

Social Media **for Unions**



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Why unions should embrace social media

The new social media is a very powerful thing. It allows unions to have intimate, personal conversations with hundreds, if not thousands of members, potential members and supporters.

No longer are unions reliant on the old forms of media (news papers, television, radio), or on face-to-face conversations between organisers and workers. Social media allows for unmediated communication and dialogue across vast distances, and at any time of the day or night. Unions can now campaign globally, raise awareness of issues locally or build support from non-traditional regions or geographic areas.

Unions can utilise very powerful and flexible social networking tools, but like any organising and campaign tool, they must be used properly. Tools such as Facebook and Twitter should not be just an afterthought. A union cannot just set up a Twitter account, make one or two “tweets”, and then expect hundreds of its members to start “following”.

Like any endeavour, the effective use of social networking requires practice, and trial-and-error. Consumers of social media (union members, potential members and supporters) can interact with corporate and commercial users that have a high standard of professionalism. If a union is going to start using social media, it must be prepared to invest time and (human) resources to do so properly.

(Of course, traditional media is still very important, and by no means am I suggesting that unions stop engaging in traditional media strategies.)

Using social media well

Social media and the social elements of “Web 2.0” are characterised by conversation, participation, openness and community. Unless your unions understands these principles of social media, you won’t get very far, and many of your efforts may be wasted.

1. Engage in conversations

Social media tools allow you to have conversations. People who visit websites these days expect to be able to interact with you on that website. The content you put on your union’s website is no longer one way.

Even if you don’t have a website that allows comments, users are still able to have their say, using tools such as Facebook or Twitter. Smart unions will engage with those people both on their chosen platform, as well as on the union’s website.

It is no longer enough to simply use your union’s website to broadcast your message, such as media releases or “messages from the secretary”. Members and non-members should be able to leave comments directly on a page, and expect someone from the union (yes, even the secretary) to actually read and reply to the comment. The more personal the interaction the better (see later).

Similarly, if you discover a blog, website or twitterer that is discussing your union, or an employer where you have coverage, use the opportunity to join in. Leave a comment on the blog. Send an “@ reply” to the twitterer. This is especially important if you encounter criticism of your union online - the new social media rules mean you can interact with your critic directly, and others can participate as well. (Of course, make sure any response to criticism is polite.)

Your members and supporters will start to engage with you, and feel a greater level of ownership over your union’s online presence. As you build your relationships with people online, you will find that people will start to promote your

“Unions can utilise very powerful and flexible social networking tools, but like any organising and campaign tool, they must be used properly.”

cause voluntarily, defend you in online forums, send you information you'd never find out otherwise, and participate in future campaigns.

2. Be active and involved in online communities

No one will read or follow a Twitter account with only one or two tweets. Similarly, if your Facebook feed is only taken up with media releases or links to the news section of your union's website, then you aren't really engaging.

Social media is on and active 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Twitter and Facebook operate in real-time. Members, non-members and supporters quickly stop checking a campaign site that hasn't been updated in a week.

Being active means responding to comments, tweets and Facebook messages. While most unions may not have the time and resources to have someone full-time on social media, it is important that someone checks the union's Twitter and Facebook account regularly. Most social media sites have a bunch of tools to help (for example, [Twitter's search function](#) can allow you to see if people are tweeting about your union).

Social media tools can't be used sporadically. If you are only sending out a tweet every month or so, it will get lost in the maelstrom of updates that users experience. The "live" nature of many social media networks means that you need to check your union's accounts daily at least.

3. Choose your social media networks carefully

With the hundreds of sites out there, and more growing all the time, it can be tempting for a union new to social networking to jump on as many as possible.

There are several reasons to limit your interaction with only a few social media sites.

Firstly, choose the site where most of your members and supporters are (or most of the workers in your union's industries). Most social networking sites allow you to do searches - for example, on Facebook, you can search for your existing members, but you can also search for people on Facebook by the information on their profiles (see my earlier entry on [Facebook as an organising tool for unions](#)).

Secondly, unless your union can afford to have dedicated social media officers, it is likely that you simply won't have the time or resources to adequately maintain your presence on lots of different social media sites. Having an engaged and vibrant presence on one, two or three sites is better than having an inactive, disengaged and infrequently updated presence on hundreds.

