

Attitudes and Strategies for Using Social Media in a Missions Organization

by Amanda Lynn

Amanda spent years mobilizing college students and church planting in North Africa. Today she serves on a team of creatives at mid-size mission agency who use their gifts to tell stories of what God is doing among those isolated from the gospel, encouraging people to find their role in the Great Commission. She finds inspiration in beautiful stories, colors, conversations and landscapes.

I remember the day back in August 2007 when I opened my Facebook account. I was sitting in my North African apartment with the windows open on a sweltering day. I had a broken leg and a few other injuries that confined me to a wheelchair on the 4th floor of my building for several months. Boredom and frustration set in until a friend recommended I sign up for Facebook.

I filled out my profile, uploaded some photos, looked up good friends and old friends and encouraged my family to join as another means to keep touch. It helped me feel connected to the outside world. Little did I know that years later my job would tether me to the world of social media—a term I didn’t even know then. Now, I manage the social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) for a medium-sized mission organization.

When I began this work four years ago, it took about a week to realize that I was in over my head. I knew how the pieces worked, but I couldn’t seem to get them to reach the objectives I was tasked to achieve. I had only used them for my own enjoyment, and I had no specific objectives. Since then I’ve learned a lot, but these platforms keep evolving— and I can hardly keep up with the changes and developments. But I’ve learned a few valuable lessons.

I. Talking about missions is serious, intense business

A personal account on a social media platform is a means to express yourself—likes, fears, hobbies, interests. If you actually use it on a regular basis, it reflects who you are, or at least who you want people to think you are. But when leveraging social media as a tool for your organization, you are not the person that you want your different social media feeds to reflect. Unless you have a leader that personifies your organization and is savvy and charismatic with social media, your presence on them can be really flat (or worse—super serious).

Like a church that has a singular message of hellfire and brimstone, my tendency when populating my organization’s social media feeds is to be serious, intense, dramatic (i.e. ‘pray for this tragedy’, ‘this underserved area of the world needs people like you’, ‘these people live without Jesus’, ‘knowing about this debated strategy is

important', 'here's a theological view of one thing', 'here's the problem with such-and-such in missions'). It's not my desire for everything to be so serious. My desire is to add the love and grace to the metaphorical hellfire and brimstone for a more well-rounded and lighter persona. I find that balance is hard to come by and something to always be aware of.

2. Security is priority #1

Protecting my organization and its members is my highest priority when posting on our organizational social media accounts. I often have information that I would like to post (a conversion story or a particularly important prayer request), and yet after thinking through how to write it I realize that I cannot possibly share without being too vague to make sense or too explicit, exposing too much information.

As I do my job each day, the Internet confirms to me that information is available for those who want to find it. One misused word can lead those with bad intentions to make connections that we don't want them to make. So, I settle for posting stories with vague logistical details but strong impact. That means that sometimes a village in Tunisia becomes North Africa or the Arab world or a bike excursion business becomes one of tourism. It's worth a little less punch to protect the details of our people.

3. The trolls are gonna getcha

A few years ago, I had an intern helping me with social media. It was my habit to check the posts that he had written each morning before they were scheduled to go live. One morning I got busy and forgot to check... and it came back to bite me. That particular day marked a religious festival with particularly occult practices. He had posted a prayer request with the name of the people group and the festival, asking people to pray they would be saved. Someone from that people group celebrating that festival did a search on Twitter and found our tweeted prayer request. They retweeted the prayer request, tagging us, and adding their own commentary. The retweet got picked up by hundreds, and before I knew it, we had so many hateful responses to our prayer request and much unwanted attention by people who considered our concern to be hateful.

The lesson I learned is that the likes, shares, friends, follows, favourites and retweets may be coming from people who want to bash us with words, or worse, actually do harm to our people around the world or those of us working from our U.S. mobilization base. No tweet or post is that important. And because my job is to engage Christians with helpful information and to encourage them to pray, give, send, advocate or go, getting the wrong attention was a problem to be worked out, instead of a blessing to be embraced.

