

Using Social Media to Recruit Adopters: Best Practice Guidelines for Voluntary Adoption Agencies



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Introduction

The Internet has had a huge impact on the way that prospective adopters find out about adoption. As a result, Voluntary Adoption Agencies (VAAs) have had to change and evolve the way they market themselves to take advantage of the latest technology. It's become widely accepted that people research adoption online before contacting an agency and the agency website has become the most important single source of adoption enquiries, second only to word-of-mouth recommendations. As well as visiting the agency website prospective adopters also interact on social media in a variety of ways including visiting forums, clicking on links from Facebook, reading adopter blogs and networking with adopters for recommendations. This paper will outline some of the methodology currently in use and provide best practice guidelines including suggestions for marketing messages for VAAs on the use of social media in recruiting adopters.

The authors of this paper conducted research on behalf of the Four Nations Learning Partnership in 2014/2015, which included an online survey of lapsed adopters, focus groups and depth interviews with current adopters and depth interviews with the CEOs from the four agencies in the Partnership. The research covered key issues facing VAAs, including the use and attitudes towards social media¹. Relevant findings are included in this paper as well as content from other research projects on the topic.

¹ Four Nations Learning Partnership Research Reports M, Randhawa & T, Gooderham (2015)

1. Current Overview of Social Media Use

1.1 The definition of social media

Social media can be defined as ‘websites and applications that enable users to create and share content or to participate in social networking². ‘

Social media is increasingly important in the communications mix for adoption agencies looking for an easy and cost-effective way of targeting, communicating with and encouraging new prospective adopters to make an enquiry. The Internet is now seen as the main medium for prospective adopters to find out about adoption and adoption agencies, and therefore a lively and personable agency website is a high priority. The Internet has enabled people to ‘shop around’. In the past people were still making the decision about whether to adopt when they attended information evenings. Now, by the time the potential adopter contacts the agency they have made that decision, have looked at a number of agencies online and come to the agency through the recommendations of other adoptive families.

“What’s surprising to me... is the potential adopters’ capacity to network and connect to somebody who has previously adopted.”

CEO at VAA, Four Nations Learning Partnership Report

1.2 Benefits to VAAs of using social media

Agencies who use social media as an accompaniment for potential enquirers hope that this will lead on to face-to-face contact with the agency.

The social media model suits VAAs in a number of ways:

1. Social media is low cost compared to more traditional marketing methods.
2. VAAs can more readily post to Facebook than Local Authorities agencies and tend to be more innovative in their approaches with less bureaucratic structure/corporate control.
3. VAAs can convey their unique selling points to enquirers, depicting themselves as independent, professional organisations with the feel of an extended family where staff members and regular social and fundraising events are featured in their marketing material.
4. VAAs are not responsible for children in care needing adoption and do not have the same concern about the possibility of interventions by birth family members.
5. Allowing visitors to post comments and ask questions about the assessment process and adoption in general can create a better dialogue between the enquirer and the agency.
6. Social media helps at different stages of the adoption journey: fact finding at the information stage via the agency website and deeper engagement via social media networks such as Facebook and online forums.

² Online Oxford English Dictionary www.oxforddictionaries.com

The benefits of social media to adopters are as follows:

- The Internet informs and empowers potential adopters. They find out about the adoption process and are more informed when they first contact the agency in person.
- People considering adoption can find out more without actually speaking to someone and this is perhaps an easier, less daunting opportunity for them.
- The Internet (specifically forums and other information sites) gives the potential adopter the ability to check out perceived barriers that concern them.

1.3 Audit of VAA Social Media Use

Of the 27 VAAs that were included in a desktop research study of VAA social media use, only 2 were currently not using social media. The most popular platforms are Facebook and Twitter with some agencies also using You Tube, Google+, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram and Flickr.

First4Adoption is currently doing a 'brand watch' on all VAAs to assess what social media tools they are using and the successes they are having. A survey was also recently undertaken by BAAF on social media use by VAAs and LAAs.

The UEA research (2013) refers to the fact that agencies are trying out new social media platforms but states that it was too early to determine the relative effectiveness of these activities, including (see page 19 of the UEA report for more information):

- Using Google maps to highlight agency location to web visitors viewing a particular location.
- Alert Smart phone users to presence of agency office when in vicinity.
- Buying domain names key search phrases such as 'want to adopt' to use in particular campaign so that it appears in search and they are directed to VAA website.
- QR codes in media ads to connect enquirers with Smart phones to agency website.