Thirdly, choose sites that fit in with your campaign or organising plan. Hundreds of your members may be on sites like LinkedIn or Facebook, but those sites are like straightjackets for campaigns. You have almost no flexibility to export data, or take control of how your profile looks. Simply put, some sites are more useful for specific campaigns or activities than others, and you should consider the feature set of each social media tool before you jump into it.

4. Open up the union to socialising

Many unions run tight ships when it comes to communications, media engagement or interaction with members. Only media officers speak to the media, only organisers speak to members, only the secretary makes official statements.

The rules of social media don't allow for such rigid structures. Members, supporters and non-members want to hear from a range of voices within their union. Organisers could have Twitter and Facebook accounts. In fact, social media should be embraced by everyone in the union, rather than just a one or two people.

Openness and interaction are a major part of social media. Embrace it. You will be rewarded for your transparency and openness (see point 1 above).

Of course, be prepared to make mistakes, and be big enough to admit when you have screwed up, then move on. Have a Social Media Policy, or set of guidelines for union officials. Make sure everyone knows what the policy is.

Four pillars of social networking

I often get asked by friends, colleagues and acquaintances about why x, y, or z social networking tool is useful. (The question is alternatively phrased to ask me to justify why social networking is not just a waste of time.)

I think many people of a certain age (even Generation X) find it very difficult to get their heads around the concepts of Facebook or Twitter. They can get frustrated that there doesn't seem to be an immediate payback. This is particularly the case for union campaigns where it is difficult to link blog posts, tweets or comments on a Facebook page to new members, bodies on picket lines or similar. Whereas businesses selling a product or service can see a return on investment, political parties and unions have a harder time of it. Furthermore, the union communications officer or organiser may not have admin rights to the union website, access to Google Analytics or similar services to test the effectiveness of integration between the website and social networks.

To assist decision makers at unions (and elsewhere) on how to effectively use social networks, I have gathered four pillars for social networking. These concepts should give a good foundation for using tools like Facebook or Twitter. They should of course be read with [my other articles about social networking](#).

"Trust is essential for social networks."

1. There is no instant fix

While a major feature of social networking is that it is "instant" and "live", using social networking tools effectively is a slow process. New media is not an instant fix. While it is easy to create a Facebook page or Twitter account, just setting them up is simply the first step in a long march. Like other endeavours, social networking takes time to do right.

2. Keep at it, be consistent

It is easy to let things like websites, Twitter accounts and Facebook pages slide when things get busy. I know that when my work heats up, I will neglect this blog, as well as updates on Creative Unions. This is understandable, and most organisations (especially unions) won't have the resources for a full-time person to handle their online activities. However, you should be consistent in your online activities. If you haven't updated your Facebook page for a long time, don't despair. Get back on the horse. Make time when things are quiet. Some social networking apps (or software like Wordpress) allow you to schedule updates, so that you can pace yourself. (This post for example was written on the weekend, and scheduled for a weekday.) Consistency strengthens the relationship you are building with your readership, fans or followers.

3. Don't be selfish

Social networks are about communities. Communities of unionists or union supporters. Communities of progressive political activists. Communities of bloggers or tweeters. These communities value good content and are willing to promote that content. However, you must be willing to do likewise. If another union, or a member, posts or tweets something interesting or insightful, share it. Re-tweet it. Link to their blog. Respond to comments and emails. Engage in the conversation. Give back rather than simply take.

4. Trust is essential

Trust is essential for social networks. In these days of phishing and spam, smart Internet surfers only visit sites or follow links from people they trust. When websites are increasingly filled with marketers trying to sell something, people are relying more and more on what their friends tell them. This is why social networks are so valuable for unions and political organisations. They allow unions to build personal relationships with scores of people simultaneously.

Communicate, don't sell

An interesting article from our friends across the ditch, about [how to use social networking tools](#). Don't act like a salesperson. Interact with your potential member in order to build a relationship with them.

