



# Building an Effective Online Strategy

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# benefits

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A successful digital communications strategy can help employee benefit funds achieve organizational goals. The author offers tips for improving websites and communicating through social media and mobile apps.

**T**he simultaneous rise of social media and smartphones has presented both opportunities and challenges for modern communicators in the Information Age, where people expect information to be instantly available and accessible. Brands and organizations can reach people directly and have enhanced abilities to do so, but they must reach them with the right content and be aware that attention spans are short.

The differences in communication styles and values from generation to generation can be staggering. Another challenge is audience fragmentation. Every communication medium has its trade-off, and one platform alone is not a one-stop shop to reach everyone.

However, we cannot ignore that 69% of people in the United States use some type of social media to connect with one another, engage with news content and share information (Pew Internet Research Project, 2017). And 59% use the Internet on a daily basis for their news (Pew Internet Research Project, 2018).

Smart organizations and benefit plans will embrace the idea that online

communication tactics continue to evolve and will recognize that search engines act as filters for the wealth of information available online.

Effective communication strategies contribute to and support overall organizational goals. The ultimate challenge is to decide what combination of communication choices will enable your organization to reach these goals and objectives. You must ask: “Is the intent to persuade a certain behavior? What role can a communication strategy play in helping to achieve this goal?”

For example, your apprenticeship fund might seek to reach and recruit minorities and females. You should first be specific about your desired target audience and then ask how a communication strategy can support this goal.

Start by understanding your current situation and evaluating current communication methods. Conducting a *SWOT analysis* (listing organizational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) can help to organize research and uncover insights.

Once everyone involved has a clear understanding of the current situa-

tion, developing communication goals should be a simpler process. Communication goals should be SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic/relevant and time-based.

Examples of SMART goals for apprenticeship funds might include:

- Grow audience connections on the Joint Apprenticeship Training Committee (JATC) Facebook page by 20% by January 1, 2019.
- Increase mentions on Twitter related to the JATC program by 15% by August 1, 2019.
- Grow website audience e-mail subscribers who are aged 19-29 by 30% by December 1, 2020.

Ultimately, creating an effective online strategy means asking “How can I provide value for my audience?” and staying focused on repeatedly communicating that value to your audience. First listen, and then engage with them to offer solutions that will meet their needs.

## Developing an Effective Website

To build an effective website, focus on your users. Having a *responsive website* (that looks great on all mobile devices) and a site that provides a high-quality user experience are minimum requirements.

Plenty of self-serve tools are available to allow you to create your own site. (Wix, Weebly and Squarespace are some of the most popular.) But there are drawbacks to using these drag-and-drop site builders. Personalization can be difficult, and often search engine optimization (SEO) will be restricted because the sites rely heavily on older streaming and video software and a jumble of code that is not structured well. Ultimately it may

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be difficult for search engines to find your site for purposes of indexing.

Another option is to hire an external agency to design the website. A full-service website development agency often has tools including current design software and SEO expertise and even access to an existing social media fan base.

When determining whether to hire an external agency, consider long-term support. Once the website is developed, is ongoing support included in the fee? Can your organization make its own changes to site content, or will you need to contact the agency to make those changes? The best agencies are long-term partners, offering collaboration and long-term support to advise your organization of the latest techniques in the online communication space.

Eliminating any barriers to information is one of the most important things you can do to increase engagement with your websites. Important content is often hidden behind log-ins or not clearly marked. This is necessary when dealing with sensitive or personal data, but your website should be more than just a landing page with a log-in.

Few users will spend time reading long passages of text on screen. Concise chunks of information are better suited to the computer screen, which provides a limited view of long documents (Lynch and Horton, 2004).

Post helpful resources and frequently asked questions centrally on the website. Let visitors know your values, what you care about and your mission statement.

When assessing the effectiveness of your website, consider these key questions:

- Which website pages are most viewed?
- Do visitors regularly visit two or more pages, or do they leave quickly? This is commonly called the *bounce rate*. A high bounce rate can mean that visitors are leaving the site after little interaction with content.
- How much time are visitors spending on the site? On specific pages? This can help reveal what pages visitors are most interested in.
- What topics are people searching for? This can help identify trends and common needs or requests and inspire ideas for future content.

You can answer these questions using a variety of free and paid data-tracking and SEO tools, such as Google Analytics, Google Webmaster, SEM Rush, SimilarWeb and Moz.

Understanding how a data-tracking tool determines search engine results and how the search engine ranks your

## takeaways

- Employee benefit funds that want to increase the effectiveness of their online communications should start by evaluating their current communication methods and developing communication goals.
- Organizations can choose to design their own websites using self-serve tools or work with an external agency. Websites must be *responsive* (adapt their layouts for devices with varying screen sizes).
- To assess the effectiveness of a website, look at factors such as which pages are most viewed, how many pages people visit and how much time they spend on those pages.
- When planning social media communications, it is helpful to create a content calendar that first defines the type of content to post and then considers the audience, social media platform and purpose.
- Many organizations use push notifications to send messages and alerts to the people they are trying to reach. *Push notifications* are banner messages that pop up on the person's mobile device and communicate real-time information or prompt the user to swipe into the app for more information.

site when browsing online continues to be one of the most important pieces of building and maintaining an effective website.

SEO is an important aspect of any site, and there are many techniques that should be utilized to make sure that people can find your site by using a search engine.

Most communication agencies offer SEO expertise and tactics to enhance your online presence, but a basic understanding of SEO is important for staff members who take an active role in updating the website.

