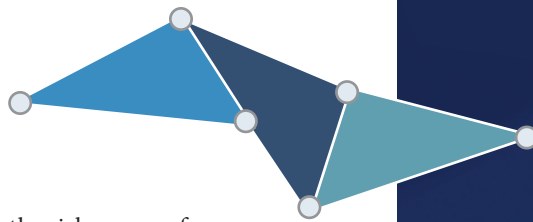


Blazing the Digital Trail

Effectively engaging members in cyberspace

BY STEPHANIE RILEY



I remember as a child waking up most mornings to the rich aroma of my dad's Folgers coffee brewing downstairs. That smell meant he was settled in his La-Z-Boy recliner in our wood-panel-lined living room with his coffee, reading the newspaper. It seems like an archaic practice now, taking 20 or more minutes before going to work to read a newspaper, but when I was growing up and before then, a hard copy of the newspaper was one of the most popular transmissions of news, events and pop culture, aside from the television. We received printed newsletters from schools and organizations in the mail and used the newspaper to find movie times and upcoming dates when concerts and other event tickets went on sale (which we had to buy in person at a music store or venue box office). We went to a brick-and-mortar library to check out books, research articles and materials for schoolwork and professional presentations and had to go to the mall or a physical store to shop.

Today, we have the information and the ability to do all of the above in the palm of our hand. Digital devices, such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and even voice-controlled digital assistants, like Alexa and Siri, have become the dominant way Americans get their news and stay informed and connected to the rest of the world. According to a 2021 study by Pew Research Center, "More than eight-in-ten U.S. adults (86%) say they get news from a smartphone, computer or tablet." The study further found that roughly half of Americans prefer a digital platform.

So, if the modern professional prefers, and ultimately receives, his or her news digitally, IRWA Chapters, Regions and International should make strides to ensure that members can get updates about events, meetings, education courses and more through websites, social media and other forms of virtual communication. Not only will the convenience of this information-flow cause members to continue to support and belong to IRWA, but it will engage more non-members to potentially join a Chapter and ultimately grow the Association. Let's take a deeper dive into the top three digital communication methods that Chapters and Regions would highly benefit from.





Digital Platform #1 – The Website

I have had the privilege and opportunity to serve as chair and webmaster of the Indiana Chapter 10 Communications and Relations Committee since June 2022. When I accepted the position, not only did I want to renew the look of the site, but I also sought to guarantee that a Chapter 10 member could visit the site and get answers he or she seeks and sign up for events and meetings seamlessly. Additionally, I wanted visitors to have easy access to IRWA's International website, Region sites and other digital resources, since combined with social media, they are now the preferred sources of for accessing information, especially and exponentially so in a post-pandemic world.

If the goal is to increase engagement and activity, web pages can't just be text on a screen. An April 2021 Forbes article states, "A well-designed website allows visitors to connect with and understand your mission." Creative and expertly crafted internet sites attract potential and current members and encourage support of the Chapters and Association.

Have you heard of the design principle, K.I.S.S.? It stands for "Keep it simple, stupid." Although the phrase sounds crass, K.I.S.S. is a theory that I use often and prevails in many aspects of our professional and personal lives. A website is no different — the

simpler and more logical the user experience is, the more actively engaged the user will be. The April 2021 Forbes article indicates that people spend an average of 10-45 seconds on a website (on the first visit), which means that a Chapter site needs to quickly and clearly communicate benefits of becoming a member, what engagement opportunities are offered and other pertinent information.

Menu bars and tabs, animated boxes, slideshows and videos are a great way to instantly grab visitors' attention. Anthony Alderman, SR/WA, Chapter 31 past president and former webmaster and contributor to its 2021 International Website of the Year Award, said, "The video promotes the Chapter and really anchors the website. It also answers website visitors' basic questions about us and IRWA." Alderman also mentioned that he encourages Chapter members to use the video to convince their bosses to let them attend an IRWA conference or to give it to a speaker at an upcoming event who may not know much about IRWA and its members.

