Creating Brand Ambassadors:
Strategic Online Engagement in a Nonprofit Association

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Membership associations can face specific challenges when it comes to marketing and brand recognition. This case describes how the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC), a membership association for 26 national and international women's fraternal organizations, or "sororities," addresses these challenges. NPC's mission is to be the premiere advocacy and support organization for the advancement of the sorority experience. However, NPC has traditionally struggled with brand recognition and identity, hampering their mission fulfillment. This chapter illustrates the social media techniques used to engage and inform NPC's key constituents through a virtual event, using a two-pronged approach. The first prong involves deepening engagement to move stakeholders to higher levels of interaction with the association. NPC must effectively communicate with its vast network of members and stakeholders to help generate greater awareness of NPC and promote sorority life in general. The second prong involves using its existing network to amplify NPC's key messages and spread it to those beyond its current network. Outputs and outcomes for the virtual event were used to determine that a defined strategy, as provided in the organization's strategic plan and logic model, impacted overall outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the social media use of one nonprofit membership association, the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC). In the late 1800s and early 1900s, women were unequal on college campuses, unequal under the law, and in need of an organization to help them band together through a critical time in the development of any young person. Women's fraternal organizations were formed to fit those needs. NPC was founded in 1902 as a membership association for campus-based women's fraternal organizations (member groups). It was formed on the premise that, similar to the need for women's fraternal organizations, member organizations would better succeed in a male-dominated, and at times hostile, campus culture if they banded together under a collective interest.

Today, NPC is one of the world's oldest and largest membership associations for women. It is comprised of 26 national and international women's fraternal organizations, with a total membership of over 4 million women. Of note, although its members number in the millions, NPC can be considered a medium-sized nonprofit, and faces similar challenges to other similarly-sized organizations: a relatively small staff, an operating board, and a relatively small budget (Virtual, Inc., 2013). The mission of NPC is to be the premier advocacy and support organization for the advancement of the sorority experience. However, it has faced some challenges in mission fulfillment, particularly in its marketing and advocacy roles, due to a complex structure and the intergenerational nature of its stakeholders.

The purpose of this chapter is to highlight the marketing and branding challenges that can exist for nonprofit membership associations, as well as nonprofit organizations with a federated structure. Organizations with a federated structure must adapt to potential barriers with organizational messaging, as they may not reach beyond the institutional affiliates to engage or inform the average member of the organization. Also, both associations and federated organizations can have a diverse set of stakeholders across all levels of the organization. These stakeholders can be diverse geographically, generationally, and can also have diverse (and sometimes divergent) interests. The case will highlight how strategy-driven communication helps membership associations not only communicate across multiple layers of an organization, but also with diverse groups, using various social media tactics. What is needed to develop brand ambassadors, or those who will leverage their social media presence to educate their networks about the organization? How does NPC move those within the organization's existing network to a deeper level of participation and engagement, and how does the organization perpetually broaden that network?

This chapter also examines an association's ability to accomplish key organizational objectives using social media as a strategy. The primary driver of the work will be to highlight an association's ability to better advocate for its members and mission

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