4. Quotes, pictures and Muslims are popular

Research about the engagement we get from our own social media feeds indicates that the most effective and far-reaching content we post always includes a video or a photo. Beyond that, quotes from heroes of the faith (typically long-dead missionaries and pastors) are most likely to be engaging to our audience. In fact, quotes also fared much better than excerpts of scripture. Posts containing excerpts of scripture are the second most effective.

Posts about Muslims and the Muslim world were also more likely to draw attention and bring engagement. However, since that time (and our few experiences with trolls) I typically leave out the word ‘Muslim’ and just include the area of the world, hoping that Christians who are mission-minded can make the connection.

Additionally, we avoid any position or political commentary. It does draw attention—but we prefer not to take a stance so we can draw attention to what God is doing and what His Word says. While the people in our organization take many different stands on political ideas and agendas, we agree on the fact that people need Jesus.

5. Even a well-intentioned post can be dehumanizing

My years in North Africa brought me in contact with many people who begged on the street. It was different and more intense than anything I had experienced in the U.S. One day, God showed me that these people were human. It wasn’t that I didn’t already know that—but I approached them wondering what I was supposed to do for them. I approached with an anxiety that overrode my ability to look them in the eye and have a conversation. Seeing them as people made in God’s image helped me to approach them, instead of their need.

That lesson carries over to my work in social media. When we feel compassion, it’s often easy to write in a way that indicates we make a comparison to ourselves. We can dehumanize others or communicate subtle attitudes of racism or paternalism. My boss and I talked about it after the earthquake in Nepal in 2015. People of many faiths (Christian, Muslim and Hindu) were responding to the crisis and posting on their own social media feeds. Many of the words posted were diminutive (i.e., poor, little, helpless, uneducated) and words that communicated our feelings of superiority (i.e., ‘save them’, ‘they are in darkness’, ‘they need our help’, ‘target them’, ‘penetrate the remotest people’).

My goal is not to avoid mentioning that those without Christ need Jesus or that they live in poverty. My goal is to make sure that I grant them dignity in the way I describe them and in the pictures that I post. We can show people at their worst, but we don’t because we want to attribute to them the human dignity that God grants them. In much the same way, I don’t want people posting pictures of me when I’m in my yard work clothes, or when I’m sweaty, dirty, in pain or angry. We try to afford the people we depict the same courtesy.

6. Social media is a great pointer

There is only so much information you can post or tweet—and shorter character count usually performs better. In the past, research indicated that social media content should always point people back to your website where they can sign up for regular e-mails or find special projects you have. That remains true for Twitter, but in the last year we are trying to replicate the information on our website on both Facebook and Instagram in shorter packages. It seems the algorithms are in our favour when we give fewer outside links. We don't avoid linking off entirely, but our numbers indicate that little website traffic is generated by these two platforms.

7. Allow others to shine on your wall or in your feed

The organization I work for values partnership with those who are like-minded on the field and off. We are a sending organization, but we have relationships with other sending organizations, churches, think tanks, authors, researchers, etc. When they are doing cool things, we like to highlight how God is working through them—and it doesn't detract from what we have to say or what we are doing. Social media is a way we can tell them we appreciate them and send a little attention their way. We also have many mission friends in other niches who direct a spotlight at us sometimes. Our mutual use of social media builds relationships with them.

8. Pray about what you post

This is my hardest lesson. When I post to my own personal social media accounts I just post what's on my mind or share my most recent fun picture. I never thought about praying about what I post until it was my job. But if you want to increase the effectiveness of your gospel ministry with social media, dependence on the Lord and *his* inspiration is key. For me, that means I want to draw people to what God is doing in and through the people of my organization. If the hearts of the people who follow us are tugged, I'd love to see them choose to join us in prayer or donate to a specific missionary or project. We would also like to have them get their church involved in sending a witness to live among unreached people groups. Accomplishing this goal takes time, planning and especially prayer. I consistently forget and have to come back to it. But the truth is that people are finding us through social media. It's not our primary means of recruitment and involvement, but it is one of them—which means I need to do my best to use and steward it wisely.

Though this list is not exhaustive, it does reflect the most critical and relevant lessons of my work in social media these last few years. May God also guide you by the power of His Holy Spirit as you continue in or take up social media as a tool for your gospel ministry to Muslims.