



THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND METRICS TO INCREASE VISIBILITY FOR LEGAL AID

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Grilled Cheese Friday! A recent Facebook post by Columbia Legal Services featured a picture of Aurora Martin, Executive Director and spatula-wielder extraordinaire, making grilled cheese sandwiches and keeping things upbeat with the staff on a Friday afternoon. But for what purpose? Why would a busy legal aid organization expend precious resources to broadcast pictures of fun times through social media? How did we get here? And how do we know anyone is paying attention?

Our Path to Social Media

When Columbia Legal Services (CLS) decided to establish a social media presence, the decision was not made lightly. In fact, it was tortuous. While some of the staff saw value in the visibility inherent in a Facebook or Twitter profile, CLS had traditionally been the very opposite of “visible.” Many of the decision-makers at CLS weren’t ready to jump on board the social media bandwagon. Would social media make us seem

superficial or unserious? Would it take the spotlight away from our advocacy or take our focus away from our mission to serve? Would it expose CLS to hostility and unwanted attention?

Some may believe that legal aid programs seem to invite controversy in direct proportion to how well they serve their missions. Such controversy can strengthen and propel the work, but it also invites attention from powerful forces in business and politics. Both CLS and our partners have endured numerous attacks on our funding, along with challenges in both the courts and the legislature. Keeping a low profile and focusing on the clients has been a strategy of survival. So, why risk increasing our visibility via social media? For CLS, quite simply, we took the risk out of fear — fear of obsolescence in a changing world, and fear of financial obliteration in the wake of the 2008 recession.

One of the early drivers of our move to social media was fundraising. Like so many other legal aid and nonprofit organizations, CLS perceived a political and economic crisis unlike any other in our long history, where our fiscal survival was jeopardized by our political viability with the powers that be. This time, it seemed that organizational survival rested more on the financial forces of the national and world economy, and less on whether our primary funders understood the importance of our work. In some ways, the dramatic drop in interest rates that impacted many programs’ revenue was a literal manifestation of a dramatic shift in how we think of “interest” in legal services. At CLS, we saw our future like this: growing and diversifying our budget would require a different way of framing our work to diversify our financial and community support.

Many nonprofit organizations were already using every possible publicity medium, so potential supporters were accustomed to finding many sources of information about the organizations they might fund. Program officers wanted more from us than they could easily locate in our ho-hum print materials, which we



Left to right: Charlie McAteer, Aurora Martin, Michelle Majors, Mike Katell, Alanna Tritt.

created in-house with Microsoft Word, and our oft-neglected website. As we searched for new grants and donors, some potential partners began to ask: “Why aren’t you on Twitter?” and “How are you reaching beyond the choir?” Implicit was the question: “What are you passionate about and why should we join you?” Given the migration of so many other organizations into the social media milieu, we could see that there was a model, but few organizations like us were using it. And this made us very cautious.

At CLS, before we issued our first “like” or “tweet,” there were meetings. Lots of meetings. Management wrangled with many questions, considered the risks, and approached the challenge of social media like lawyers regulating the range of problems that might occur. Most worrisome for us was the possibility of backlash and reputational harm if quality control and social engagement were to run amok. What if we posted something we shouldn’t and alienated someone important? In addition to trying to get everyone comfortable with using social media, we had to figure out our online “personality,” and this ultimately came down to answering two questions: *Who* are we trying to reach? And *why* are we trying to reach them? We had to discover our audience and our organizational character in the process.

We already had a successful outreach strategy connecting with our client communities through informational sessions, email, and word of mouth. We partnered with social service organizations, traveled to the places where our clients live and work, and conducted multi-lingual community education sessions. Because our outreach strategy was working, we concentrated on using social media to build on our alliances and partnerships. We decided to focus on an audience of civil legal aid organizations like ours, funders, policymakers, reporters, direct service organizations, and potential allies who could support our work. We had determined *who* to start engaging in our online community. As for the *why*, that has evolved.

Although our initial motivation was to merely adapt to the modern environment so that we could be more successful at fundraising, we are now experiencing dynamic engagement that has led to a resilient approach to our advocacy, our mission, and the overall goal of shifting the narrative around poverty, inequality, and the relevance of legal aid. Though we were initially sheepish about talking about our staff and advocacy success, we gradually recognized the benefit of sharing our experience and passion and celebrating the stories of not only the people we serve, but also the staff who

serve justice.

