



# Social Networking for Associations

July 2009



## Inside

Executive Summary  
**Pg. 1**

Outline  
**Pg. 2**

Creating a Sense of Community  
**Pg. 3**

Creating a Culture of Information  
Sharing  
**Pg. 7**

Social Networking  
**Pg. 9**

Doing More With Less  
**Pg. 11**

Implement Quickly and Affordably  
**Pg. 11**

## Executive Summary

Membership development is the lifeblood of any association. Not-for-profit associations in particular are looking to expand a growing network of new and existing supporters, advocates, and participants in which an increased to raise support is a primary objective.

All associations have four major objectives in common:

- 1.) Sustaining membership renewals based on improved member engagement, collaboration, and awareness.
- 2.) Increasing membership by offering additional or improved awareness, services, and/or products. This usually includes fundraising and

donation efforts for non-profit based associations.

- 3.) Non-dues revenue. What are associations doing to boost their budgets while strengthening their services for members? Associations are doing everything from providing one-stop shopping to helping their members generate new business, train their staffs, fill jobs, and find jobs.

Doing more with less. Associations soften work within a very constrained budget environment limiting capital expenditures and technology investments.

## A. How?

Social networking software promotes and supports individual involvement, participation, and the development of a sense of community within any distributed membership based organization. Social media are invaluable tools for building engagement, supporting collaboration and creating knowledge in associations. Social media can be used to promote attendance at meetings, conferences and networking events. Build online, interactive communities, quickly, easily and cost effectively. Members within the network can create their own personal profiles, network with other “like minded: members, manage and coordinate events, participate in peer groups, email or RSS feeds to create community specific information, discover new career opportunities, and much more. Remember outsourcing? That was yesterday. Today’s new pool of cheap labor is everyday people using their time and energy to create content and solve problems. Crowdsourcing has the potential to upset the entire apple cart—the way in which work is organized, talent is employed, research is done, and products are made and marketed. There are implications for individual businesses, associations (think of the opportunities for both creativity and cutting costs) and society in general.

The key benefits of implementing a social networking solution to any association include:

- 1) greater stickiness- members stay engaged in the social networking site longer
- 2) Return members- engaged members return more often
- 3) Member loyalty- higher renewal and donation rates
- 4) Membership intelligence- associations can track usage patterns and activity to create more targeted programs.

## II. Outline

**Social networking can play in the life of an association. When member networking is successful, its members become more satisfied, engaged and loyal.**

Declining membership renewals, stagnated membership growth and diminishing response rates to direct mail campaigns are just a

few examples of the negative effects that online social networks are having on many associations today. The reality is that online social networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn and Plaxo are doing a better job of providing cost effective, easy to use tools to connect and network people together. The statistics don’t lie- over 250 million people- belong to at least one online social network. More startling is the fact that this growth has occurred in the last four years.

This is a huge problem for associations and potentially threatens their very existence. The

need to “do more with less” is the new operational imperative. Old static web sites and “push-based” marketing campaigns are no longer effective. Members are demanding more value, services and control at lower costs.

A new breed of associations are starting to emerge- with very different business models. They have figured out that you cannot ignore the social networking trend but need to embrace it. Many have already begun to integrate social networking tools as part of their program offerings. It makes a lot sense as the core value proposition of any association revolves around knowledge sharing, collaboration and networking- the fundamental building blocks of social networking.

This whitepaper highlights the critical role that social networking can play in the life of an association. The premise of this paper is that if member networking is successful, members become more satisfied, engaged and loyal.

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## Why Should I Care About Social Networking?

Customers have lost trust in traditional sales, marketing and service (the three areas commonly referred to as “CRM,” or Customer Relationship Management). According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, “the most credible source of information about a company is now ‘a person like me,’ which has risen dramatically to surpass doctors and academic experts for the first time.” The survey relates that in the U.S., trust in “a person like me” increased from 20% in 2003 to 68% today.