1.4 Success Stories of Social Media Marketing

According to a recent Guardian Article (3rd March 2015)³, social media is being increasingly used to recruit adopters by both VAAs and Local Authorities. Kindred⁴, in a relevant research project "Identifying effective marketing methods to engage potential adopters" found that social media channels drive far deeper engagement.

³ Guardian Article 'Finding Homes for Hard to Place Children' <http://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2015/mar/03/fostering-adoption-hard-to-place-children>

⁴ 'Identifying effective marketing methods to engage potential adopters.' Kindred for DfE, March 2014.

Some agencies are launching highly successful campaigns including live Q&A sessions via social media with targeted individuals. The Q&A allowed potential adopters to ask a wide range of questions on topics ranging from myth-busting to their personal situation and the campaign also increased engagement by greatly increasing page likes, follows and even generated one immediate enquiry.

According to First4Adoption the following adoption agencies are also currently achieving success through social media:

PACT
Coram
Barnardos
Durham
Stockton
Action for Children
After Adoption
Hertfordshire
Adoption Matters
DFW adoption

TOP TIP: vary social media content so that it's not always focused on what the agency is doing, but other things that will interest the people who like your page.

The agencies mentioned in the list above all have one thing in common, which is that they post regularly. Some of them talk about 'life outside their brand' and some of them don't as much. DFW have just started doing a live chat on their FB page, other agencies run live Twitter session, often with special guest including adopters.

2. Key Activities In Social Media

2.1 Search Engine Optimisation

The Four Nations research project¹ found that adopters used several online resources during different stages of their adoption journey. Initially most adopters carried out a Google search to find contact details for adoption agencies in their area. The majority of prospective adopters are “shopping around” using a Google search as their main research tool. This makes search engine optimisation (SEO), to improve the ranking of the agency website in Google’s search results, a key task for VAAs. Many VAAs now use Google and Facebook Ads to increase their visibility online.

SEO techniques require advanced web skills and many VAAs and LAAs are now hiring social media companies to undertake this work for them and/or a member of staff to oversee website and social media activities.

Both the Kindred⁴ and UEA⁵ reports suggest ways to make organic searches more effective:

1. Optimise the agency website by including a commonly used search terms (or key words) in key pages with a variety of different terms that prospective adopters may search for such as ‘child adoption’, ‘adopting a child in the UK’ or ‘adopting children’ as alternatives to the more common ‘adopting a child.’ This improves the visibility of a website in a Google search.
2. Generate good quality, new content in the form of blogs. Agencies should post regular blogs updates that reference the key search terms above linking in with trending topics on social media, and invite current adopters to write posts and share on their social media networks, some agencies have ‘guest bloggers and tweeters’ including their own adopters.
3. Use original imagery – websites that use original photography appear higher on search rankings than those using stock imagery.

The Four Nations CEOs rightly considered the agency website a high priority since the majority of the enquiries come from the website. Adopters who find the website welcoming are more likely to call the agency. Adopters visit the agency website to find out further information about the process. Prospective adopters said that they liked to see real people working at the agency on the website as well as information.

Other ways to increase organic search ratings include⁵:

- Uploading video clips. YouTube is a good low cost platform for sharing real life stories.
- Having relevant content.
- Having a mobile optimised website.

2.2 Facebook

A key piece of research in this area, conducted by UEA⁶, examined perspectives and

⁵ A key reference provided by Google can be found online here:
Search Engine Optimization Starter Guide: <http://goo.gl/E1UQ5G>

insights of adoption managers and marketing professionals and found that the most suitable social media platform is Facebook. Facebook is also recommended as the best social media channel for adoption agencies in the Kindred⁴ report and by Net Natives, rather than other platforms such as Flickr or Pinterest, etc. Combined posts can be set up for Facebook and Twitter.

In February 2015, over 39.6 million people in the UK visited Facebook and activity on Facebook accounts of 20% of all time spent online⁷.

Facebook can be used in two ways:

1. To demographically target paid advertising to relevant target audiences.
2. To accompany followers/enquirers, allowing interaction at a fairly simple (non-confidential) level, giving them a feel for the nature of the organisation and promoting a stronger sense of connectedness.

“Facebook is a really useful tool...It's free. We use it to speak to people – it humanises us.”

VAA marketing manager, UEA report

Facebook tips (Kindred⁴):

1. Regular content is key – the audience loses interest if there are long period of silence on social channels. Not every post is automatically displayed to Facebook followers in their newsfeed (this is determined by Facebook algorithms) so they need to post regular high-quality content for people to visit their Facebook page regularly.
2. Engagement on Facebook must be managed – agencies need to be ready to respond/manage positive and negative comments.