Andrea Mitchell [writes](#):

Obama's campaign sure got it right through social media. As Obama adviser Scott Goodstein said: "Some people only go to MySpace. It's where they're on all day. Some only go to LinkedIn. Our goal is to make sure that each supporter online, regardless of where they are, has a connection with Obama. Obama had profiles on more than 15 social networks, including Facebook and MySpace. The count for this success: 3 million online donors, 5 million "friends" across 15 social network platforms (3 million on Facebook alone), nearly 2 000 official YouTube videos watched more than 80 million times, with 135 000 subscribers and 442 000 user-generated videos on YouTube. The list goes on.

Web 2.0 is all about the conversation. Smart politicians (and unions, and businesses) ignore the platform (Facebook, Twitter, etc) and are present where their voters (customers/members) are. If they are on Facebook, be on Facebook. If they are on Twitter, be on Twitter. If they are everywhere, be everywhere. If they are only one place, be there.

People on those social networks don't want to be sold things. They don't want a cookie-cutter experience. They want customisation, simplicity and an experience with a real human being. Communicate, don't sell.

"Web 2.0 is all about the conversation."

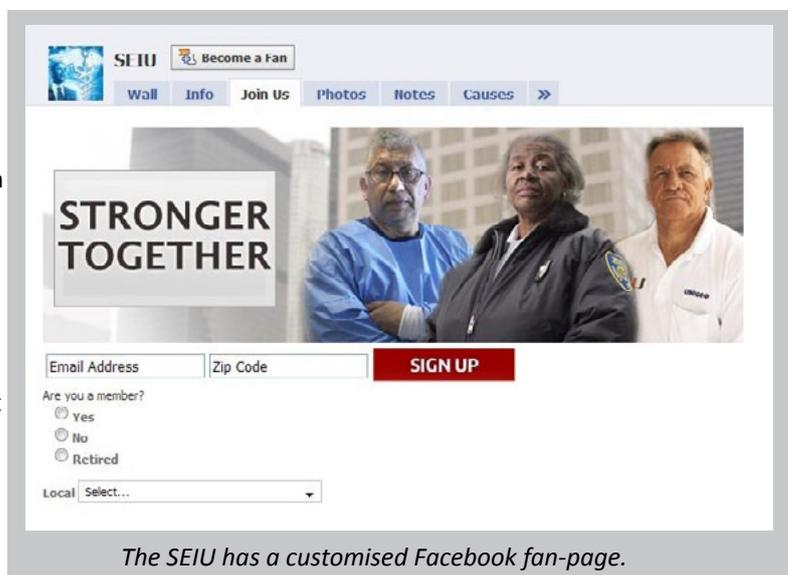
Best practice use of Facebook for unions

Many unions now have a presence on Facebook. However, I am aware of only a few unions that make full use of Facebook's many tools.

I also suspect that most unions that are using Facebook do not have an online or social-media strategy. Thus, their Facebook activities are haphazard, ineffective or even counterproductive.

Caveat

Facebook is a business. Unions should never forget that. While it presents itself as a social networking tool, it has shown no compunction about its arbitrary attitudes towards unions and union organising. There are [several instances](#) where Facebook has intervened to shut down union accounts, ban unionists and so on. Mercifully, most of those instances are from several years ago. Nevertheless, we should be aware of the severe constraints that are present when using Facebook.



The SEIU has a customised Facebook fan-page.

Examples of Best Practice

1. Use Fan Pages, not groups

When Facebook first got started, it didn't have Pages. Instead, users created groups, which allowed people to join, and for administrators to "email" members. However, groups were and remain relatively limited.

The most limiting aspect of groups is that they cannot interact (at the moment, Facebook may be changing this soon) with users' News Feed (the live updates on the main Facebook page). Since many users rely on this to navigate around Facebook and to get updates from their friends, it is a severe limitation.

Fan Pages are far more versatile and useful. You can publish updates directly to your fans home page.

UNITE-HERE (the textile and hotel workers union) uses a Facebook Page. The image on the right shows that the Page by default has information about the union for people who are not yet fans. This can be set up by the administrator, and there are a lot of different options. For example the SEIU (at the top of this blog post) have by default a banner image promoting visitors to the page to sign up. Someone who is already a fan would not see this image by default.