*“The connections enabled by social networks are the glue that put the humanity back into business to solve the trust problem. In other words, the organizations that will win are the ones that most easily enable individuals to build relationships and communities with people they trust. “*

Specifically this paper will examine how social networking software helps associations to:

- ▶ Create a sense of community within an association
- ▶ Promote a culture of communication and collaboration
- ▶ Improve relationships and networking capabilities
- ▶ Create new revenue streams
- ▶ Do more with less( cost savings)



### III. Creating a Sense of Community

Social networking can play in the life of an association. When member networking is successful, its members become more satisfied, engaged and loyal.

Communities act as a single place on the web (public or private) where association members can securely share and collaborate together regardless of social, political or geographic boundaries. Your association’s community can be of any size (small, medium or large); scale (local, national, international); scope (interest or practice); and can be managed regardless of geographic boundaries or time zones.

Associations generally set up an online community to improve collaboration, knowledge sharing and networking amongst members. For example, most associations need a

mechanism to more pro-actively engage and communicate with membership on services, products, and benefits. Social networking software offers existing and prospective members a one stop shop, where they can access to the most recent news, connect with other members, pay their membership fees, register for an upcoming event—anything that is related to their role in the association.

One of the primary reasons associations should take advantage of social networking software is that association members already share a common interest. A sense of community is a vital component when building critical mass in an association, club or professional network. An online community, powered by social networking software is conducive to creating critical mass around a cause, profession, institution or industry.

To create a sense “community”, your members must be able to interact, participate and network within the dedicated environment. As a minimum, your online community must allow member to:

- ▶ set up and share personal profiles
- ▶ create relationships with other members with similar interests and backgrounds
- ▶ state opinions on topical issues using blogs
- ▶ discuss issues using online forums
- ▶ publish, share, comment, tag, search, bookmark and rate information



## A. Protect Your Brand

When implementing an online community using social networking software, be sure that the software offers a collection of administration tools that help you to enhance and protect your brand, membership and intellectual property (IP). Typical administration tools should include:

- ▶ Brand - page layouts, logos, fonts, styles, CSS
- ▶ Page Layout - page templates, site map, navigational items
- ▶ Security - login, forgot password, individual and group permissions, roles
- ▶ Membership management - invitations, reminders
- ▶ Application Controls - for applications such blogs, forums, wiki, calendar, member directory,
- ▶ Document sharing, video sharing, audio, commenting, rating, tagging
- ▶ Notifications - email and RSS (to drive members back to the community)

## B. Public Versus Private

Portions of the online community can remain private, while other sections can be made available to the public, allowing associations to communicate member benefits, products and service offerings to current enrolled members, prospective members and the public. The community serves as both a public

website and a private “clubhouse”, delivering value above and beyond a standard website solution.

Authorized members or administrators can use straightforward and fully integrated content management tools to create, update and post static and dynamic content to the online community.

The community can be structured and designed to reflect the organization of the association itself, and branded with a uniform look and feel to communicate a consistent message to the public along with potential new members and key stakeholders.

## C. Improve Membership Services

Not only do associations require the ability to increase membership and develop communities, they also need to create new and innovative ways to increase membership and fundraising campaigns. Social networking software can improve your ability to raise online memberships, collect membership fees and funding, and garner support for association objectives.

Members can be required to “sign up” to the online community in order to access value-add member services from the association. This may include publishing their member profile; connecting with other members; joining groups or creating, commenting or rating content within the online community using blogs, wiki or forums.

Associations can set up the online community and allow members to “sign up” for free or pay online using an ecommerce gateway (Note: requires a merchant account to be set up and activated).

When a member joins the online community, the association can track member activity and usage trends. This is extremely valuable information when creating tailored programs based on member groupings, activity and/or contributions.

The association can also integrate online fundraising applications which automatically collect donations or fees from both members and the general public via an open API (application programming interface). Upon completion of the transaction, members of the association and general public are automatically issued a tax receipt. This store-front e-commerce is


A centralized member directory enables associations to create a social directory or “yellow pages” in which personal profiles of all registered members are displayed, and can be accessed and sorted. Custom groups or chapters can be created by community administrators so that each member in the group is automatically assigned a specific level of access rights within the community. For example, a “Discover Group” can be created within a not-for-profit organization to engage members in taking trips overseas to see firsthand the impact of specific programs and report this back to the organization.

Personal stories and experiences can then be shared across the network to “spread the word” and reach an audience of potential new members or supporters. A for-profit organization can use Groups to run a Mentor Program, offering a very tangible benefit to first time members.


