

A growing community

Charity PR has been transformed in recent years due to the proliferation of social media. Through Twitter, Facebook and Instagram campaigns, charities have been able to run cost-effective, engaging campaigns that can directly target their supporters and key audiences.

But the NCVO's latest *Road Ahead* report, which looks at forthcoming trends in the sector, questions whether social media will "still be hot" for charities in 2019. It points out that public trust in social media took a serious dent last year due to privacy and data scandals, such as the Cambridge Analytica data leak, as well as concerns over fake news.

According to the 2018 *Trust Barometer*, produced by PR agency Edelman, trust in social media among the UK public fell from 26% to 24% last year. Worldwide, 40% have deleted a social media account due to concerns around trust and privacy. The report urges charities this year to "review their communication channels" and consider using other ways to communicate with those who might no longer trust social media.

Social media is a powerful tool for publicity, but keeping your audience engaged is key. WRITTEN BY JOE LEPPER

NCVO external relations manager Aidan Warner notes it is still too early to say whether the current dip in trust in social media will be long term, but it is an important trend for charities to monitor. "What we are doing with *Road Ahead* is flagging emerging issues. There are certainly some alarm bells going off around some social media platforms. We are starting to see people turning off them," Warner explains.

Building an online community

Despite such concerns, PR experts stress that social media is still an enormously powerful publicity tool, where "charities can tell their stories in a way they want them to be told", says Adeela Warley, chief executive of communication professionals group CharityComms.

Social media also helps charities build an online community and better understand their audience, says Gemma Pettman, joint secretary of the interim committee of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations' not-for-profit group.

"Social media is great for listening and gaining feedback. From tracking relevant hashtags, to searching for your charity name, to polling your audience, you can learn so much from your followers and what they say about you," Pettman says. "It also helps you to communicate quickly, sharing news, giving a behind-the-scenes view of your world and urgently appealing for help."

Central to successfully using social media as a PR tool is to accept it can be "resource intensive" says Warley. Time needs to be given to produce engaging content and monitoring reactions to swiftly address any negative comments.

For the Teenage Cancer Trust, this engagement starts at the top, as its chief executive Kate Collins is heavily involved in promoting the charity via social media herself. In November 2018, she was named overall winner in the Social CEOs awards, which recognises charity leaders who are innovative with social media and digital. Judges

were impressed with the way she uses social media to flag up staff and volunteer achievements, which helps promote the charity and motivate her team.

"Social media provides me with the opportunity for conversation, feedback and insight from some of the incredible people we support or are supported by," says Collins.

"From one day to the next, I can be in contact with staff, young people, families, Teenage Cancer Trust nurses and youth support coordinators, sector leaders, opinion formers and supporters who all have the ability to help inform the work we do. On Twitter I share my day, network, engage, chat and listen. I think it's also important to give a sense of me as a person rather than just a corporate 'face'."

The power of good publicity

Macmillan Cancer Support is another charity that ensures it can effectively use social media as a PR tool. In October 2017, it appointed Ellen McPake as a digital nurse specialist, to combat myths online about cancer and offer direct advice to patients.

This in turn generated a raft of further good publicity among mainstream media outlets, including BBC News Online, Mail Online, The Sun Online and Radio 4's Today programme, as well as among health professionals' trade media.

"Crucially, the campaign drove more people living with cancer to our services," says Emma Guise, Macmillan's director of communications. "Registrations to Macmillan's online community almost doubled on the day of the launch, compared with the days leading up to it."

"There was also a 30% increase in calls to Macmillan's support line on

the day of the launch and the following day, and a 60% increase in written enquiries to the support line the week after the story launched."

The digital nurse campaign also showed the importance of running a PR campaign that can target a wide audience through a range of media, covering broadcast, print, online news, as well as through social media.

Broadcast is a particular area of opportunity for charities, says Warley, with producers increasingly turning to the sector to co-create content, especially on in-depth investigative projects. This was a key theme to emerge at a recent International Broadcast Trust conference attended by CharityComms colleagues, who heard about how charities are working with the makers of Channel 4's Unreported World series.

"Where there is a meeting of minds of the journalist and charity, it is a win-win situation, as the journalist can get access to people on the ground, really authentic stories from the frontline," Warley says.

React and respond

The ability to spot and react swiftly to opportunities for good publicity is important for charities of all sizes. An example of a small charity that gained good PR recently from being able to mobilise its communications quickly is Yorkshire based children's hospice Martin House.

In January, a Sky Sports reporter accidentally mistook its chief executive, Martin Warhurst, for Jan Siewart, the new manager of Premier League side Huddersfield Town FC. This case of mistaken identity happened when the reporter spotted Warhurst in the crowd at

Huddersfield's home game with Manchester City. A bemused Warhurst found himself being asked on national TV about his new role at the club and replied "No, that's not me. I'm Martin from Wakefield".

