

Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword for Promoting Blood Donation?

Introduction

Blood has no substitute. Humans can only rely on the goodwill of voluntary, nonremunerated blood donors for the supply of blood.

In Hong Kong, only one public institution provides blood to all public and private hospitals. This institution is the Hong Kong Red Cross Blood Transfusion Service (BTS). It was originated from a voluntary, nonremunerated blood donation program, which was launched by the Hong Kong Red Cross in 1952. Starting from December 1991, the BTS has been managed by the Hospital Authority. The BTS is committed to ensuring an adequate and safe blood supply in Hong Kong. Thanks to the effort of the BTS, over the past six decades, more than 1.6 million people have donated blood in Hong Kong.

Vision and Mission

The vision of the BTS is to become one of the world's leading blood transfusion services in achieving zero blood risk and fulfilled blood donation experience. Aiming to share and save lives, their core business is providing sufficient and safe blood and hematopoietic stem cells.

Service Scope

The BTS provides a few services, including blood collection, donor recruitment, blood tests, supply of blood and blood components, supply of plasma derivatives, and publicity and education.¹

¹ <http://www5.ha.org.hk/rcbts/enarticle.asp?bid=1&MenuID=1>



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Promoting Blood Donation

In the 1990s, the BTS had marketing campaigns and promotions on TV commercials, radio, and newspaper initially. Stepping into the 20th century, the Internet became popular, and they developed their own website. However, when time went on, they discovered some major issues in their ongoing campaigns: (1) the promotions were boring and (2) the target audience, namely, patients and donors, could not be reached.

Unfortunately, the expected blood inventory level has been always under-satisfactory. The BTS launched different campaigns and promotions through various channels. With the rise of social media, the BTS established their social media promotion first on Facebook in 2010, and since then, this has been the only social media platform they employed.

The BTS makes use of different channels to promote blood donation. In the past, the BTS uses advertising space in TV and radio, newspapers, and website. From 2010 onward, the BTS started to develop its social media platform but has been restricted to Facebook only. Other social media platforms have been kept in mind but not used because of limited manpower to handle them.

The Facebook fan page was established in 2009 for sharing of news and photos. Use of social media targets at existing blood donors with a hope to spread the idea of blood donation to their peer networks. The young generation, whom the BTS believes uses social media in a much higher frequency, is also the target.



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Source: https://www.facebook.com/pg/BloodForLifeHKRCBTS/about/?ref=page_internal

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/BloodForLifeHKRCBTS/photos/a.454137001282411.115137.405250926171019/1738362522859846/?type=3&theater>

Limitations

Social media provides an unlimited boundary for businesses to explore their potentials. The BTS, however, cannot fully enjoy its benefits. They are not only limited by the manpower they possess but are also limited by restrictions from the mother organization. Having the HA as their mother organization, the BTS is bound by the inherited rules and regulations. This condition limits their creativity and variations in format and content in the posts on the fan page. They are required to maintain the professional image of the HA but, meanwhile, use more interactive methods and trendy elements to attract more volunteers. Having a breakthrough under this situation is difficult. Dr. Lee Cheuk-Kwong, Chief Executive and Medical Director of BTS, said,

The BTS is required to abide by different rules and regulations of the mother organization. To maintain the professional image of HA and the BTS, we should avoid doing some acts, such as giving an angry face emoji as a reaction to some news. Given these limitations and the theme of the BTS, the scope of activities that can be performed is narrow as well.

Blood for Life 熱血使命 (HK Red Cross BTS 香港紅十字會輸血服務中心)
July 27 at 12:28pm · 🌐



Date	Location	Start Time	End Time
15/7/2017	大角咀維樹街47號海康大廈1座2樓(禮堂)	10:00am	5:00pm
17/7/2017	北角渣甸道191號 高華國際中心12樓1208室	10:00am	5:00pm
19/7/2017	天水圍 T Town一期地下(廣場)	11:30am	6:00pm
20/7/2017	葵涌 梨木道79號 亞洲貿易中心地下大堂	11:30am	5:30pm
27/7/2017	九龍灣 常悅道9號 企業廣場3樓大堂(向臨樂街)	10:00am	5:00pm
27-28/7/2017	長沙灣 永康街77號環善中心地下大堂	10:00am	5:00pm
28/7/2017	九龍灣 宏照道39號 企業廣場3期1樓大堂	10:00am	5:00pm

Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/BloodForLifeHKRCBTS/photos/a.454137001282411.115137.405250926171019/1754327487930016/?type=3&theater>

Compared with private users and organizations like game developers, the BTS is at a disadvantaged position in employing social media. Blood donation is obviously a more serious issue compared with a car-racing game. How the BTS promotes the theme and handles different issues would directly affect the trustworthiness and willingness of the public to donate blood, and this would directly influence many precious lives.