Within the community, members can share professional and/or personal information depending on policies set by community administrators. Groups and chapters can be browsed online and members can select which groups or chapters to join.

Member Directory allows association members to:

- ▶ browse groups or chapters
- ▶ select groups of chapters to join
- ▶ browse member profiles
- ▶ request access to private groups
- ▶ view private groups or chapter content based on permissions
- ▶ subscribe to group content (blogs, wikis, forums)
- ▶ register for chapter-specific events
- ▶ send messages to group members



## **Social networking software can automate the registration of new members, including the creation and sending out of invitations, along with authenticating member enrollment and expirations.**



securely integrated with the community’s administrative functionality and web content management.

### **D. Consolidate member management**

Social networking software can automate the registration of new members, including the creation and sending out of invitations, along with authenticating member enrollment and expirations.

Using an online community, member relationship management is centralized in one familiar location that makes available detailed information about members, pending memberships, contacts, committees, events, publications, financial information, volunteer programs and more. Redundancy and multiple data sets are eliminated because the management and storage all of membership-related information occurs in one location.



## **E. Integrate event and campaign management**

Many associations hold events and conferences once or twice a year where members can meet and network. A social network extends an association's networking capacity; instead of meeting once or twice a year, members can connect year round regardless of their location. Associations benefit by offering their members a way to connect outside or beyond a specific conference or event. For example, attendees can connect, collaborate and share ideas long after the event is over via the online community. Members can share their experiences, provide feedback on the event, discuss topical issues or upload content such as conference presentations to be downloaded by other members. This can be a huge value add to members as well as providing a huge cost-savings to the association by hosting some events totally online.

Social networking software integrates campaign management so that associations can easily organize current, planned and ongoing events that attract a subscribed member audience. Whether its objective is an upcoming event or fundraising and/or cause-focused, an online community provides the ability to organize, invite and manage all content, registration and scheduling of any type of event. Members are able to easily search, view and access an online calendar of events, which is fully integrated within the community. A private community of events or chapter-specific events can also be posted and accessed by members who have permissions to access the private pages of the association's online community.

Social networking software offers the ability to collect, manage and manipulate membership list(s) in order to target and reach all or segments of this list via email. Facilitators are able to subscribe members/groups to events so that they can

receive immediate information. Because associations tend to host a good number of events, members need to be able to easily find event-related information and facilitators should be able to create recurring events for monthly or annual meetings with and between members. Social networking software allows associations to leverage a community calendar that provides this functionality.

## III. Creating a Culture of Information Sharing

### A. Eliminate Silos

With employees, members, volunteers and other stakeholder groups geographically dispersed across the globe, associations often have to contend with isolated silos of information. Important data, including policies, programs, service offerings, news and member information is often unorganized or hard to find. This often results in redundant data, duplicated efforts, unclear communications, and costly delays. A social network provides a secure central location to house and manage all of an association's vital information (policies, procedures, meeting minutes, programs etc), replacing silos of information with easy to use knowledge or data management functionality.

Information within a social network can span multiple locations, giving authorized members access to the community from anywhere, via a secure Web browser or mobile device like a BlackBerry.

Authorized members are able to upload files, documents, images, video and audio files and manage membership access to this information. From a member perspective, people are able to search for this information, rate it, download and comment on it. Version control and detailed audit histories guarantee that members have access to the most recent version of a document, both inside and outside the firewall.

Because security and privacy of information is guaranteed, members are able to deliver sensitive information at any time to geographically dispersed members. Confidentiality and protection of data is assured with industry standard SSL, passwords and audit trail.

### B. Encourage Open Dialogue

Effective, targeted and timely communication is essential for keeping association or network members engaged. Associations need to be able to consistently and accurately communicate to their members the ongoing benefits of membership renewal and cost-justify membership expenses through news, press releases, email and other forms of communications. Social networking software for associations enables users to optimize "push" and "pull" mechanisms to drive communications and improve member engagement.