The Teamsters also use a Facebook Page that by default allows visitors to see their "Wall". The Wall is the area on the Facebook page where your updates will be shown. You can also allow your Fans to leave updates on your Wall, although you can choose whether they are shown by default or whether users have to choose to see them. In the case of the Teamsters, their default Page shows their own Wall updates, but not their fans.

2. User interaction is the point of Facebook

Unions should be on Facebook to interact with members, supporters and potential members. Millions of people are on Facebook, so it is likely that every union will find either existing members, or people in their industry who use Facebook.

Page Walls are useful, because they allow you have your fans interact with you. When you publish something to your Wall, your fans have the ability to "Like" what you have written, or to comment on it. The "Like" feature is a relatively new one that is also available on profiles. It allows fans to show their approval for what you have written. The number of people who "Like" something is shown to all your fans. The image of the Teamsters Facebook page shows that their most recent Wall post has 16 people who "Like" it.

Comments are also important, as they allow you to have a conversation with your Fans. In the Teamster example, the most recent Wall post has 27 comments. This means 27



UNITE HERE uses a Facebook Page rather than a group.



The Teamsters have an open Facebook Page.

Fans have left a comment. This interaction by fans with you is a great opportunity to further spread your message, and you can be sure that the comments are read by many times the number of people who actually leave a comment.

Depending on your settings, you can also allow Fans to upload their own photos and videos. This was used very successfully, for example, with the [Save VCA campaign](#), where supporters of the campaign uploaded photos and videos of the rally and other flashmob activities. Administrators generally can remove unwanted or inappropriate user generated content.

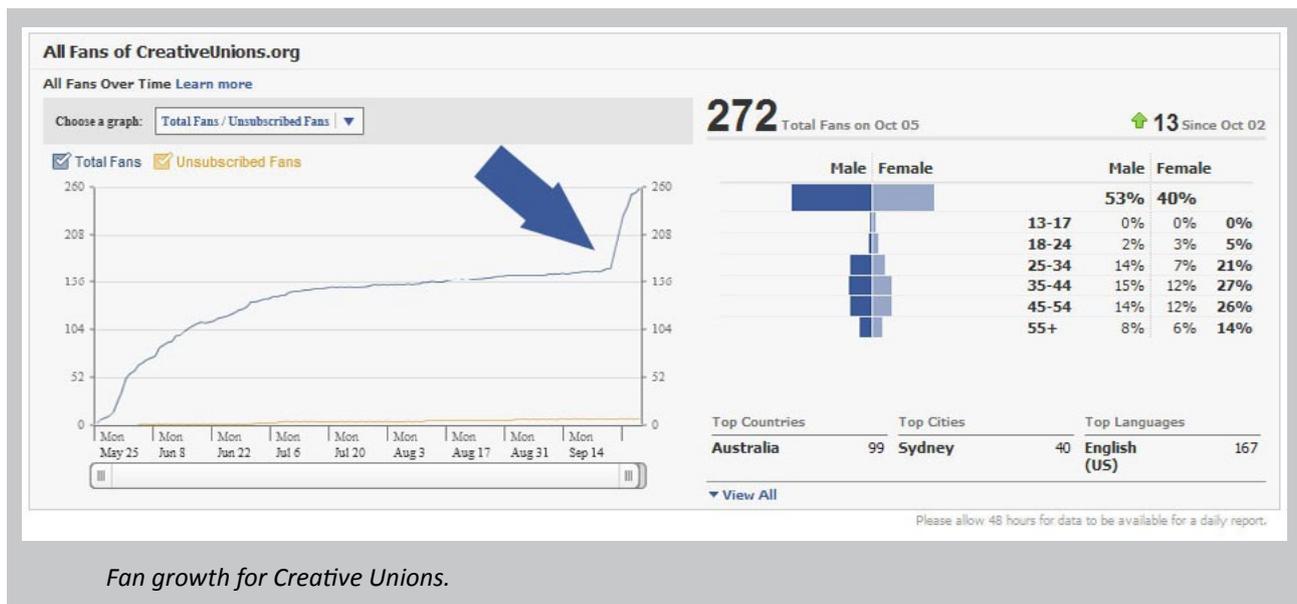
3. Use Insights from Pages

Facebook Pages are more versatile than groups, but they also give administrators more information than groups and profiles. Pages allow administrators to get a range of statistics about their Fans.