Insights

How to Balance

Presentation style is the main strategy used by the BTS to make a breakthrough. Transforming a boring context into a modern and trendy content is not an easy task, but we can see some successful examples from the BTS. Though they are bound by the regulations and image of the mother organization, they break through the barriers by the elements used and the presentation style of content.



Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/BloodForLifeHKRCBTS/photos/a.454137001282411.115137.405250926171019/1761353647227400/?type=3&theater>



Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/BloodForLifeHKRCBTS/photos/a.454137001282411.115137.405250926171019/1737269122969186/?type=3&theater>

Different from the promotions at the time when social media was not yet popular, the promotional materials nowadays are incorporated with more interactive elements and are more vivid and creative. Cartoonish and interactive elements add vitality to the posts and attract people's attention.

Scope of Audience

Despite limited creativity and variation in promotional materials, social media is still a competitive platform in terms of scope of audience reached. Simply a "Like" or a "Share" option pressed by either their followers or other Facebook users can already help spread their messages and posts to a wider social circle, as other Facebook users who may not be followers of the BTS but are in the social circle of the one who liked or shared the posts can also see the BTS messages on their wall. The BTS can use the minimum effort to reach a larger group of people thanks to the friendly setting of the social media platform.



shared Blood for Life 熱血使命 (HK Red Cross BTS 香港紅十字會輸血服務中心)'s post.
August 15 at 12:06pm · 共

血庫存量短缺 指定捐血站 服務時間延長

為方便市民，指定捐血站由八月十二日至二十日期間，延長服務時間至晚上八時。詳情如下：

銅鑼灣、荃灣、沙田、觀塘、元朗捐血站
服務時間: 上午11時至晚上8時 (星期一至日)

中區捐血站
服務時間: 上午11時至晚上8時 (星期一至六)

其他捐血站服務時間維持不變。

Blood for Life 熱血使命 (HK Red Cross BTS 香港紅十字會輸血服務中心)
August 15 at 12:05pm · 🌐

本週一（八月十四日）前往登記捐血的熱心人士有987人，成功收集742袋血液。

現時血庫的所有血型血液存量再次下降至嚴重短缺水平。

為了提升捐血站服務，銅鑼灣和荃灣捐血站每日服務時間已延長至晚上八時。此外，直至八月二十日(星期日)，中區、沙田、觀塘和元朗捐血站的服務時間亦會延長至晚上八時。

... See More

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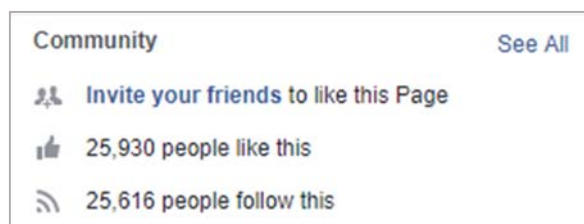
1

Source: Facebook



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Unfortunately, this effect can be limited by the relatively low number of followers of the BTS page. Based on the page statistics, there are only fewer than 30,000 followers. As a result, the spreading effect may be relatively small when compared with other large or popular organizations. The number of followers can be an important factor in the effectiveness and efficiency of social media platform promotions.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/BloodForLifeHKRCBTS/>

Update Frequency

The BTS provides daily information and news on their page, which illustrates the effort they exert and their ambition to utilize social media to gain the most benefits. In terms of update frequency, they have been doing quite well. Most of the organizations with relatively low popularity lack resources and perseverance in social media maintenance. Together with low popularity, the social media accounts of those organizations will be aborted, thereby resulting in waste of resources. Moreover, as the BTS uses the page as a news announcement platform, they should always keep the information there up-to-date and be prompted as the most recent news on top of the wall of their followers. From the high update frequency, the BTS has been valuing the social media platform as their main communication tool with the public.