Targeted promotions describing new or expanded services, products, upcoming news, events and initiatives can be pushed out to members. As a solution, social networking software for



associations delivers powerful and intuitive tools for bulk emailing (to groups or chapters), messaging and creating e-newsletters. Announcements can be published to community members to introduce new members, highlight upcoming events, and promote new publications. Sophisticated member management functionality allows administrator or facilitators to track interaction on a one-to-one basis.

Subscriptions are available as a pull mechanism to improve access to up to date or important information. Members can subscribe to content in a community-wide library or resource collection to enable proactive member awareness and communication. Offsite content can be embedded into an online community via RSS feed integration. Blogs, forums and wikis (see below) can be created within specific groups or site-wide to increase member participation, collect feedback and member input, and open up lines of communications.

### **C. Promote Information Sharing**

Lack of member engagement results in non-productive membership and lower renewal rates. Not only do associations need to improve member engagement; they also need to focus on improving and promoting relationships between members.

Social networking software for associations provides an environment in which members can experience the value of creating connections, deepening relationships, offering insight and exchanging stories and experience. These mechanisms include private group or chapter areas, blogs, forums, wikis and polls.

A **blog** is an online editorial or article that expresses an author's opinion, observations or expertise on specific topics, events or activities. Members can be encouraged to create their own blog on a specific topic and solicit opinions from other members within the association. Associations can use blogs to encourage dialogue between members and gather feedback regarding new products and services or past events. Blogs can be specific to a chapter or site-wide. Sharing experiences and receiving information in such a loosely structured way promotes a free-exchange of ideas and deepens relationships with an association's key constituents. Associations can also make use of forums to improve communications and build relationships.

**Forums** facilitate interaction and collaboration, providing an online place where members can gather and discuss relevant topics and pose questions to one another. By committing to respond quickly to forum posting, facilitators can ensure that

members stay involved for longer time frames, following a specific online conversation.

**Wikis** can be implemented to encourage the exchange of innovative ideas and integrate the brand with the overall strategy and direction of an association. A wiki is a collection of web pages that a community can access, contribute to and modify online. A wiki can be set up as a “living” collaborative document that always contains up to date information. Members inside and outside of the association can use wikis to actively contribute to the development and refinement a program or best practices, for example.

**Online surveys, polls and rating** functionality also present a cost-effective way to reach out to both current and new members. By delivering automated push and pull mechanisms for communications and moving all information online, social networking software significantly reduces paper and distribution costs typically spent on sending out promotions such as quarterly newsletters, for example. Social networking delivers an environment where members can go to network and collaborate on specific association services, events, programs and products—enabling them to further understand the associated value and benefits they are receiving from their membership.

By providing mechanisms to aid in monitoring member participation, trends and issues (via blog postings, viewing comments, accessing individual contributions) social networking software helps organizations improve their understanding of their own members to provide more effective membership benefits.



## IV. Social Networking

### A. Endorse Connections

Association members spend a percentage of their time on social networking sites like Facebook, LinkedIn and MySpace. Consumers of these sites are drawn to online communities that allow them to connect and share common interests with other like-minded members. This new technology is focused on profiles of individuals and mimics real-world social interactions in which people develop profiles and reputations that persist across relationships. By associating their profiles with specific groups, members can build trust within the association that extends to all group members. This is the value of social networking, as well as the ability to share ad hoc information and tap into expertise from around the world.

Social networking software for associations permits members of professional networks, clubs, foundations and agencies to login to a secure online community and create personal profiles, join specific interest groups, build connections with other members and communicate directly within the association. Every registered member of an association is provided with a private and secure place to store, organize and manage their personal information related to the community. It is a Facebook®-like environment where members maintain personal and

professional information and provide extended biographical information. Contacts can be managed and connections made with a member's peers.

External social and professional networks can be managed, along with subscriptions, bookmarks, photos and more.

Members can use their profile to:

- ▶ Raise profile visibility with other members
- ▶ Maintain contacts
- ▶ Maintain personal blogs with file/audio/video sharing enabled
- ▶ Post an online resumé/CV
- ▶ Manage career postings
- ▶ Manage personal preferences and alerts
- ▶ Upload personal photos to galleries

## B. Promote Relationships

Members require the ability to easily and quickly search and connect with relevant content and other members within an association. Social networking software for associations provides robust search functionality which enables members to easily search find and save targeted content that is published or posted by other members. Making it easy to connect to information promotes collaboration between members based on shared interests or work, specific projects, regional groups and more. For example, if a member wants to connect with other members that share a common interest in "global issues in technology" or is looking for a targeted group of individuals who may have created a community around "global issues in technology", a social network enables this member to be kept up-to-date by subscribing to areas and people of interest.

