

Campaigning for Street Kids in the Digital Age

By Flora Sutherland, 180 Degrees Alliance



In the last decade, the opportunities for grassroots campaigning have exploded with the proliferation of social media and 'citizen journalism'. Now, anyone can get news into the public sphere without having to persuade the mainstream media to write about it. This was highlighted in dramatic ways in 2011 when events such as the uprising in Egypt were largely coordinated via Facebook and Twitter. As people who care passionately about street kids and ensuring that the issue is not forgotten about, we should consider how we can use this opportunity. Furthermore, since there are no large outlay costs for social media campaigns, these are much more accessible to low-budget projects.

The two main social media channels to get started with are Facebook and Twitter. If you are totally new to these, here are links to a couple of tutorials who can help you get comfortable with the set up of the sites:

Facebook: http://www.ehow.com/videos-on_108_use-facebook.html

Twitter: http://digitaltutorials.jrn.columbia.edu/?page_id=785

Once you are familiar with using these sites (if you're not already), then you will be in a position to think about whether you can use them to campaign on behalf of street children. If you do decide to use social media, then here's a suggestion of the steps to take.

1. **Step One: Creating an Online Identity** - choose an appropriate 'Page Name' (for Facebook) or Hashtag/handle on Twitter. In particular, consider separating the personal from professional. On Facebook, if you want to reach beyond your personal network of 'friends and supporters' then creating an organizational page is essential. Ensure that you choose an appropriate image and take the time to describe yourself well thinking ahead to when you might be reaching out to people you don't know yet.
2. **Step Two: Building a network** – be strategic in the kind of network you build on these channels. On Twitter in particular, you can normally follow people that you don't have a direct connection with and often they will follow you in return. Even if they don't follow you, often others who see the kind of people you're following will decide to follow you if they think you'll have similar interests to them. If you're looking to influence your Government, be sure to follow your president and any relevant ministers. Many presidents are surprisingly active and engaged online, e.g. Rwanda's President is a keen Tweeter and will always respond to private messages. Also follow influential journalists in your area or region as the power of social media is often best used when mainstream media highlight an issue they found out about through these channels.
3. **Step Three: What to Say** –be creative and thoughtful and most importantly, do NOT just use communications to ask for money! Think instead of make the issues affecting street kids relevant or interesting to others. If you build up a reputation as someone who really understands the issues and can give insights that are beyond the norm, the probability of gaining other kinds of support will be much more likely.
4. **Step Four: Conciseness and consistency** – social media requires conciseness in message – such as the maximum of 140 characters allowed by Twitter. So ensure your words are powerful but few, providing links to articles and websites for more detail when needed. Since the 'newsflow' on these outlets is so rapid, make sure you send out updates as often as possible (although only if there's something interesting to say or highlight). Don't be discouraged if it takes time to build up a following, just keep looking for things that nobody else has highlighted and keep pushing them out there.
5. **Step 5: The Power of Pictures:** One thing that is not new about social media is the power of images. If you have images that tell the story, all the better (of course bearing child protection in mind). The man who took the photo of the plane that landed on the Hudson River in New York had only a few hundred followers at the time, but that photo (uploaded via Twitter) was on the front page of almost every major media outlet within days.