Our use of Facebook and Twitter has put us in touch with new audiences, including other advocacy organizations and important community members. Social media has also influenced our approach to public education and media engagement on important, long-term advocacy issues. By strengthening our messaging capacity at CLS, we have become more visible, and our visibility offers encouragement and support to other individuals and groups that share our values.

Getting Started on the Right Foot with Data

There are a number of programs which have already developed their social media strategies, and the CLS experience is one that is still in the early and exciting stages. Some thoughts to consider: it is important to develop goals, work within your capacity, and measure your impact. CLS does not have full-time staff dedicated to social media, and so we started with modest goals and a willingness to track basic progress, experiment, and learn.

Remember, it is *social* media. Don’t treat these platforms as one-way channels for distributing information, like a website. Instead, put the “civil” in civil legal aid and be nice about retweeting and “liking” allies and tagging reporters when sharing their coverage of your work. Remember, you are joining and contributing to a virtual, online community.

Once you have gotten the hang of posting and tweeting, it is time to get to know your online community. Tracking Twitter followers and Facebook likes can offer a glimpse into your community, but there are manageable ways to dig deeper and provide more useful information. For example, take a closer look at *who* is following you. In addition to the usual suspects, you might find some surprises: staff for key policymakers, even oppositional organizations and interest groups who are monitoring your activities, or beat reporters. Journalists, in particular, are increasingly turning to Twitter for news and deleting press releases from their crowded inboxes. Set a goal to engage with key *taste-makers* (users who have thousands of followers) until they begin following and retweeting you.

Twitter Analytics is a free tool that allows you to measure, amongst other things, *impressions* (the number of times users saw your tweet on Twitter) and *engagements* (the number of times a user clicked on a hashtag, retweeted, or otherwise interacted with your tweet). A quick scan of these metrics tells you which topics or hashtags are more popular in your Twitter feed, as well as who is engaging with you on these

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issues. You may also find that many tweets are getting zero traction. In these cases, you could alter how you talk about these topics or intentionally seek out more followers who care about them.

Although Facebook tends to change the rules of the game with very little warning, it still proves to be a worthwhile platform for engagement as well. Tools such as Facebook “Insights” help you track useful data such as: the number of people who like your page, the number of people whom Facebook shared your post with, and the number of likes, comments, and shares a particular post received. Being able to measure audience engagement in this way is essential to your social media strategy and can show you which posts are engaging your audience and which are not.

“Grilled Cheese Friday” posts may not be *your* strategy. There are a thousand ways to share your vital work — along with a dose of your personality. There is also a host of other social media platforms you can dip your toes into, including YouTube, Flickr, Instagram, Tumblr, and Vine. Each has different potential audiences to engage depending on your capacity and strategy. Take a step at a time, experiment, and learn as you grow.

More Benefits of Social Media

While many organizations are slow to step into the world of social media, citing the constant time and effort that social media requires, many consider the increased support and engagement to be worth the investment.

Here are a few more benefits of a strong social media presence:

- *Narrative control* — With so much information on the internet, both positive and negative, driving your own social media allows you and your organization to stay in control of messaging. Search engines, hashtags, and other tools enable you to create associations that positively promote your organization and advocacy.
- *Activity* — While websites are important, they are static and don’t allow for much engagement. However, whenever your audience engages with a Facebook post or a tweet, it serves as a reminder of your work and mission.
- *Exposure* — Online information is easy to share, which creates more exposure for your organization. Take the ALS #icebucket challenge for example.

Because of the exposure created by sharing, the ALS Association generated over \$70 million dollars in 2014, compared to \$2.5 million in 2013. Whether you are seeking donations or support for your advocacy, the right exposure is essential.

- *Cost-effectiveness* — Many civil legal aid firms rely on a tight staff and even tighter budgets. Traditional advertising mediums such as print, radio, or television are often cost prohibitive, while social media is an affordable alternative for running a potentially wide-reaching marketing campaign.

Summing It Up

If current trends are any indicator, legal aid stands to benefit from embracing the fast-paced world of social media. The commonly cautious and restrained nature of law and the sometimes-delicate politics of anti-poverty advocacy may pose some concerns, but social media has become a powerful platform to leverage advocacy, engage supporters, and potentially broaden connections with the next generation of legal aid advocates and leaders: the millions of millennials whose mode of operation cannot be ignored. Though we were initially concerned about joining the world of social media at CLS, we find that it has broadened our support base and allowed our partners to participate vicariously in our advocacy — and grilled cheese.

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