

Face to face – virtually: Two PR professionals share their success on Facebook

Many PR professionals are on Facebook now, though few seem to know how to best leverage it for business purposes. Facebook is an excellent channel for communicating with (not to) a variety of publics. So should PR people use Facebook? David Neff, director of Web, film and interactive strategy at the American Cancer Society, and Adam Denison, coordinator of social media communications at General Motors, offer advice on how a large nonprofit and automaker use Facebook to reach their publics.

By David Neff

A search for the word “cancer” on Facebook will find hundreds of groups and links about the disease.

We view these not just as random links and text, but as important conversations. As modern-day PR and marketing professionals, we want to do more than monitor these online conversations; we want to be part of them.

At the American Cancer Society High Plains Division (which includes Hawaii, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Texas), we have been successful on Facebook because we treat online social networks as another community we serve and as a place to raise funds.

The goal of the American Cancer Society has always been to defeat cancer and serve local communities as they fight against this disease. We offer programs, information and services to local communities, patients and caregivers. We raise money through events such as the American Cancer Society Relay for Life and Making Strides Against Breast Cancer to fund research, education, advocacy and service.

Now we are able to expand our outreach through online avenues such as Facebook. In my blog on FISpace.org, I try to avoid “preaching” by encouraging visitors to join the conversation. At the American Cancer Society High Plains Division, we employ the same strategy on Facebook: We find conversations in progress and join them.

We are also starting our own conversations on the site. As of this writing, you can become a fan of several of our Web sites on Facebook, as well as the American Cancer Society itself. You can even add the American Cancer Society Facebook



Survey: Facebook continues to grow

Facebook's recent ascension to become the top global social networking site has been spurred by its substantial growth across worldwide regions. Though its largest visitor base is still in North America (49 million), Facebook's growth in the region is a relatively modest 38 percent. In every other worldwide region, Facebook's audience has more than quadrupled. Europe is quickly catching up with North America as Facebook's largest visitor base with 35 million visitors in June, a 303-percent increase and a net addition of nearly 27 million monthly visitors versus a year ago. [Source: comScore, Inc.]

application to your profile, which allows users to share cancer prevention tips and give cancer ribbons. This application is a work in progress; a large part of our 2009 strategy centers around more efficiently recruiting people to use these pages. These tactics let us engage constituents and volunteers in our conversation.

In addition, we're also raising money through the site's Facebook Causes program, which allows certified 501(c)(3) nonprofits to start benefit groups. American Cancer Society headquarters started a Facebook Causes group to raise funds for free summer camps we provide so kids with cancer can find peer support.

In the crowded landscape of “causes,” these camps have been difficult to promote and we are further exploring Facebook Causes as part of our 2009 Web strategy.

The real advantage of Facebook Causes is that people can do what I like to call “freestyle fundraising,” meaning they can create original event groups to benefit your cause, such as “Bob's Sunday Brunch to Cure Cancer” or “Relay For Life of Dallas.” We don't always know the volunteers who start these groups, but our cause certainly benefits from every dollar they raise.

To find out more about these groups,

all we have to do is join the conversation. If we are not happy with their intent, Facebook allows us to express why we believe the group should be removed. We haven't had to do this yet, but it is something to consider.

We know there are many meaningful conversations happening about cancer, and many of the people are connecting online. While our tactics evolve as we navigate online, our strategy is the same: Join and start conversations, and get involved in communities, virtual or actual, to defeat cancer.

By Adam Denison

At GM, most of our success on Facebook comes from engaging a variety of publics one-on-one. Although the number of people using Facebook is huge, we need to view Facebook as a one-to-one medium, not one-to-many. Let me explain how we've done this at GM.

If you've used Facebook, you may have noticed many of your friends are



members of various groups on the site. Groups are like clubs built by Facebook users with a passion for a topic. There are groups for virtually everything, so the first step is to find the groups most relevant to your organization and start to participate in them.

Most Facebook groups allow members to post video, pictures and links directly to a group's page. Group members can comment on any of the content you post. If group members are active and visit the site often, you'll get attention, but if they aren't, much of your hard work may go unnoticed. So when joining a group, check how active it's been recently (i.e., most recent wall posts, comments, etc.).

Next, build a relationship with the group administrators. The phrase “group administrator” sounds technical, but really, they're similar to editors.

When I join a group on behalf of GM, the first thing I do is send a Facebook message introducing myself to the administrator and telling him or her I'm an available resource if they ever need information from GM. This has worked very well. The group administrator usually likes having access to an inside source.

A great relationship with group administrators has two main benefits:

- They have access to the recent news section of the group and can post news about your organization or client.
- Group administrators can send messages to all group members.

The “discussion topics” feature of Facebook groups has also proved successful for us. Group members can create and join discussion topics (similar to forums or message boards) related to the group's subject matter. At GM we have both participated in and initiated GM-related conversations.

Perhaps the best example was a discussion I started on an environmental group site regarding GM's push to diversify our fuel needs. I simply posted a few facts about what we're doing and then asked group members what they thought.

We had a huge response, and all of them, with one exception, were positive. One disgruntled group member kept trying to cause trouble despite my best efforts to establish a respectful dialogue.

Finally, another member told him how lucky the group was to have a representative from GM to talk to, and said if he didn't like it he didn't have to respond. After this, the dialogue was positive.

For more on PRSA's Facebook group, please turn to page 23.