



How to Build a Plugged-In PTA

By Sherri Wilson

Think social media is just a fad? OMG! Think it is only for the kids? LOL! Facebook reports there are more than 800 million users, and the average user has 130 Facebook friends. Twitter now has 100 million monthly users tweeting 6,939 tweets per second or about 230 million tweets each day! More than 3 billion videos are viewed on YouTube, and YouTube Mobile gets more than 400 million views per day; 13 percent of all YouTube videos are viewed on mobile devices.

Social media is a powerful tool that allows you to connect parents, teachers, administrators, and the community around the PTA mission. Social media provides a platform for you tell your story, build relationships within your school community, recruit new members, advocate, and raise funds. It also allows you to plug into a community that is much larger than just your neighborhood school.

Membership recruitment

According to research by the Family-School Partnership Lab at Vanderbilt University, in order for families to become involved they must:

- Believe that they should be involved;
- Believe their involvement can make a difference;
- Believe that the teacher, the school, and their child want them to be involved; and
- Believe they have the ability to be involved.

Connecting with families on social media platforms can help you show them how they can become involved and why it is important for them to do so. YouTube videos that show teachers and administrators inviting families to participate at school events let families know they are welcome in their child's school and are important members of the school community. You might even engage students in creating such videos.

Sharing information

One of the most useful ways to connect and engage using social media is to share information—and not just your own. Government agencies and social service providers often post information that you can share with your community via Facebook and other social-networking platforms. Are you having a board meeting and want to engage the local community? You can live-tweet your event using Twitter so that all of your followers can participate.

As the former director of the Alabama Parent Information and Resource Center (PIRC), I often had the opportunity to attend national conferences and conventions that I could share by live-tweeting the events. People from all over my state had the opportunity to feed me questions or comments that I could share with the speakers and then report back on the responses. I also used Twitter to share information about Alabama PTA board meetings with board members and local unit members who were unable to attend in person.

Advocacy

Social media is not just for grassroots or nonprofit organizations. Most state and federal legislators have Twitter and Facebook accounts and are eager not only to share their information but also to follow the comments of their constituents. You can share information with policy makers about the positive effects your programs have on the lives of families in their districts. When legislative leaders and policy makers see frequent tweets and posts about the work that an organization does, they begin to pay attention. Another way to promote the positive effects of your program is by retweeting and reposting all of the positive mentions you get from the schools and families you serve. It is one thing to say how wonderful you think your programs are, but the impact is greatest when other people offer you praise.

Fundraising

Every single friend or fan of your social media channels is a potential donor. Many local businesses are on Facebook and Twitter; connect with them to share information about the needs of your school and how you will use their donations to improve the lives and achievements of students and their families. One of my personal Twitter followers was a board member of a charitable foundation. Following and reading my tweets over a period of time gave him insight into the work Alabama PIRC performed. One day, he sent me a private message to let me know he had advocated for supporting the work of the PIRC and that his foundation would be sending us a check to help us continue our efforts. He lived in another state and never would have heard of Alabama PIRC if not for the power of social media; as a consequence, Alabama PIRC received \$5,000 without having to hold a fundraising event or solicit donations.

Key factors for community engagement

The most important part of building a plugged-in community is to engage with your audience. Like anything else, the foundation for success starts with building relationships. As you work to build your online community, consider these key factors:

- *Be authentic.* Share information generously and engage with others. Do not think of your messages as billboards, but rather as opportunities to create dialogue around key issues and events in your community.
- *Be helpful.* Think outside your program box. If there are other community organizations or events that will benefit your followers, promote them.



- *Be kind.* Act as though everything you post online will be seen by everyone you know and many people you do not. Respect the privacy of others.

- *Be aware.* Search for mentions of your PTA unit or school to see what others might be saying about you. If there is bad press out there, you should know about it so you can address it or diffuse it.

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