The image to the right shows just some of the Insights from Creative Unions. As well as the total number of Fans that Creative Unions has, it also gives a demographic breakdown - ages, gender, geographic location, language, and so on.

Facebook Insights also allows you to see page views, unique views, and the number of interactions (that is, comments, “Likes” and so on) that your Page has had.

This information is not available for groups, or for profiles.



4. Promote your Facebook Page on websites

Facebook has a range of tools to promote your profile or page on web pages. This is fairly simple code that can be cut and pasted. There are also options to decide what you want to show.

For example, the image here shows the promotional box for [Mashable](#), a very popular social media blog. This allows someone who has signed into Facebook to become a Fan straight from your website, without having to go to Facebook first.



5. Keep your updates relevant

Facebook now allows users to “Hide” updates from friends or other applications. If a person or page is hidden, this means that their updates no longer appear on the user’s home page news stream.

Users choose to hide updates for a range of reasons, but one common one is that the person updates too frequently, which drowns out other updates.

By keeping your Page or profile updates relevant, interesting and varied, you can help ensure that as few people as possible hide your union’s Facebook updates.

Seven ways for unions to use Twitter

Twitter is definitely one of the new cool things on the Internet - the epitome of “Web 2.0”. Unions have traditionally been slow in their uptake of new technology. A quick survey of many union websites show that they are seriously out of date (technology wise, if not their content). Many union leaders and officials consider social networking tools to be useless, wastes of time or not compatible with the needs of organising.

Union campaigner [Eric Lee has some definite opinions on how Twitter can be used by unions.](#)

The real power of Twitter is that it’s platform-independent. You receive those messages where it’s most convenient for you. That can be through your own Twitter page on the web, or it can be as text messages to your mobile phone, or via the Instant Messenger of your choice, or through an RSS news feeds.

Clearly, Eric sees Twitter as a useful communications tool, able to get short, concise messages to large numbers of people, cheaply and easily.

Unfortunately, one of the most useful parts of Twitter - free sms of updates to followers who opt in - has been turned off in Australia.

Nevertheless, Twitter is growing in leaps and bounds, just as Facebook has done. For white-collar unions especially (but also blue-collar unions), the ability to get a union message to someone’s computer or web-enabled mobile is a very useful thing.

Twitter as an organising tool is limited. But it definitely a useful communications tool, especially during sustained campaigns. Just as most unions would never run a campaign without putting out media releases, newsletters, posters, leaflets, emails and text-messages, so too must unions start to use the likes of Facebook and Twitter.

However, Twitter shouldn’t just be updates from the union’s website. Twitter and Facebook should be used to build authentic relationships with followers.

Unions that use Twitter need to have their leadership “give up control”, to allow for the immediacy that makes Twitter useful.

The following suggestions are based on my personal experience from using [Twitter at the NTEU.](#)

“Twitter and Facebook should be used to build authentic relationships with followers.”

Seven ideas for unions to use Twitter

1. Put up original, personal ideas on your union's sector or industry

Include reflections or opinions on your union's industry. This is designed at making your union an authoritative commentator on your industry, and builds your relationship with your followers.

2. Share photos of events quickly

Tools such as [Twitpic](#) and similar allow immediate sharing of photos with followers. For members or supporters who can't attend a rally or delegates meeting, putting up a photo on Twitter can make them feel part of the action.

3. Follow Twitter trends

Look up what people are saying about your union, and the employers of your members. [There are some great tools for searching Twitter and following trends](#). You can get a good idea of whether people are speaking positively or negatively about your union or an employer, and get up to the minute news from your industry.

4. Interact

Ask questions and answer them. Get involved in conversations, especially those in your industry or sector. This builds good will, and develops your relationships - this is especially good if you have lots of members as followers.

5. Build your followers carefully

Ignore the "follower builder" offers (spammers offering to increase your follower count for payment). You want to have followers who are following you because they are genuinely interested in your union and what you have to say. Don't blindly follow people back - check to make sure they aren't spammers or p*rn. Don't just follow union Twitter accounts. If you can, cross-check your membership list with those already on Twitter.

