groups and forums. This has the dual benefit of enabling the team to answer member questions as they arise, and to show off capabilities of the site through uploading videos, writing blog posts, etc.

Tactic #6. Encourage subscriptions to your emails

One of the NPCA's challenges in maintaining the network is to convert its members to paid supporters of the organization.

"One of our branding challenges is for people to realize that when they become a member of the free social network, that does not mean they are a full-fledged member of the National Peace Corps Association. That membership requires a different signup process and generally a fee," Mattessich says.

To combat this challenge, Mattessich's team now includes an opt-in request for the team's newsletters on the registration form for the social network. The goal is to send emails to members of the network to remind them of the additional benefits of being a member of the organization and to solicit donations.

"It has definitely helped us grow our email lists."

NPCA's story is just one of many on social media marketing we've featured. If you're interested in reading more inbound marketing case studies and how-to articles, subscribe to the free [Inbound Marketing newsletter](#).

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