

Social Media and Masonry

What is social media? Social media describes the various ways of using technology to connect with an audience. Every Lodge should have a social media or outreach program that connects with three groups: The members, other Masons, and potential candidates. Here is a brief description of the various types of social media:

- Website – A collection of pages on the World Wide Web that can be seen from any computer, smart phone or tablet. Think of your website as an online brochure with text, pictures, and videos that advertises your business or organization. The more elaborate ones allow users to interact and upload content: text, pictures, or documents. It requires a certain amount of technical experience to set up your site, but users can be taught to update the content themselves.
- Facebook – A web site that allows people and groups to have their own page with a certain amount of content control. Users create "posts" made of text, pictures, or video. The big advantage of Facebook is that most everyone uses it, and most users check it daily. Facebook is free, and requires little technical expertise to create a group page. Plus, you don't have to manage member accounts. You just add people to your group, and then they can post to that page.
- Twitter - Another social media site, where each post, or "tweet", can only have 140 characters. You can also upload pictures and video. Unlike Facebook, where you have to "friend" someone in order to read their posts, you can "follow" anyone on Twitter and see what they are posting. Twitter is also free, and is more user-friendly for mobile devices, due to the shorter posts.

- Email - Electronic mail has been common in the work force for years. Most people have one email address for work, and a different one for home. Email is available for free from sites such as Google, Yahoo, or Hotmail. Email is also free from Internet providers like Cox and Verizon. An email distribution list is essential for every Lodge. You will find that most of your members already have email accounts, you just have to get them.
- Phone - Everyone has a home phone, a mobile phone, or both. Every lodge should have a phone committee, and call each member several times a year to look in on them. There are also phone services available that can send a recorded message to every member, at a fairly low cost.
- Texting - Mobile phones also have the ability to send text messages to other phones. For some members, texting may be a better way to reach them than even email. You can set up mass mailings the same as email.
- Postal or "Snail" Mail – Many lodges produce a trestleboard. Printing and postage costs are rather high, so it is better to email the trestleboard to as many as possible. But you will always have members who prefer their trestleboard mailed to them.
- Visits – Nothing replaces the personal connection of visiting a brother in person. For those members who are older or shut in, a personal visit means much more to them than a phone call or email. This is a duty that so many Lodges fail to complete.

All of these have pros and cons, an effective outreach program uses a combination of some or all of them. The biggest requirement is an investment of time on the part of the members in order to be successful. A website is good for top-down communication, to put out the official word, while Facebook and Twitter are better for getting the members to interact, supporting and sharing their day to day experiences with each other.

Getting Started

What does it take to get started? First, prepare and mail a brief survey to every member of the lodge, asking for their phone, email and Facebook information. Tell them the purpose of the survey: that are you trying to better connect Ask them how they want to be informed about Lodge activities: Email, phone, or mail. Let them know about the lodge web site and Facebook page. You can ask other questions in the survey, such as any special program they would want to see in the lodge.

Once you have a social media program in place, you must promote it and keep promoting it in lodge. It's not enough to email the members, you have to remind them in person. At every Stated, your outreach committee should give a brief update, tell them about the various programs, tell the success story of a phone call to a brother who we had not spoken to in years. Ask for suggestions on what they would like to see on the web site.

One thing you must be prepared for is the resistance to change you will encounter from some members. Get ready for the phrase, "We have always done it this way!" Well, what we actually have always done is put an ad in the newspaper, print and mail a trestleboard to every member of the lodge, and call every member at least once a month. So we don't even do that anymore. No one reads the classifieds for Lodge notices. After printing and postage costs, it's around a dollar per member for each and every trestleboard. Or you can send an email for free, every single week. These tools are available to us, we need to take advantage of them to reach as many as possible without forgetting about the ones we still have to reach by conventional means.

Remind these well-meaning Brothers that you are not changing any of the fundamental aspects of the craft. We will still have our meetings and our degrees the same as always. But your program will keep the members better informed, and encourage them to attend more often. It also lets those who live far away to stay in touch and feel connected to their lodge. Finally, it encourages other Masons and potential Masons to attend, without recruiting.

Goals

What are the goals of our outreach program?

- First, reach all the members. A survey should reach them all, but not all will respond. It will take phone calls and personal visits to contact each and every one of them. Once you can email 75 percent of your members, don't forget to call or write to the other 25 percent on a regular basis.
- Remind them they are not IN the lodge, they ARE the lodge. Every member is important; and by keeping in closer contact, we can respond better to their needs. Remind them that Masonry only works when we do. Each of them has a role to play, some just need help discovering it. How much more could your Lodge accomplish, if every single member did at least ONE thing for the lodge this year? Attended ONE degree? Gave blood ONE time? Coached ONE candidate?
- The web site must be easily accessible, with the most important information on the home page. All information must be reachable in three clicks or less. The site should have an easily remembered URL, or address. If you can remember it without writing it down, it is a good URL. Imagine driving in your car and hearing an ad on the radio

with a web address or phone number: Can you remember it without writing it down?
For example, norfolkvalley.com is a good URL, while norfolkaasr.com is not.