Social networking software nurtures members who want to collaborate in small sub-communities of common interests and relationships by enabling members to socialize and collaborate with a targeted subset of members based on shared interests and/or initiatives (groups, for example). Once a group has been

established, members can share a "space" whereby people and information associated with a specific group or shared interest can collaborate, socialize, and interact.

Associations and their members require the ability to understand the organizational structure of the association and its members. A member directory gives facilitators and association staff the ability to see who's where/what in the organization/association by a dynamic organization chart format.

Members can use the member directory to see and connect with members based on criteria including country, region, area of interest or expertise, job, organization, and more.

## C. Know Your Members

Associations historically have limited insight into the actual make-up of their membership, including their interests, areas of expertise and relationships within the association community. Social networking software for associations provides measurable mechanisms for tracking membership activity for additional insight into an association's "membership persona".

Detailed member profiles provide access to a member's interests, areas of expertise and even display details about where members contribute most in the association community. By monitoring member participation and activity, associations can improve their understanding of their members and better tailor their products and services to suit these members' needs. Membership information can also be collected via online polls to survey the engagement and status of members and services offered.

Social networking software for associations takes organizational administration one step further by helping associations understand the interactions between members and their product or service offerings, providing insight into how their offerings are consumed, how effective these offerings are, and whether or not they are fulfilling their memberships' needs.

**Making it easy to connect to information promotes collaboration between members based on shared interests or work, specific projects, regional groups and more.**

## V. Doing More With Less

Social networking software for associations helps organizations to overcome traditional obstacles and methods—such as static websites and costly push-based marketing campaigns—to offer extended reach, expanded revenue streams and a leading edge, proven technology.

Social networking software helps organizations do more with less to:

- ▶ Improve member engagement, loyalty and commitment—offering an online environment where members can connect, network, participate and feel that they play an active part in contributing to the association's mission, cause and key objectives.
- ▶ Increase membership renewal by facilitating member interaction, collaboration and discussion
- ▶ Attract new membership through viral member activity, such as blogs, forums, peer groups, and social networking.
- ▶ Reduce print and distribution costs associated with traditional print publications and marketing programs by delivering targeted and timely promotions directly to members via online events, blogs, newsletters, and announcements.
- ▶ Save time and money spent on campaign and event management by moving events online and enabling organization to save previous event coordination information as best practices—to reduce duplicated efforts.
- ▶ Improve offerings to members through e-commerce to raise online memberships, collect membership fees and funding, and garner support for association objectives.
- ▶ Implement a solution quickly and affordably using a SaaS (software as a service) based delivery



## VI. Implement Quickly and Affordably

Most social networking software solutions use a SaaS model (software as a service). This is based on an association “renting” the software based on a monthly or yearly subscription pricing model.

This type of delivery model minimizes upfront costs in technical infrastructure; the need to hire in-house expertise and accelerates time to market. The entire solution is maintained by a third party company with expertise in software development, support and customization.

Additional to the SaaS costs to the association may include:

- ▶ Design services
- ▶ Integration services
- ▶ Training
- ▶ Extended support

Social networking software for associations makes it easy to manage an online community by providing a suite of intuitive administrative tools which allow facilitators to take total control—to update content, run reports, import/export member data, approve member postings, and more. The secure administrative back end is easy to use and component-based to satisfy an association's growing needs.

An online community delivered on a SaaS (software as a service) model is the most effective way to manage an association online. As a hosted service offering, implementation of an online communication can happen immediately, with little to no upfront investment required in technology, expertise or experience.

Other SaaS benefits include:

- ▶ Fast to deploy - no installation of hardware or software
- ▶ Cost effective - no upfront investment
- ▶ No additional work for IT staff
- ▶ Zero maintenance
- ▶ Reliable - guaranteed uptimes
- ▶ Secure - SSL, password protected, audited

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