Key Reference: Kindred provides guidelines on how to respond to negative comments (Kindred Appendix 1).

2.3 Targeting With Google And Facebook Ads

Kindred⁴ suggests that organic SEO may be cheaper and more effective than a paid ads campaign as there is now increasing competition and expense for popular key search terms. A Four Nations CEO said Google Ads were less effective than previously⁸.

⁶ ‘Success Factors in adopter recruitment: Insights from adoption agency social work managers and marketing officer’. Clifton and Neil, UEA (2013).

⁷ Comscore.com [Digital Market Overview UK February 2015](#).

2.4 Online Forums

The Four Nations research¹ highlighted that a number of adopters had visited forums during their 'fact finding phase' and lapsed adopters rate forums as either "quite helpful" or "extremely helpful." One of the Four Nations CEOs commented that prospective adopters who contacted the agency had already found adopters through networking on online forums. Facebook is considered to be more of a public forum whereas discussion boards promote a greater sense of community and more personal posts. Kindred⁴ lists the most active forums as: Adoption UK, Adoption.com, Babycentre.co.uk, Mumsnet and Netmums.

TOP TIP: An ideal way for VAAs to interact with these forums would be to recruit one of the agency's successful adoptive champions and ask them to take part in forum discussions. They will be seen as an authentic voice in the discussions. For more practical tips on improving the impact of social media see the Kindred report (pages 18-19).

3. Messages for marketing on social media

3.1 Information for prospective adopters

Potential adopters do a lot of fact-finding online. They want to know about or have reassurance about the following:¹

1. The additional needs of children waiting.
2. Support available after adoption including financial support.
3. The adoption process including timescales.
4. Whether their personal circumstances might prevent them from adopting.

Adopters in particular want a range of honest first-hand testimonials/real life stories to get an idea of how adopting a child will impact on their life.

Prospective adopters have access to more information than before because of the Internet. They have deeply-held hopes and dreams and the early conversations are very delicate because of the way the information and their dreams tie together. They filter out some of the information because of their emotional desires, and agencies need to work hard to enable prospective adopters to mesh the dreams with the reality of the children.

The messages used in social media marketing communications should be clear, consistent and myth-busting. The Kindred⁴ report recommends that messaging includes intrinsic and extrinsic motivating factors e.g. intrinsic motivations would be “I want to be a parent” or “I want to enrich my life by having a family” or extrinsic “I want take a child out the care system” or “I’ve got resources to spare”. The Four Nations’ focus groups⁹ found one of the main reasons to adopt was “my dream was to be a family” but others also “wanted to give something back.”

In the research¹, adoptive families and agency CEOs were asked what was the best part of adopting a child and found the following which can all be used in messaging about adoption:

- Being a family or when the child considers you to be their dad or mum.
- Meeting their child for the first time or bringing their child/children home.
- Seeing their child develop and grow in confidence and trust.
- Discovering that the child was the right one for them. To feel like the child that you have been placed with is the child you were meant to parent. Sometimes it’s surprising because the child may have been considered “hard to place” with major issues but it’s all about the parents choosing that child “we couldn’t have been placed with a better child”.
- When the children relate to their parents as a mum and dad, however briefly. At that moment the child needs and wants you and you are that person.
- Parenting a child that is theirs and having parental feelings that are as strong as if their adopted child had been their birth child, even if the journey has been convoluted and complicated.

- Making a difference when you want to parent a child and this coinciding with giving that child a decent childhood is the best feeling you can ever get.

3.2 Key messages to Communicate

3.2.1 Terminology

The word 'journey' came up again and again in our research. Many adopters talked about their experiences as a "journey" of emotions where they were not entirely in control. VAAs need to talk with PAs about accompanying them on their journey – a key strength of VAAs is that they are there for the families forever and many talk about 'our agency' - they are connected.

3.2.2 Key strengths of Voluntary Adoption Agencies

VAAs need to present their unique selling points because it is known that prospective adopters shop around.

Some of the key strengths of VAAs are as follows:

- Specialists in finding homes for harder to place children so this expertise helps their adoptive families deal with the issues that the current pool of children who need adopting have.
- More responsive and flexible when issues arise because of their small size.
- Offer a more personal service and an intimacy of knowledge of people.
- Friendly, welcoming and good at listening.
- Accept prospective adopter where they are and begin the conversation at that point.
- Will respond quickly and start the process earlier.
- Excel at the level of post adoption support.
- A comprehensive service focussed solely on adoption.
- They are independent. If the child and parents are with the same agency there can be a conflict.
- They have access to a national pool of children.
- They offer innovative services.

