

Social Media Clicks With Fire Fighters

Social networking isn't just for techies any longer.

Twitter and Facebook are among the most popular, powerful new tools in the social networking media universe, and an increasing number of IAFF affiliates are using them to get their messages out.

Twitter enables users to send and read messages known as tweets — text-based posts with a limited number of characters. Facebook, the largest social network, boasts 250 million active users. Twitter is without a doubt one of, if not the fastest-growing web application.

Both have become indispensable in the digital world.

"Twitter fits the American lifestyle," says Jay Lowry, who uses Twitter to follow and report on fire fighters and fire departments around the world through his web site and blog at firefighterhourly.com. "It is brief and it is fast — you have 140 characters, so you've got to get to the point."

With attention spans getting shorter, Twitter and Facebook can quickly send a message to a group of people, and remove any filters (such as local governments and the media) between you and your intended audience. "Twitter and other new social media level the playing field and put fire fighters in the same ball game with respect to messages," Lowry says.

This is particularly good news for IAFF affiliates, which are increasingly using Facebook and Twitter as miniature blogs to spread their

message and increase its impact by reaching a broader audience — an audience that can also actually participate in the conversation. The best part? These new technologies and tools won't break the bank.

Mikel Bullis, president of UnionCentrics,

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—Steve Clelland, President
Orlando, FL Local 1365

which provides custom web design and hosting for IAFF affiliates — among others — is seeing rising interest in social networking media. "I encourage IAFF locals to use Facebook and Twitter," he says, especially as web sites alone become less effective. "Web sites are a 'one-trick pony.' I tell my clients 'to go where the pond is well stocked' and leverage Facebook or other social networks to drive traffic to their web site."

"Our Facebook page has been extremely effective," reports Steve Clelland, president of Orlando, FL Local 1365.

Local 1365 member Matt Magee, one of 46 fire fighters receiving pink slips

earlier this year, developed the Facebook group to enlist the community's help to prevent the layoffs that the City announced. The layoffs were to become effective October 2, 2009. In a matter of weeks, the page attracted nearly 20,000 members, and it is still growing.

"We were able to get information to thousands of people and send a message to the City that it could not ignore," says Clelland. The page includes a link to a "Rescue Orlando Fire" web site, which provides additional information.

Similarly, San Francisco, CA Local 798 used Facebook as part of an aggressive and offensive strategy to keep firehouses open and fully staffed.

"Facebook is a fantastic tool," says Local 798 Treasurer Tom O'Connor.

With San Francisco facing a budget deficit of nearly \$600 million, the City threatened to close firehouses. But Local 798 feared it was losing its older base of activists as families moved to the suburbs for better schools and other services.

"We needed to reach a new generation of renters," explains O'Connor. "Our campaign blended old-school politicking with new online social networking tools."

Local 798 used traditional media — such as bus stop and newspaper ads — to drive supporters to Facebook, which asked "friends" to go to rallies, make calls to politicians and attend meetings at City Hall. In addition, Local 798 used online ads in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and *San Francisco Examiner* to move people online. "I never thought Internet ads would actually work, but they did," O'Connor admits.

With more than 8,000 friends on its "Save Our Firehouses" page, Local 798 quickly turned hundreds of citizens into activists by giving out T-shirts to anyone who lived in the City and called their supervisor.

In addition, the local made robo calls — including calls in Chinese — that put citizens through to their supervisor by pressing "1." "Supervisors received 100 phone calls in Chinese!" says O'Connor.

"The City backed off," he reports. "At the end of our budgetary battle, we ended up not losing any stations and avoiding brownouts and layoffs. We even received a three percent raise. It's truly amazing."

When Reno, Nevada, implemented rolling brownouts late last year, Reno Local 731 began using Twitter to tell the public what stations are closed each





day. “It’s been extremely effective,” says Local 731 President Bradley Jensen. “We can update citizens about station closures that the City won’t talk about.”

The City, which is shutting down rigs, denies that it is closing fire stations. The apparatus remain in the station bays, but are out of service. “People see the rigs and don’t know that shutting down engine companies effectively shuts down the fire station,” Jensen explains.