Other website features to consider include registrations for events and meetings, mobile-friendly design, an events calendar and social media links. In addition, Alderman said that adding and highlighting supporters on the website increased Chapter 31's number of sponsorships.



Digital Platform #2 – Social Media

Launching a quality website is only the first step when it comes to enhancing your overall digital footprint. In a CHRON.com article in March 2019, Houston journalist Lanie Petersen wrote, “The key to social media success is sharing quality content that enhances a brand, provides needed information or entertainment.” She also suggested that the types of content to be shared on social media platforms include links to industry articles, photographs and videos.

Chapter 10 is currently on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Each platform appears to have a varying audience. One member of the Chapter may prefer Facebook, while another prefers quick bursts of information on Twitter. The information being transmitted is the same. However, it may be worded differently on the different social applications to fit the audience. One thing is certain — I will always include a photo, flyer, link or video in my posts. Digital device users are scrolling quickly through their social media accounts at any given time, and if there are only words in a post, it’s less likely to catch their attention than a funny GIF or intriguing photo. The reason this is important is because most social media platforms’ algorithms automatically push posts up on the respective “news feeds” (what posts the user sees) as they garner more likes and interactions.

Alderman credited Chapter 31’s website, along with its LinkedIn account, for maintaining its active membership and participation at meetings and events. He believes many professionals may not know what IRWA is and/or assume the members themselves aren’t as qualified as those in other organizations. However, he believes that social media, specifically LinkedIn, can “improve the overall standard of our industry.”

It’s also encouraged to post consistently and often on social media. For Chapter 10, not only do I try to post on its social media outlets three to five times a week, I have implemented a Friday Funny post on Facebook to engage Chapter members to check every Friday for a humorous cartoon or meme that’s industry related. In November 2022, Chapter 10 and North Texas Chapter 36 held a Social Media Battle to encourage members to post and use hashtags to increase connections, likes and followers of each Chapters’ accounts. Chapter 10 won (of course) but Chapter 36 was a formidable opponent! Hootsuite’s online blog states that, “Daily posting will grow followers 4x faster than posting less than once a week,” and “to keep that regular content coming.”

In the end, social media is simply another form of marketing. It can promote events and courses, show photos and videos, highlight sponsors and vendors and overall become an unparalleled branding tool. Chapter and Region communications committees or social media managers should aim to keep followers informed and entertained with concise and regular posts. You can also take advantage of Facebook ads at a minor cost. These ads noticeably boost engagement and drum up more activity and followers.



Digital Platform #3 – Email Campaigns

An email campaign can be a cost-effective and less time-consuming form of marketing than other strategies, such as newsletters, blogs and other callouts and flyers sent to members via email. As reported in an April 2020 Keela.com article, undeniable benefits of an email campaign include: 1) reaching more people faster, 2) sending more targeted and relevant messages, 3) increasing support/donations, 4) maximizing resources, 5) maintaining regular, top-of-mind awareness and 6) deepening trust with your audience.

The article continues by stating that, “Historically, email marketing generates the best ROI (return on investment) for your marketing dollars — around \$40 earned for every \$1 spent.” With an email campaign, you can hit a large number of the membership with the click of a button, and it is a great way for Chapter presidents and Committee chairs to relay information quickly and efficiently to all members. Companies like Constant Contact, MailChimp and HubSpot are user-friendly and customizable and offer free subscriptions or trials to get started.

Leave Your Digital Footprint

Alderman suggested that IRWA is a secret hidden within the “underground” right of way industry. Websites, social media and email communications and marketing can all unveil the IRWA secret and bring the right of way industry to the surface, while creating opportunities for young or newer and experienced professionals to embark on careers in our industry for continued growth and the recognition it deserves. 🌟



Stephanie Riley is the current IRWA Chapter 10 webmaster and chair of its Communications and Relations Committee. Since March 2020, she has been the director of communications and marketing for Yasmin L. Stump Law Group, PC (“YLSLG”) where she oversees the firm’s website, social media and business development and marketing initiatives. Additionally, Stephanie is extensively involved in the planning and execution of educational and sponsorship programs and events for both YLSLG and Chapter 10.