Engaging with Young People Online

The online world provides many opportunities for organisations to engage with young people. Understanding social media and other online platforms will help you to make the most of these opportunities.

**Working with social media**

Social media is an ever-evolving medium and provides valuable tools for working with young people. Most young people access social media platforms regularly, and do so from a range of devices. Businesses and organisations also use social media regularly as it is free to use, provides valuable two-way communication opportunities with the community, and allows contact with people who may be difficult to reach in-person due to geography, accessibility or language barriers. In addition, because young people quickly and simply share information they find on social media, it is a powerful resource when used effectively.

Social media is a great tool for contacting young people, as well as engaging them in your organisation’s work. Some organisations hand over some or all of the responsibility for running their social media channels to young people, to ensure the content is appealing to their intended youth audience and to give young people a meaningful way to contribute.

**Planning your social media strategy**

To use social media well, you will need to have a strategy. The strategy will explain:

- **Your goals for social media use** (eg. inform community about initiatives, seek feedback from service users about potential changes, develop affinity with your brand).
- **The ‘voice’ you will create for the page**. This includes the ‘look and feel’ components and will guide your choices of content and language.
- **A rough guide to the kind of content you will post**. Some organisations create a daily guide to plan the week and make use of social media trends such as ‘#tbt’ (‘throwback Thursday’, where you post old photos).

Useful tip

The SocialMediaNews.com.au website publishes monthly statistics on social media use in Australia that you may like to look at when planning your strategy.
Tips and tricks

The ‘most popular’ social media platform is always changing, and organisations need to adapt their strategies accordingly. However, there are some tips organisations can use that apply across all social media platforms.

• If you want your page to speak to young people, you must ensure that the content you post is informed by young people. Use their advice to keep up with trends, and understand things like memes and hashtags.

• Hashtags are like hyperlinks to an index which contains all posts which contain that hashtag on that platform. For example, if you make a post containing ‘#sunshine’, anyone who clicks/taps on #sunshine will be taken to a page showing all of the posts containing ‘#sunshine’. You can use this to your advantage – you may be able to make posts including a hashtag that is popular with your target audience (as long as your post is relevant) as a way of reaching a new audience, or you can ask attendees at an event to use a particular hashtag so that they can see what others at the event are up to.

• To keep people interested, your page or your feed must be updated regularly with relevant and meaningful information that engages people’s attention. Some social media sites prioritise posts depending on how frequently you post updates, so you need to post regularly in order for your audience to see your content.

• Take the time to understand the channel being used. Some platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Tumblr) use a ‘newsfeed’ model where what a user sees depends on the type of content, frequency of posts, and how much the individual has engaged with posts previously, while others use a ‘timeline’ model which presents posts chronologically (such as Snapchat). Similarly, each platform tends to have its own theme which you will need to understand (for example, Snapchat is very informal whereas Twitter tends to be more professional). Understanding these factors will help you shape your strategy.

• Social media is a two-way communication tool. You need to allow comments if you want people to engage with your channel, and you must ensure that you moderate the site appropriately and respond to any queries or questions promptly.
• Put thought into your brand recognition, across cyberspace and into the 'real world'. Choose something that is easy to search for, and try to use the same ‘handle’ (name) across platforms—be careful though as once you choose a name, some platforms do not allow you to change it.

• While each platform has its own theme and feel, you can often save time by posting the same or similar content across platforms. Some platforms allow for simple cross-posting (for example Facebook integrates posts from Instagram and YouTube seamlessly), or you may like to use apps and online tools which allow you to post to multiple channels at once.

Online accessibility for young people with disability

When designing an online space, it is important that it is as inclusive as possible. Young people with disability can have trouble using and navigating sites if they aren’t designed well. You can make your site more accessible by:

• providing text alternatives to pictures and videos
• including a caption that describes images and pictures
• including captions on videos (you may like to investigate YouTube’s subtitles guide or Easy YouTube Caption Creator for help creating captions)
• providing links to accessible portals, such as Easy Chirp (Accessible Twitter)
• using high contrast colours and larger text
• using clear and concise text with limited abbreviations.

Case study

The following social media channels are good examples of organisations that have been successful in engaging young people (please note: some may contain explicit language and/or adult themes):

• Reachout.com, on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube
• Youth Affairs Council of WA on Facebook and Twitter
• Foundation for Young Australians on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube
• ABC Heywire on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.