Using actual donors as the main characters in the promotions is another strategy of the BTS. Given that donating is voluntary and the BTS has limited resources, they seldom hire celebrities to promote for them. As a result, the celebrity effect of the BTS on social media is limited. Instead, they choose to invite ordinary people to share and post their photos of donation to make blood donation more approachable and increase their willingness to become frequent donors. Together with the frequent updates, these strategies can act as a reminder or encouragement for people to take action. However,

this is not always possible and easy to achieve, as the BTS needs the donors' support and approval to post their photos on the page.



Source:

<https://www.facebook.com/BloodForLifeHKRCBTS/photos/a.454137001282411.115137.405250926171019/1766537410042357/?type=3&theater>

Timeliness and Trustworthiness

Without a doubt, social media offers an economical and convenient way for businesses to spread their messages and reach a wider audience. However, it is difficult to master it and always keep it under control, as the Internet is too powerful. There have been times when messages sent were misinterpreted by the netizens. Social media, thus, becomes a double-edged sword. Dr. Lee said,

The BTS believes that social media in general is useful in promotion and obtaining more donation. However, the right messages and timing are important factors that the BTS is not always able to achieve.

The sword once hurt the BTS, and they were caught unprepared and surprised. Negative rumors on the recipients of blood collected spread wide and swiftly across the Net, including on Facebook, which put the BTS into a difficult situation. The attack originated from a blood donation promotion from the Hong Kong Red Cross (HKRC),



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urging people to donate blood by asking them what if one day the one in need is their family members or close friends. Given the background of the HKRC having a membership in the Red Cross Unit of the Mainland, and the complex situation of conflicts between Hong Kong people and Mainlanders, there were rumors saying that the target recipients of the blood collected would be mostly Mainlanders or patients in private hospitals. Many people treated the appeal as a menace, and rumors started to spread widely.

This incident revealed one of the major problems of the BTS—insufficient human resources, which led to a slow response to the attack and allowed the rumors to spread at an unexpected rate. A point to note is that the rumors were started on online forums, and exploded on social networking platforms and attracted the public's attention.

How to Manage

Transparency is positioned as a high priority in this day and age, especially in a commercial setting. People are getting more bargaining power thanks to the free flow of information and advancement in technology and educational background. When the BTS relies on the support of the people, they should gain their trust and confidence. The BTS should clearly disclose their operations and the flow of blood collected to appease the anger and lessen the curiosity of the people and establish a long-lasting relationship between donors and the BTS.

Prevention is always better than cure. But accidents always happen unexpectedly. Thus, the BTS should be prepared at all times. Plan for the worst and handle similar issues better in the future. Better organization and planning are expected.

Publication and announcement of news will be centralized to the official channel of the BTS to maintain trustworthiness. The internal staff will keep a closer monitor on social media and provide faster reactions and responses to any attacks or negative news toward the BTS.



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Prospects

Dependent on the goodwill of donors, the BTS is always at a passive position, unfortunately. What they can do is to increase the awareness and willingness of the general public toward blood donation. Dr. Lee said,

We saw some commercial exemplars on WeChat to promote their businesses, and hence, we want to imitate them through WeChat. However, the target audience would then be wrong (i.e., the frequent users of WeChat are Mainlanders, instead of Hong Kong people, which may possibly lead to another round of attacks if the BTS really launched a WeChat official account). Therefore, with everything constant, the BTS will continue to stick to Facebook in the foreseeable future.

Solely publicizing on the Facebook fan page in the future may not be enough under this fast-changing world. They may need other social media platforms, such as Instagram, to expand their online promotional campaigns and also acquire more resources to increase their publicity. Most importantly, they need donors' support and trust to keep not only their page running but also their business operating. After the incident discussed earlier, their first priority is to regain the trust from the donors and the general public. Perhaps they can explore the opportunities and potentials several years after the page is well publicized and the staff are well-trained and experienced with social media platforms. But for now, staying at the current state without any other new movement may be the best thing to do.