- Make sure your contact information, street address, phone, and email address, are prominently displayed. We are trying to reach other Masons and potential candidates in addition to our members, so make it easy for them to find us in the real world.
- Welcome visitors, by making your web site friendly and inviting. Have a page dedicated to showing new visitors around. Give the reader a reason to visit our lodge in person.
- At every opportunity, encourage members to attend lodge and be involved. Of course, you must have fun and interesting programs to promote. If you have a special program like a Grand Master's Visit, use every avenue (Facebook, Twitter) to promote it. Those who have not attended in a while will want to see what they are missing.
- Master and Wardens must contribute. If you don't have current content, your web site will look out of date. All stationed officers have a responsibility to provide their take on what is happening in the lodge. It cannot fall on the Worshipful Master alone, or worse, on the brother who maintains the site.
- Encourage other members to provide content as well, such as your Lodge Educational Officer or Lodge Historian. If a well-educated brother has written a paper but doesn't use a computer, scan it into electronic form and post it for others to read.
- Encourage members to connect with each other. When a Lodge member is on Facebook, the Webmaster should recommend him as a friend request to all other members. This way, every member can enjoy fellowship with every other member.

Content

The web site is usually managed by one member, the Webmaster. The Worshipful Master may choose to approve every bit of content, or just provide his comments on a regular basis. But the Webmaster will maintain the site for the long-term. In any case, a web site has the most amount of creative control. There is no limit on how customized the web site can be. A Facebook page, on the other hand, allows only a limited amount of customization. But you will find that Facebook users will check the group page far more often than the web site, so it is critical to keep both places current. Your Web site should, at a minimum, have all of these elements:

- A calendar of meetings and events, including the date and time, and any additional information such as the speaker or special program. It is critical to keep the calendar current. Each new Master should have a term plan ready before his year starts. The webmaster can use this as a starting point, and modify as needed throughout the year. Calendars should be printable.
- Announcements highlight upcoming events or new features added to the web site. You can add banners or big text to promote special events, like a blood drive.
- Pictures, pictures, and more pictures. A Web site of nothing but text will put a reader to sleep. Ask members to post pictures to the Facebook group, as most understand how to do that, and the webmaster can copy the pictures over to the website later.
- Tell the history of your lodge, when it was founded, what lodge it came out of, the different temples where you met. If you have pictures from back then, even better. It is a good idea to appoint a Lodge Historian, or even a committee, to gather this

information, and not put it all on the shoulders of the Webmaster. This way, non-technical members can contribute.

- Current officers and old officers – At a minimum, list the current Lodge officers with a group photo. Over time, you can add officers from previous years. A list of all the Past Masters with their photos and biography is also recommended. Have a member interview each of the Past Masters to build their biography, this will also strengthen the ties within your Lodge.
- Links, links, and more links – The Web works by sites linking to each other. Always have a link to the Grand Lodge, and the other lodges in your district. Most Grand Lodges have a “What is Freemasonry?” page and similar pages, these are well-written and easier to link to than creating your own. Link to appendant bodies, Scottish Rite, Royal Arch, etc. Be sure to include the youth groups, not just at your temple, but in the surrounding area. Ask the owners of each of these sites to reciprocate. By connecting to each other, we make it easier for visitors to discover similar sites, which is the whole point: exposure.
- Speaking of Grand Lodge, once your site is up, send an email to the Grand Lodge Web Committee for their approval. Though not required, it is better for your disclaimer to say "Approved by the Grand Lodge of Virginia". They also won't list your Web site on the Grand Lodge web site until it has been approved.
- Your site should have a guestbook, to let people identify themselves and their lodge. If you have a skilled Webmaster, you can have a chat or discussion section. But you should only build this if there is a demand for it. Maintaining accounts for each member can be labor intensive. If Facebook meets this need, then use it instead.

Administrative duties

Every social media outlet should display links to all your other sites. Your web site should have a prominent link to your Facebook and Twitter pages, and vice versa. Officers should be encouraged to include their lodge web site in their email signatures. If you use Masonic calling cards, list your sites as well as your email address and phone number. The key to promotion is ensuring that everyone you come in contact with Masonically is aware of your web site and knows the URL. Join other Lodge's Facebook pages, and post events such as blood drives, to ensure their members are aware.

Your Facebook group should be open to the public, but only members should have the right to post. Depending on your policy, other Masons, wives of Masons, Eastern Star, and members of youth groups should be members of your site as well. But it is a good idea to require that every post be approved by an Administrator, this prevents hacked accounts from posting inappropriate content. You should choose several brothers who are on Facebook frequently to be Administrators, so that new posts are approved in a timely manner.

If there truly is a demand to have a members-only group on Facebook, then create a second group, and restrict the membership. But you should always have a publicly visible group for people to discover.

Conclusion

In conclusion, be flexible with this new technology. Experience will tell you which social media outlets bring results, and which do not. Find the right combination to focus your energy on, and drop or minimize the effort for those with little or no return value. One of the Twitter accounts I manage for the Norfolk Valley Scottish Rite has over 500 followers, but less than a handful are members of our Valley. So, we are keeping Masons the world over well-informed, but we aren't doing anything to inform our own members. Ask your members periodically if they are taking advantage of the program, and what they like and don't like. Make the effort to add new content regularly, at an absolute minimum once a year to show the new officers and calendar for the year. I have seen many web sites that were well designed and pleasing to the eye, but the most current officers listed were from five years ago or longer.

Finally, my brethren, remember that all of these wonderful tools at our disposal are just there to assist us in reaching our members. Masonry was not founded to make sure a brother sitting at home remembers that he is a Mason. It was founded to bring us together for fellowship. Nothing can replace meeting face-to-face with your brothers within this lodge.