3.2.3 Messaging for Harder to Place Children

As part of the Four Nations research,¹ adopters of harder to place children were interviewed including those who had adopted BAME children, older children, siblings groups and children with additional needs.

3.2.4 Older children

Some of the messaging that emerged from this research were:

- There is more certainty about adopting a child over four.

- They would have more information about an older child including which developmental milestones the child had reached.
- Adopters also had practical reasons for adopting an older child such as taking on a school age child if self-employed and not able to take adoption leave.

3.2.5 Sibling groups

Reasons for taking on siblings included:

- Imagining always having two children or picturing their family as a complete unit.
- Prospective adopters have siblings themselves.
- If they started adoption at an older age this option made sense for some.
- Siblings can be more resilient because they maintain the sibling relationship.
- Matching is easier in a sense since you are matching a ready-made sibling group with two adults rather than matching a child to 3 or 4 people.

However, adoption goes in line with general trends and finances and placing larger groups of 3 or more siblings may reduce since most prospective adopters are now well into their 40s having tried IVF and fertility treatment and they don't have a house set up for large sibling groups. Larger families are declining too so prospective adopters would be less likely to come from a larger sibling group themselves and want to replicate this.

3.2.6 Children with additional needs

“We should talk about children being hurt or wounded by their experiences rather than describing them as ‘damaged’.” This quote aptly summarise the message VAAs should try to get across:

“Always try to remember that the children don’t consist solely of the difficulties that they had and the difficulties that they might have. Ultimately, they are just children who have had a normal response to abnormal situations in their life and that needs to change but that doesn’t define them. They are just normal children with needs that normal children have.”

CEO at VAA, Four Nations Learning Partnership Report

4. Steps to a Successful Social Media Campaign

1. Set your goals – engagement, new enquiries, raising brand awareness, etc.
2. Define your audience - the Four Nations Partnership used existing adopter profile information on demographics combined with geo-targeting data and market research to further understand the needs and expectations of PAs.
3. Choose your platforms – Facebook is currently considered to be the most efficient platform for VAAs to recruit PAs and further engage with this group.
4. Create your campaign – this can be done in-house or through a Social Media Company such as Net Natives. The benefits of using a company are that they are able to use their skills and knowledge to create a campaign and messages, test these and then monitor results in order to optimise results.
5. Monitor success – identify which metrics demonstrate success. There are plenty of free tools available online to do this, including MentionMap, Facebook Insights, Hootsuite (for scheduling and monitoring posts), and Tweetdeck (a social media dashboard application for management of Twitter accounts). Interpret the data to make it useful to you and amend your activities to improve your results.

Success will also depend on having a Marketing Officer in post who will be responsible for the following activities:

- Develop a marketing information system to inform activities.
- Develop and implement an integrated marketing plan (combining social media activities and more traditional marketing activities).
- Create a social media planner (see First4Adoption's Resources for Professionals).
- Develop an appropriate social media policy to guide activities (a code of conduct that provides guidelines for employees who post content on the Internet either as part of their job or as a private person).
- Coordinate other members of staff who are involved in social media activities.

Increasingly, social media professionals are using 'social media listening' as a technique whereby staff monitor online discussions on forum sites such as Mumsnet and intervene to point the way to the adoption agency when the topic of adoption has been raised.

Social media monitoring is an essential task for listening to what potential adopters are saying about adoption and for agencies to engage with users. Many threads on online forums focus on post-adoption issues with members seeking advice about on how to deal with unforeseen issues in children with complex needs. Agencies need to be aware of these conversations and able to deal with them.

5. Further Resources

Adoption Data Analysis: Full report with Executive Summary. Produced on behalf of The Associations of Directors of Children's Services (2013).

Barriers to Adoption, PACT (2012).

Guide to Improving the Impact of Social media, First4Adoption:
<http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/professionals/recruitment/guides/social-media/>

Guidelines for Finding Adopters for Sibling Groups/Older Children, National Recruitment Forum: <http://www.first4adoption.org.uk/professionals/national-recruitment-forum/>

Identifying effective marketing methods to engage potential adopters. DfE (2014).

Success Factors in adopter recruitment: Insights from adoption agency social work managers and marketing officer. Clifton and Neil, UEA (2013).

Understanding attitudes, motivations and barriers to adoption and fostering: A marketing proposal for the DfE. Scott and Duncan, Kindred (2013).