

## *Vibrant Calgary Rides the Social Media Wave*

### *Challenge*

As part of its ongoing effort to increase community awareness of poverty-related issues and encourage voter participation in municipal elections, Vibrant Communities Calgary (VCC) embarked on a social media project in January 2010. Director Dan Meades and staff members Mike Williams and Alexa Briggs were interested in challenging the view that low voter turnout was the result of citizen disinterest or apathy.

Says Dan: “Everyone cares about their immediate circumstances, and our project would be about widening those concerns to include the issue of poverty reduction. We felt that we could play a role in sharing information on municipal candidates and educating people about poverty’s place in the City’s affairs.”

VCC is particularly interested in helping increase volunteer rates and election participation among residents in their 20s and 30s. Because young adults are heavy users of technology, social media provide an ideal conduit for exchanging information.

VCC staff members believe that values-based discussions need to take place alongside economic arguments in order for citizens to determine how poverty can best be addressed in their city. Says Alexa Briggs: “Our social media sites provide an open forum where people have the opportunity to access information as well as engage with us and others around issues of poverty in Calgary.”

### *Strategy*

On January 1, 2010, Mike, Alexa and Dan opened a Vibrant Calgary Twitter area (140-character web log posts), a page on Facebook, Tumblr (a blog area for longer posts) and YouTube (video) feeds. Although Mike takes care of maintaining the VCC website and associated tools, all

three staff members take turns attending poverty-related events in Calgary and posting details, links and video footage.

Staff members will continue to meet with mayoral and alderman candidates in the weeks and months leading to the October 2010 elections, offering them the opportunity to publish whatever poverty-related campaign materials they feel are relevant to their voters. It is the organization's lack of filtering or editorializing that distinguishes its politician-posted materials.

### ***Ready, Set, Twitter***

*Several Vibrant Communities sites are harnessing social media tools to distribute their messages. You can tweet VCC at @VibrantCalgary, Opportunities Waterloo Region (@OpportunitiesWR) the Hamilton Roundtable on Poverty Reduction (@hamiltonpoverty). Vibrant Communities Saint John is exploring an integrated social media strategy with their partner, the Human Development Council.*

“As long as people are reading poverty-related materials, we feel we’re raising awareness of the issue,” says Dan. “There are other social media outlets in Calgary that are covering the upcoming election, but our poverty focus will provide a dedicated area for people trying to get informed on this particular issue.”

VCC's social media work adds another set of tools to an already busy communications strategy. Vibrant Communities will produce 2,500 copies of a pre-election newsletter which will be distributed to the city's food banks, shelters and the community organizations with which it partners. This strategy proved to be an effective way to reach vulnerable residents in the last civic elections in 2007, particularly those needing information on new voter identification rules.

In early 2010, VCC opted to take over management of Poverty Talks! – a collaborative civic engagement project launched jointly by the Calgary and District Labour Congress and the Alberta College of Social Workers. Its original intent was to give people who live in poverty the leadership skills and information they need to become involved in the electoral process, while raising public awareness of poverty issues.

In late 2009, Poverty Talks! partners printed 10,000 copies of a report that lists 16 recommendations for future poverty reduction work. VCC hopes to use a portion of the United Way money it secured for its Poverty Talks! work to hire homeless people to distribute the report all over the city – to passersby, at City Hall and at C Train stations. Says Dan: “Little by little, Calgarians are becoming used to talking about poverty. Our distribution project will be a way to get more people talking to community members who experience poverty every day.”

As part of Poverty Talks!, VCC is planning an innovative pre-election forum. Instead of candidates presenting their ideas, the event will feature a panel of people living on low incomes that candidates and incumbents may question in order to arrive at a better-informed view of poverty. Later, the tables will turn and people on low incomes will question candidates about whatever issues and ideas they feel are important in determining how they will vote in the election. There are currently five people in the Calgary mayoral race, but that number is expected to climb to 12. (Incumbent Mayor Dave Bronconnier – who posts tweets on Twitter – is completing his third term and has announced that he will not run for re-election.)

VCC's ambitious pre-election communication planning is aimed at improving the lackluster polling figures gathered from the last two elections. In 2004, only 19.8 percent of Calgarians voted. Unconfirmed figures for 2007 range from 20 to 35 percent – up from 2004, but far below VCC's wish for a 50 percent or better turnout.

### ***Outcomes***

Social media extend but do not replace face-to-face encounters, telephone calls, TV, radio and newsletters. Social media have more clearly surfaced the technical divide that exists among early adopters, laggards and non-users. Some of VCC's stalwart participants and volunteers have said that they never use social media. Moreover, many Calgary residents living in poverty struggle with literacy, do not own computers and speak only limited English. Though steadily growing in popularity, social media are not a panacea. Communication is about finding the right tool for the right audience.

United Way of Calgary and Area is a major contributor to VCC operations. When VCC was originally established in 2004 as an offshoot of United Way's Poverty Reduction Coalition (PRC), there was a perceived degree of overlap between the two organizations. Over the years, the United Way has refashioned PRC into a research-focused initiative; its work has focused lately on poverty indicators. PRC and Vibrant Calgary now consider one another partners and collaborators.

Brian Hoffart is a Senior Community Planner with United Way of Calgary and Area and has long supported VCC's work both financially and professionally. He had known Mike Williams' skill in high tech and social media from workforce placement projects Mike had undertaken on behalf of two United Way-funded agencies. He was pleased that Dan Meades hired Mike to apply his computer skills to poverty reduction efforts. It was also a perfect chance for the United Way to observe first-hand a social media learning laboratory.

Says Brian: "In a few short months, VCC has mastered the use of social media. VCC has demonstrated that social media is a strategy that has successfully engaged new audiences in policy, legislation and social discourse. Social media is changing the way we communicate; it will soon be

### ***Not just a pretty face***

*Vibrant Calgary used Facebook to post information about a talk by Senator Hugh Segal in March 2010. Co-sponsored by VCC, the Sheldon Chumir Foundation and the Salvation Army, a capacity crowd of 250 people packed a room at a downtown hotel to hear arguments for and against a Guaranteed Annual Income.*

*Says VCC's Mike Williams: "We could easily have accommodated double the numbers, given the response we saw that night. The event gave people the chance to hear a federal Conservative voice speaking to a subject generally considered more to the political left." If the purpose of any media is to inspire action, Facebook has quickly moved beyond simply providing a place to look at pictures and swap personal stories.*

unavoidable. United Way is emerging in this area of communication as well, and we are learning from the steps VCC has taken.”

Says Dan Meades: “We are presuming that if people are reading and following our social media materials, they are engaged in the issue of poverty. Before we began this work in January 2010, we had zero followers. In April, our records showed 2,000 direct contacts to our materials and more than 3,120 indirect connections to our online brand. Our work on Facebook shows 1,659 page views and our blog records show that 65 percent of our readers are viewing the materials more than once. By December 2010, meaningful social engagements on the internet will have gone from zero to 10,000.”

The action generation potential of these social media-related figures is open to question and interpretation. We are collectively experiencing a new wave of technology-related communication advances, with no firm way to measure their impact. For now, VCC and the United Way of Calgary and Area are content to continue to see how far this new wave of technology can take the poverty reduction message, and whether Calgarians will ride it from the computer screen to the voting booth in October 2010.

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