“When the local news channel interviewed residents about the closings, they didn’t know anything about it,” he continues. But because of Facebook and Twitter, Jensen says people now realize that they were only getting one side.

To spread the word to the public about daily brownouts in Los Angeles neighborhoods, Los Angeles, CA Local 112 has posted an interactive “Brownout Closure Map” on its web site for citizens to use to find out when brownouts hit their community. “It has proved invaluable in our current fight to stop these closures,” says Local 112 President Pat McOsker. “It’s getting thousands of hits and it’s driving elected officials crazy!”

Frustrated over fire station closures in its city, Anchorage, AK Local 1264, also took matters to Twitter. “The City wasn’t doing enough to tell neighborhoods which stations would be closed for the day,” says Tom Westcott, president of Local 1264.

“From the City’s standpoint, it is not politically popular to publicize that it is closing down 20 percent of the department’s fire apparatus on a given day,” says Westcott. But now — thanks to Twitter — on a daily basis, anyone who wants to know what apparatus are shut down, is informed.

In Columbia, South Carolina, Local 793 created a Twitter page as part of its public relations campaign to correct misperceptions concerning the fire

department budget. Using Twitter — in combination with traditional media — Local 793 was able to make significant strides with local media and elected city leaders about fire department and public safety concerns.

Local 793 President Mike Cosola says Twitter was a way to broadcast the fire fighters’ message to as many people as a major media network. “Previously ‘unreachable’ elected council members are now contacting us to discuss the current and upcoming budget year,” says Cosola.

The Twitter page also helps the local keep up with local news without having to constantly update the web page. “Essentially, immediate and pressing news and information can now be sent instantaneously to everyone following Local 793’s Twitter page,” says Cosola.

He adds that social media has helped traditional newspaper and television news sources to air both sides of the story. “Now, citizens and fire fighters alike have a single place they can go to educate themselves about public safety issues in Columbia.”



Lowry, who included the Columbia fire fighters’ story in his firefighterhourly.com blog, says, “Social media has the ability to take what would otherwise be a small incident and share it with the world.” The blog helped bring Columbia Local 793’s issue to the local media’s attention. “In this case and others, the entire world is now able to listen to both sides,” he says.

“Our local media are following us on Twitter,” says Doug Boczek, secretary for Mount Vernon, IL Local 738. “They had no idea what was going on.” Local 738, which uses Twitter and Facebook to communicate directly with the public, is seeing a dramatic increase in fans and followers. “It’s growing very quickly,” notes Boczek.

These examples illustrate how social networking tools can help IAFF affiliates do a better job of sharing information, connecting with the public on a personal level and interacting directly with those in their network. “Nobody in the fire service will say there’s nothing to talk about,” notes Lowry. “Social media gives them a voice and a means of sharing information, supporting each other and having a common voice.”

Bullis adds, “Another benefit is that it puts a face to people in the union and reflects positively on the local.” Even better, social media can help track and influence your own reputation or public image.

But it’s important to keep it professional.

Lowry cautions, “New media is out there for anyone to find, so be sure the information you put up is factual.” Anything can be used for the wrong reason.

Another big issue is the lack of control over content. Some would say it’s a losing game. “Using social networking media requires a change in mindset and giving up the control that we’re used to,” says Bullis.

In Orlando Local 1365’s case, it did not want its Facebook page to appear censored. “Some of the posts are not supportive of the fire fighters, but we did not delete them,” says Clelland, who notes that there is not much sympathy in these hard economic times for not wanting to take cuts. “It’s a very dangerous PR walk down this path,” he says.

However, Clelland remains optimistic that the 46 jobs can be saved, as well as an additional 24 vacant positions. “We are working with the City towards a solution that would include forgoing raises,” he says. “We recognize what’s

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happening nationally and, while not ideal, it will save jobs and protect public safety.”

Reno Local 731, which was successful in removing the previous fire chief following a vote of no confidence, has dialed back its political action efforts and softened its Twitter updates and is working to support the new chief. “It’s time to make things right,” says Jensen, whose members have made more than \$500,000 in concessions and given up raises to prevent fire fighter layoffs. He notes, however, that he’s ready to ramp it up again if necessary.