## Communicating Strategically With Social Media

Online communication is most effective when messages are relevant, personalized and meaningful. Constantly posting content is one of the most challenging parts of keeping up with social media, but it's important to stay engaged with your followers. Creating a content calendar and planning everything ahead of time will make updating a whole lot easier.

To start, clearly define what types of content you want to post. Consider your audience, the social media platform

and its purpose. Then set aside some time to schedule posts ahead of time across social channels. Your organization also can benefit from sharing content that vendors or other affiliate organizations post publicly online. Ideas may come from your corporate or public leaders or trustees and other committee members.

The next stage is to consider audience segmentation and targeting. Most social media platforms offer a variety of options to target your audience based on their demographics, geographics, interests and online activities. If your group has a Facebook page, you can place snippets of code called *pixels* on your website to track visitors and their engagements on the site. Over time, retarget or remarket these audience groups with key messages or reminders in their Facebook news feed.

The first step in your measurement plan should be to generate a list of what you're trying to achieve from your social media efforts. Social media can serve a variety of purposes, from broadcasting information to answering questions or driving people to your website. Most social media platforms offer built-in analytics to track message effectiveness and audience insight.

If you are looking to measure awareness, track metrics such as reach, shares and impressions. This will tell you how far your posts are spreading.

To measure engagement, look at metrics around retweets, comments and followers.

If your goal is to drive traffic to your website, track clicks and shares of posts that contain your website URL. Using website analytics, you can track how many people are arriving at your site from social media channels.

For example, a health and welfare fund trying to get plan members to become more health literate will likely need to measure awareness and engagement. Posting important fund information on a central site page and then measuring page traffic, audience demographics and acquisition channel (did the person get to this page from a search engine, social media post or other website?) will provide important data that the fund can use to enhance distribution of information in the future.

### Mobile App Push Notifications: Timely and Relevant

Consider investing in a mobile app for your members or group. Mobile apps are more frequently being used to push messages and alerts out to users through push notifications, which are convenient for users.

To develop a mobile app, you may want to consider partnering with or hiring an external agency that specializes in mobile app development. In late 2017, Apple announced that it was banning apps created using templates and other drag-and-drop app development services (*Tech Crunch*, December 2017). This means that online services that once offered templates for groups to simply plug in their information to develop an app will be rejected by the Apple iOS app store. A specialized mobile app development agency can offer customized mobile apps and guide your group through the rigorous publishing process. (An app should be available on both the Apple iOS store and the Google Play store.)

Once it has been published, a person who downloads the app can opt in to receive push notifications. *Push notifi-*

*cations* are banner messages that pop up on the person's mobile device and communicate real-time information or prompt the user to swipe into the app for more information. Mobile app administrators can send out messages at any time, and users don't have to be in the app or be currently using their devices to receive them.

There are also a variety of ways to segment mobile app users into groups so that they receive only notifications that contain information valuable to them. Because the notification appears as a banner or pop-up alert on their phones, push notifications won't be forgotten in an inbox, unlike an e-mail. Push notifications communicate directly to users. The messages can be used to drive actions such as encouraging users to visit your website or reminding them of an upcoming deadline. Health care funds could use push notifications to remind participants of open enrollment deadlines and health fair events or encourage them to update their contact information and preferences on communication.

### Real-World Example: The Michigan Building and Construction Trades Council

The Michigan Building and Construction Trades Council (MBCTC) supports the interests of nearly 100,000 construction workers in the state of Michigan. The group works in several important areas, including membership/apprenticeship recruitment, job-site safety, promoting apprenticeship and training programs, and political advocacy.

A lot has changed since 2013, when MBCTC started its online strategic communications campaign. The coun-

cil's commitment to embracing online communication tactics has paved the way for a more engaged and diverse audience than ever before.

The first task was to audit and eventually redesign the group's website. Valuable content was already being published on the site, but a deeper dive into the site structure revealed that most of this content was not being indexed by search engines. Search engines frequently *crawl*, or browse, sites to determine rankings and then index the site's content. Google's search index in particular contains hundreds of billions of web pages and is similar to the index in the back of a book. Ultimately, crawl errors can prevent a site from appearing in search results.

Taking the time to reformat content so it was easy for search engines to crawl meant a big boost in credibility for MBCTC. After tagging, categorizing and reorganizing content, Google soon recognized the site as a credible source and rewarded the site with first-page search engine results. Now, online users could search for topics and discover the MBCTC website in the results.

In redesigning the website, the council considered the groups of people that would visit the site frequently as well as a broader audience. The new site was image-centric, with featured photos of known landmarks and buildings under construction to greet visitors on the homepage. The images represented the MBCTC brand and helped those who were unfamiliar with the council quickly understand who and what it represents.

At the same time, the council began engaging in social media marketing, inviting members and key influencers to follow the page and encouraging them to spread the word to their personal networks. Social media is made up of clusters of audience groups, and when individuals from separate clusters overlap, new audiences are quickly exposed to a page.

Over time, the page grew organically, largely due to the willingness of the audience to share posts from the page or tag their friends. Most communities of passion emerge organically. Today, the page's audience represents the commitment to listening, posting and providing valuable information that evoked action from the community.

Paid Facebook targeted ads continue to be used to spread awareness about important policy issues. By understanding the audience both offline and online, the council uses both geo- and interest-targeting techniques to identify key influencers that would likely share or engage with the message. These key influencers helped share the messages to their own networks, which resulted in a lower spend than targeting the masses. **6**

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bio



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