After giving an interview about the misunderstanding to a Press Association reporter at the game, Warhurst was in demand from journalists. The charity's PR team had to quickly ensure he was available and prepared for interviews with regional BBC and ITV news, Sky News, BBC Worldwide, Radio 1 Newsbeat, Radio 5 Live and local radio stations. In total, he undertook nine broadcast interviews in one day and later appeared on Sky's Soccer AM.

"In all of his interviews and TV appearances, Martin took the opportunity to talk about Martin House, at minimum referring to our name, but he also talked about the nature of our work in a lot of the interviews, and the regional TV interviews focused on the impact of the publicity on the hospice," says Carol Devine, Martin House marketing and communications manager.

"A number of the follow-up interviews in the following weeks were specifically slanted to talking about what the impact had been on the hospice, and a chance to expand on what we do, as well as giving further pushes to the donate message," she explains.

Among the most eye-catching pieces of positive publicity from the incident was Warhurst taking part in a social media video produced by Huddersfield Town FC, under the hashtag #NotMartinFromWakefield. This showed Warhurst at the manager's desk before being ejected by the newly appointed Siewart.

To date, this clip has been seen by more than 1.6m people, had more than 6,000 retweets and around 28,000 likes. Working with the charity, the club gave further positive social media messages about the charity including sharing a specially set up text to donate code (JANS10 to 70070).

The story also helped the charity increase hits to its website by 82%, boosted interest in its social media accounts and help develop relationships with local and national journalists, says Devine. "We're also updating our comms plan to take into account what we learned in dealing with such a huge story – for example being responsive and managing multiple media requests."

The public's increasing appetite for podcasting and video blogging is another emerging trend that Warley urges charities of all sizes to tap into. These offer a cost effective way to promote their work and the real life voices of their supporters, workers and beneficiaries, she says.

"It's not hugely expensive to invest in with a good microphone and you can create some really engaging content that puts the audience at centre stage," adds Warley.

The benefits of pro-bono

Another opportunity for small charities is to secure pro-bono work with PR agencies, many of which are looking to offer their time to support the voluntary sector. Since 2009, Lincolnshire-based agency Shooting Star has selected a charity of the year to support, with teenage suicide awareness group Help Me I'm Fine being supported this year.

Kerri Saxby, Shooting Star account manager, says: "We realised there are a lot of charities in

Lincolnshire doing incredible work but don't have much money for PR. It resonated with our directors and we wondered if there was something we could do. So for a year, we help raise their profile and also empower them to use those skills for years to come."

Helen Cousin, Help Me I'm Fine founder, says the partnership "will prove extremely valuable" as the charity does not have the same promotional resources as larger organisations.

"Promotion and PR is important to raising the profile of any charity and most importantly, raising more money. We've already got loads of fundraising activities planned for 2019. Shooting Star will be helping us to promote them and get the press coverage they rightfully deserve," Cousin adds.

Small charities also have the added advantage of having strong relationships with local supporters, who can be a powerful ally in using social media to gain good publicity.

Saxby says one of its charity clients, Secret World, is particularly good at mobilising its supporter base via social media. "They will initially post news on social media, and then they will do a short video and then follow up with PR to mainstream media. They are going to supporters first and creating a buzz," Saxby says. By fostering such support, charities are also better equipped to tackle any bad publicity that may arise, as supporters, as well as staff, can quickly share the charity's responses to any negative comments or stories.

Strong crisis communications has been particularly important in recent years for a sector hit by scandals involving issues such as poor fundraising practice

and safeguarding children and vulnerable adults.

Preparation is key

Pettman says preparing for a crisis ideally needs to take place before it happens. "If you're not currently in the midst of a crisis, now is the time to write your crisis comms plan," she says. "Anticipate all the potential crises you could face and consider your responses to each. Identify your crisis comms team – decisions should never fall to one person – and make sure they're trained and prepared to speak on behalf of your organisation."

"When identifying spokespeople, don't forget your trustees. They may be able to provide the gravitas that's needed and be an extra resource when key senior staff are already maxed out in managing the situation."

Consistency of message is also key, says Warley, as is tackling negative comments head on, rather than ignoring them. One charity that has particularly impressed her over the last year is the RNLI, which tackled a negative story in the Daily Mail around its working practices. The RNLI swiftly posted a point-by-point comment on each of the points raised and responded to social media conversations about the story, with a strong focus on the charities commitment to "dignity at work". They "took a really brave, strong tone of voice and really aligned their response with their values," Warley adds.

While there are emerging concerns around social media's role in charity PR, for now at least, it is clearly still a vital and cost effective way for charities of all sizes to secure good publicity and address negative stories. ■