Social media is still in its infancy and despite these success stories, there is still a good amount of reluctance to use these new technologies. “It’s fear of the unknown,” says Bullis. “Today’s younger generation is very technologically savvy, but the older guys find it intimidating. They think it’s too late for them.”

“Using Twitter and Facebook is not difficult,” says Lowry. “If you don’t use it, those going after fire fighters and the unions will figure it out and use it.”

Darius Barns, of Unions America, which offers Internet services to labor unions, including many IAFF affiliates, believes that once more people realize social media provides a way for more people to see information, more will use it. “As long as members are actively using it, it offers a valuable benefit,” he says.

Boczek has found Twitter to be especially useful for updating Local 738’s web site and Facebook page. “Before, I had to be at a computer and logged in to update our site. Now I can do it with Twitter using my cell phone.”

Clearly, communication is no longer one channel, URL, medium or platform. Some experts anticipate that the laptop computer will no longer even be necessary. “Everything is moving to a

cellular platform, and all forms of information delivery will need to be mobile,” predicts Bullis.

Whatever happens, one thing is certain:

as social networking technology continues to mature, there will be even more ways to deliver information at a click. ■

The Social Medium

■ Facebook (www.facebook.com)

Facebook is a friendly online platform that allows users to connect with others based on common interests. Users can join networks organized by city, workplace, school or region and can add friends, send messages, and update their personal profiles to notify friends about themselves.

■ Twitter (www.twitter.com)

Twitter is a web-based service that allows users to send short text messages (tweets) to a group of people (followers) at the same time. People sign up to follow and then receive these posts of up to 140 characters on their cell phones, computers or PDAs. Sending messages is called tweeting (messages are called tweets). Followers can tweet back. Twitter is a way to get instant feedback or information.

■ YouTube (www.youtube.com)

YouTube is a video sharing web site where users can upload and share videos. YouTube uses Adobe Flash video technology to display a wide variety of user-generated video content, including movie clips, television clips and music videos, as well as amateur content such as video blogging and short original videos. Most of the content on YouTube has been uploaded by individuals. Unregistered users can watch the videos, while registered users are permitted to upload an unlimited number of videos.

■ LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com)

LinkedIn is a business-oriented social networking site mainly used for professional networking. The purpose of the site is to allow registered users to maintain a list of contact details of people they know and trust in business. The people in the list are called Connections.

Users can invite anyone (whether a site user or not) to become a connection. This list of connections can then be

used to gain an introduction to someone you wish to know through a mutual, trusted contact and find jobs, people and business opportunities recommended by someone in one’s contact network.

■ Flickr (www.flickr.com)

Flickr is an image and video hosting web site and online community for users to share personal photographs and videos. The service is also widely used by bloggers as a photo repository.

■ StumbleUpon (www.stumbleupon.com)

StumbleUpon is an Internet community that allows its users to discover and rate web pages, photos and videos. It is a personalized recommendation engine which uses peer and social networking principles. Web pages are presented when the user clicks the “Stumble!” button on the browser’s toolbar.

■ Google Bookmarks (www.google.com/ig)

Google Bookmarks is an online service that lets you save your favorite sites and attach labels and annotations. Unlike the bookmark feature from your browser, Google bookmarks are stored securely online, so they are accessible even if you’re using other computers. The most important features that set Google Bookmarks apart is that all your bookmarks are private (nobody else can see them) and fully searchable and you can search the entire page.

■ MySpace (www.myspace.com)

MySpace is a social networking web site like Facebook with an interactive, user-submitted network of friends, personal profiles, blogs, groups, photos, music and videos.

■ Plaxo (www.plaxo.com)

Plaxo is an online address book and social networking service. It provides automatic updating of contact information. Contacts are stored in the central location, making it possible to list connections between contacts and access the address book from anywhere.



The IAFF Facebook Group — I.A.F.F. Professional Firefighters — is a closed group. You must be an IAFF member to join.