6. Use a Twitter application

The Twitter website is ok, but has limitations. There are some very powerful Twitter applications. I personally recommend [Twitterfox](#) - an addon for Firefox. Some applications install into your web browser, and some are used on the desktop. [Tweetdeck](#) is a very popular desktop application, although I don't use it. Both Twitterfox and Tweetdeck are free.

7. Finally, don't be ignorant of the basics

There are some great 101 Guides to Twitter. [Twitter's own guide](#) is a good start.

Check out a bit more over at [Creative Unions](#).

Three more Twitter tips for trade unions

As Twitter has grown larger and faster, more and more unions are starting Twitter accounts. On the one hand, this is a good sign. Unions should exploit social media and tools such as Twitter. On the other hand, many unions are not following the basic rules of social media, or are not following Twitter etiquette.

So as to assist unions to better use Twitter, here are three Twitter tips.

1. Watch out for spammers

The rise and rise of Twitter has seen an ever increasing number of spam Twitter accounts being set up. These promote everything from teeth whitening, get-rich-quick schemes and pornography. Spammers are dangerous.

Many of the links they promote (especially the shortened URLs such as bitly or tinyurl) link to [malware, viruses or phishing sites](#). This can both compromise you and your legitimate followers. It may also be embarrassing to you if someone (such as a hostile employer or dissatisfied member) finds out that you are following Twitter accounts set up by pornographers.

Furthermore, spammers exploit a common trait of Twitter users to automatically follow someone who becomes a follower. That is, spammers rely on your good will to follow them without checking their bonafides. This could mean that your union account ends up following scores, or even hundreds of spam accounts.

Unions accounts should never automatically follow someone. Always check whether the account is legitimate. Also make sure your account password is secure. Many spammer try to hack accounts to spread malware.

A great tool to use to check for Twitter spam is [TwitBlock](#).

2. Be careful of your Follow:Follower ratio.

A basic mistake in using Twitter is to try to build your own list of followers by following hundreds of people, in the hopes they will follow you back. This ends of distorting your Follow:Follower ratio. Most people on Twitter like to follow accounts with lots of followers, in the belief that they are interesting, funny, informative or so on.

When you follow someone, send them a tweet, explaining why you are following them (using the @ symbol, followed by their name). If they are a member, let them know that you are their union on Twitter. Engage the people and organisations you follow in a conversation.

If your account has a high number of follows, but not many followers, this could demonstrate that your tweets are not very interesting and not worth following. This behaviour is also exhibited by spam and marketing Twitter accounts. The last thing you want is for your union's account to be identified as a spam account and blacklisted.

To build your followers list, go slowly and make your tweets interesting and relevant. The number of people you follow should be roughly equal or less than the number of people that are following you.

Check your own account on [TwitBlock](#) to see if you are exhibiting behaviour associated with spammers (such as high levels of ignore, blocking or disparity between followers and followed).

As an aside, do not subscribe to, or use, services that promise to increase the number of Twitter followers you have. The point of Twitter is to engage your followers, rather than buy followers who are not interested in what you've got to say.

3. Don't just have a feed from your website RSS

Eric Lee suggests that [integrating your Twitter account with your website's RSS feed](#) is one of the good things about Twitter. I humbly disagree. Your Twitter account should **never just be** a feed for your union website's RSS feed.

Of course, you could have links to your RSS feed. Do not, however, have the only content on your Twitter be the feed. Make sure you have additional, unique content on your Twitter (and all your social networks). Give people a reason to follow your union's Twitter account, beyond just getting a list of links to your website articles.

Twitter is not just designed to funnel traffic to your website. As a social networking tool, it should be used as an additional communication channel to talk to your members, supporters and to non-members. Twitter is about two-way communication, not broadcasting.

"Your Twitter account should never just be a feed for your union website's RSS feed."

About Alex White

I am a campaigns and communications coordinator for the National Tertiary Education Union (Victorian Division), where I am responsible for the union's strategic planning, organising and campaign activities.

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