MISSION AGENCIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA: COMMUNICATIONS ISSUES

Posted on November 18, 2020 by Eddie

Agencies need to be wise in the way that they approach this field, just because something can be shared on social media doesnâ€™t mean that it should be.
Category: Observations

This is the third in a series of posts based on my analysis of the social media profiles of five mission agencies. You can download the full paper here (sorry, it will cost you a couple of quid, unless you are a Patreon of this site).

This post looks at questions which broadly fall into the area of communications' strategy.

Whatâ€™s Happening?Â During the time that this study was carried out a number of significant events occurred in the wider world; the rise of Extinction Rebellion and the growing concern over climate change, the protests in Hong Kong, concern about political instability and Fake News and so on. OMF made frequent reference to some of these issues, especially those that are relevant to their work in East Asia, but for the most part, they were absent in the agency social media feeds. While it is perhaps not the role of mission agencies to take positions on some of these issues, they do effect many of the people they work with around the world and many people in the UK are extremely concerned about them. An approach to these issues which is non-partisan but informed and sympathetic would seem to be appropriate in the current climate. Otherwise, mission agencies will appear to be disconnected from the real world.Â In the year since this study was developed, the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated how important it is for agencies (and others) to engage with the realities that their supporters are wrestling with.

Market Segmentation.Â Putting things simplistically, mission agencies have two target audiences. There are the financial and prayer supporters who are likely to be middle-aged or older and the new generation of people that they are seeking to engage as possible future missionaries. Each of these groups needs to hear a slightly different message and they are likely to use different social media platforms. In broad terms, the older people will use Facebook and the younger ones Instagram â€“ though there will be some overlap. In this situation, it would make sense to present slightly different messages on each platform; messages appropriate to the particular audience and their needs. Simply cross-posting the same material on each platform is probably not the best use of social media for those who are aiming for a maximum strategy.Â

Risk. Social media, Twitter in particular, is highly divisive and difficult to control. Agencies which are active on social media need to recognise that once a story is posted it is out of their hands and may be widely shared, sometimes in contexts which might be injurious to the agency, or dangerous for some of the individuals involved. Agencies have long been careful about the security of Christians living in sensitive situations, social media adds another level of complexity to these security concerns. It is noticeable that Frontiers, who often work in sensitive situations make less use of Facebook than the other agencies.

Another issue which agencies need to face up to is that their work and their stance on a number of moral issues is at odds with the way that a vociferous body of people see things. It would seem inevitable that at some point (sooner rather than later) an agency will be accused of racism, sexism, homophobia, islamophobia or some other â€œcrimeâ€ . Whatever the truth of the issue is, these campaigns can build up a rapid head of steam and have the capacity to be harmful to agencies. While taking steps to avoid these things happening, agencies with a big social media presence also need to have contingency plans in place to deal with online hostility.

The Place of Social Media

There is a legitimate debate about whether it is appropriate for Christians to engage with social media, or what could be done to encourage face to face reaction, rather than having people staring at screens. These are questions which agencies need to wrestle with. It is far easier to contact a large pool of supporters through Facebook than it is to meet them all individually, but that doesnâ€™t necessarily mean that we should eschew face to face contact. At the moment, social media are a relatively new phenomenon and we are only slowly growing to understand both its potential and the harm that it can do. Agencies need to be wise in the way that they approach this field, just because something can be shared on social media doesnâ€™t mean that it should be. At some point in the next decade or so, things may well start to consolidate as society gets to grips with the way that social media is impacting the way we live. We probably canâ€™t avoid social media altogether, even if we wished to, however, now more than ever, the Masterâ€™s advice that we should be as wise as serpents but as harmless as doves seems apposite.