Using websites and social media to boost your research impact and engagement

A printable guide
Dr Zali Yager

It sounds so simple, doesn't it. Create a Facebook Page, Instagram profile, Tweet, blog on Linkedin… Go Viral?

Social media has a huge amount of promise for researchers, and can facilitate research recruitment, user engagement, and research impact, but it can also take a lot of time. It's worth taking some time to think about what you really need social media for, how long you need to engage with them, where your audience is, and how much time you have to devote to social media.

The three main phases of research where social media can be used to your advantage are 1) Raising awareness about your project, 2) Recruitment, and 3) Knowledge translation. More about those in another post.

So here's my guide to some social media strategies that we have been using in our 3DProject, Embrace, WIRED, and Body Confident Mums projects, and some advice I've picked up along the way from social media, marketing, and blogging experts.

1. Brand your research

   Give it a name- researchers have always been good at creating a great acronym for their project, but let's go further than that. If your project has a name, social media accounts, a webpage, and a logo, it can really help people to engage with it- whether they be gatekeepers, participants, or the media.

Depending on the lifetime, and scope of work for your project, I recommend having a logo as a minimum branding tool. If you don't have money for a fancy designer, you can use [Canva](#), or a free trial of the [logomaker](#) app to develop one for free, or Fiver to outsource the job at low cost. The social media world is much more likely to engage with your work if it is a branded entity that can be easily understood, rather than engaging with you as a researcher.

2. Know your audience

Who do you want to talk to, and where do they hang out? Adolescents are on Snapchat, 29-45 year olds are on Pinterest, 30+ year olds are on Facebook. Twitter and Linkedin are more 'Professional'. It would be a full-time job alone to have a presence on all of these platforms, and companies that do employ multiple social media managers, and scheduling tools in order to post across all platforms multiple times a day. So have a think about who you really need to engage, and where they might be online in order to preserve your energy and efforts.

Think about the people that you want to communicate with- are they parents of children with a particular condition? Try a Facebook Group. If you want to communicate with health professionals to influence their practice? Try Twitter and Linkedin. Instagram has the largest health and fitness audience. Try just setting up one account under your research brand, on one of these platforms and get it working before you go all out. The bonus? Facebook and Instagram are connected so if you post in one, it can automatically update in the other.

3. Tag tag tag
Hashtags (on Instagram, Twitter, and Linkedin) are crucial to expanding your reach to people that might be interested in your post. You need to spend some time researching and curating your hashtag strategy if you want your posts to have the most effect. The clever women at [Startups for Grownups](#) have hashtag advice direct from the experts.

4. Make it Pretty

Social media is visual. All of the other content on there is really quite aesthetically pleasing- that's why people consume it! Graphic design doesn't always come naturally to those with PhD's, so if you want to keep up, use [Canva](#). It's totally free, and you can create social-ready pics on your desktop or your phone.

Even better, try video. Apparently is has 1200% more engagement- but there's no reference for that statistic! Nothing fancy needed, just you and your phone and a quiet space. Why not share a quick summary of an amazing keynote or conference presentation that you saw? Or behind-the-scenes peeks into our world as a researcher? Even just your elevator pitch of what your project is about and what you hope to achieve with it? Or why you do what you do? Show your personality, passion, and enthusiasm- it doesn't have to be perfect, in fact it's probably better if you are human and relatable, over being robotic and scripted.

5. Know when to post

If recruitment is top on my list of 'to-do's' for the day, I'll want to post something as soon as I sit down at my desk... bad idea! There's actually a lot of data and science behind the best time to post on social media. Much of it is conflicting information- Just be sure to do a little bit of research about the best time to post for your particular audience, for your particular platforms. Most of it makes sense, like posting around 3-4 pm and 8-9 pm for mums, ie- when they pick the kids up from school, and when they go to bed! This blog post details timings by category for more detailed information (from a trusted source).

6. Collaborate!

It's really really, really hard to get engaged followers on social media. You probably thought it would be easy, but then by the time all of your friends and family have followed you, and a few randoms, you still only have 100-200 followers- at least that's what happened to me!

