

Social media at Oxfam GB

Introduction

Oxfam GB is one of 17 affiliate organisations that make up Oxfam, an international non-governmental organisation working to reduce poverty and injustice across the world. Based in Oxford, Oxfam has ten offices across the country, with a large workforce focusing on development, disaster relief and campaigning.

What did they do?

Oxfam GB has been using social media for some time. Yammer was introduced a number of years ago, but was done so relatively informally and without central direction or support from HR or senior leaders or a communication strategy. As a consequence, it never really took off and usage has remained low.

Oxfam GB use an intranet called Karl which provides updates on relevant news and changes in the organisation, as well as allowing staff to access key documents and policies. Karl also has a number of interactive features, allowing staff to connect with each other and to share information.

Karl is used to promote other voice channels, including promoting the staff survey and sharing the results. Oxfam GB recently held an Ask Me Anything session – one on a platform called Crowdcity (which allowed for a high level of interaction) and one on Karl, with employees able to suggest questions to senior leaders, which their colleagues could vote questions up or down. The top questions were posed to the senior leaders, with a video of the answers posted on Karl. Mark Goldring, the CEO of Oxfam UK took part in the session and is very keen to push this agenda and support greater use of social technology.

Oxfam UK use a number of other social tools, including Skype, WebEx, Blackboard Collaborate and others. As we shall see below, the diversity of channels used by Oxfam UK as well as other affiliates has posed a challenge.

Oxfam GB are now working with other Oxfam affiliates to develop a coordinated approach to social media.

What has the impact been?

While social media has been used to some degree at Oxfam GB for a number of years, they are in the early stages of developing a coordinated corporate approach to using social media. As such, it has yet to have a significant impact on the organisation.

Karl is seen as being relatively effective, simple, and well-used. Sally Otter, Internal Communications Adviser at Oxfam GB described Karl as being *"allowing staff and volunteers to engage at a simple level on the notice boards, and via communities (personal and professional). It has that level of interaction."*

An example of a community was a group set up for the IT team which encompasses around 120 staff spread across 5 continents. A group called 'Geek Speak' was established to bring the team together and create a sense of community. The Chief Information Officer started a blog on the group – The Light Byte – to keep staff informed of his work and the priorities for the team. As one member of the team explained, Geek Speak *"built a real sense of team – from Monrovia to Bangkok and from Senegal to London, it built this sense of IT geeky teamness. That works well."*

Building capacity in terms of internal social media platforms is seen as having numerous benefits at Oxfam. First, a single global enterprise social network would offer the opportunity to improve internal communication. As Sally Otter explained, *"we already have channels where we can push that out, but it will be much more effective if we just have one channel to do that. So there's basic awareness raising for staff."* Social media is also seen as being important to promoting visibility and recognition of the senior management team.

Second, in addition to communicating key messages to staff, social platforms are seen as better enabling staff to share information, communicate and work together. Sally Otter explained that social platforms are far more effective at supporting this than email; *"it becomes much more collaborative... You can have a more dynamic conversation."* It is hoped that this will make the organisation less reliant on email – Oxfam sends 175,000 every day – and boost productivity as a result.

Third, social media is seen as enabling the organisation to become less top-down and more inclusive. Sally Otter described how Oxfam UK is *"trying to move away from [a top down approach] towards a networked way of working."*

All of this is particularly important given Oxfam's diverse, disparate and dispersed workforce. Oxfam has 10 offices in the UK and staff doing development work or disaster relief in over 60 countries, so having ways to bring staff together is seen as being *"an absolute imperative."*

Finally, as well as supporting the communication of key messages to staff, and better team working between staff, social technology is seen as being able to strengthen engagement in the organisation. As one employee put it, *"it's not technology for technology's sake – it's a really useful staff engagement tool."*

What are the next steps?

Similar to many international non-governmental organisations, Oxfam is a confederation with national groups sitting under Oxfam International which represents the secretariat. Oxfam GB is just one of 21 affiliates spread across the world. Although this allows freedom of operation, the structure can lead to national siloes and make joint working, collaboration and interaction across Oxfam challenging. There is an effort to address this and move towards 'One Oxfam'. Facilitating digital interaction through an enterprise social network is seen as a potentially crucial part of this, in allowing employees *"to work across the organisation much more."*

Oxfam International has set up an Internal Engagement Network with representatives from each of its affiliates to look at how to go about this. A member of this network explained that *"there is appetite for it, both from a senior and a grassroots level."* They are looking into using Facebook at Work, which would be owned by Oxfam International, but used by staff at all the national affiliate organisations.

The Internal Engagement Network is working to overcome a number of barriers and challenges. With the affiliate organisations working relatively independently, they have all developed their own IT and internal communications systems organically, often using different platforms and networks. As Sally Otter explained, *"one of the difficult things for us is to keep abreast of what everyone is doing. What we don't want is for everyone to be using lots and lots of different channels – it just doesn't work."* Involving staff in the process is seen as being particularly important; *"we would always seek a breadth of feedback to ensure that we accurately represent what staff need and want."*

Oxfam IT directors launched a work stream – Find, Connect, Collaborate, Consolidate (or FC3) – which is rationalising the approaches across the affiliates so that they can be linked together more effectively. This has recently introduced Box, an online file sharing system, but further digital tools will be developed to fulfil other functions. There is a global intranet called Sumus, which is relatively well used, but not very interactive. This will eventually be replaced by Compass – a more interactive and socially enabled global intranet – which will also replace the separate intranets used by national affiliates, such as Karl at Oxfam GB. But, as the member of the Internal Engagement Network explained, *“there are huge logistical challenges and huge communications challenges too in bringing staff with you... it’s a massive project, so it’s quite slow.”* The intention is to have Facebook at Work – or whatever tool is adopted – linked in to Sumus.

Oxfam GB have had some success with using social media to promote employee voice and engage with their workforce. However, the organic growth of the channels and the numerous different systems used across the organisation as well as other Oxfam affiliates internationally has limited the impact it has had so far. There is a determination to build on this early work though and as Sally Otter explained, *“it’s something we’re clear we need to be better at.”* They are making progress on consolidating existing systems in order to allow for a more networked and collaborative organisation with a stronger sense of employee voice.

Key lessons:

- Social media can promote effective internal communication and the visibility of senior leaders, but it can also create more networked and bottom-up communication.
- Social media can be particularly effective at bringing together employees and facilitating collaborative working in large multinational organisations.
- In launching an enterprise social network, central support is important in the initial stages to encourage usage.
- When introducing social platforms for communication and collaboration across a large, mature global organisation, there is a need to identify, connect and consolidate existing tools. This can be very challenging.