If you want to really save time on social media, and only need it for recruitment for a one-off project, you don't actually have to set up your own accounts and pages, you can just work with those who already have a really large following of the people that you want to speak to, and approach them to publish a guest blog piece. We tried this with Body Confident Mums. We approached Active Truth, an Activewear company that uses diverse-sized models in their campaigns, with around 30,000 followers, and a maternity range. We asked them to publish a guest blog piece about body confidence and post-natal depression during Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Awareness [PANDA] awareness week. They did and we got a reach of 2776 people instead of 106 that we usually get through our own Facebook page.

So have a bit of a look around and see who has the audience that you want- but think about what you have that they might be interested in... Many Facebook Groups are not allowing researchers to post just for recruitment any more. The approach used in sales (and let's face it, we are selling an idea) is that you need to give before you receive. You could try asking if you could be a guest expert on a podcast, or provide a blog post for content around your expertise that could contribute, and then ask for people to complete your survey...

What can I use Social Media for??

The three main phases of research where you can use social media to your advantage are
1) Raising awareness about your project,
2) Recruitment, and
3) Knowledge translation

Raising Awareness About Your Research

Publicity. It's something you might have avoided until now, but it's amazing for enhancing the potential of your research project. When we received the funds for the 3D Project, the media team at my university suggested sending out a media release- and I was all "but we don't have the findings yet", but it ended up being a great strategic start to research engagement for the project. I made sure that I set up a quick basic landing page with email signup (more on that here), and social media accounts for the project, before working with the media team on the release- a piece about the prevalence of male body image issues, and the need for intervention programs like the one we had just been funded to develop and test (you know the first few paragraphs of your grant application? Use them!). The piece ended up being picked up by the Herald Sun and a few radio stations (they always need content!), but here's the thing… 14 people signed up to the email list on the project website. Now that doesn't sound like many, and it isn't in the context of the huge email lists that online businesses have, but those 14-people turned out to be excellent champions for the topic, and the research, in their communities, and they really wanted to help. When we got to recruitment stage, we enlisted the help of those people, and when we get to dissemination, we will go back to them again.

Recruitment

I am so guilty of putting out a recruitment post with all the hope in the world, and then… crickets! Here's the thing. Real people, and busy people, don't really want to participate in research. Sad, but true. We (and our ethics committees) make it pretty boring, and really complex to sign up, and there's not often a reward. So if you want or need to use social media for recruitment you need to figure out how to fit in to that space, engage people, give them something that they might want, or solve a problem for them, and then ask them to participate in your research…

Here's a few different strategies to try if you really want to up your recruitment:

- Approach an existing community: We needed around 200 women to complete a questionnaire for our Embrace study. When We put it out on our personal Facebook pages we got around 50 participants. When we asked the Body Image Movement to schedule one 'call for participants' type post on their Facebook and Instagram, we were inundated with 2000 respondents in 2 weeks and had to cut off data collection as we had too much data (open ended questions whyyyy did I include you??!!). This worked because it was a really engaged and passionate community of women that were in the group. No, it's not really generalizable (Reviewer 2, yes, I know), but it got us a lot of community-based data that we would otherwise not have had, that we've been able to do some really interesting analyses with.

- Make it more appealing: As researcher's we seem to take data for our own needs without thinking about what the experience could actually give back to the participant. I made an off-hand comment about developing a measure of parental role modelling of body image to a PR professional and she got so excited: "you mean that I could answer some questions and you could tell me how well I am doing with that". Yes Margie, I can! What if, for cross sectional studies, we asked participants to

do our survey, but also gave them feedback on how they scored? I'm yet to try this, but it will definitely be my next move… It might take a bit more time to develop some cut-offs and some generic text about scores into qualtrics, and the ethics committee will probably want referrals in there, but I think it can be done! When I spoke to the manager of a large social media group she said "please don't just ask people to fill in your survey- let's do something much more interesting than that". So if you need big numbers, why not try combining these tips- reach out to an existing social media community, and ask what they think you could do to engage their followers in your research… They might just have some great ideas!

Knowledge Translation

You've done the hard work, you've published the papers, and now, it's time to tell the world… but how?! Most researchers send out one tweet about their paper, and their media office might send out a release to some news publications, but there are so many more opportunities to get your research findings into the hands of people that would be interested to read about them now.

As with awareness and recruitment, you need to think about who your research could solve problems for, and where they might hang out online. What format do your target audience like to consume things in? Video? Audio? Text? Make a list of the publications, podcasts, and blogs that people interested in your findings might access. Then start systematically contacting them and asking if you can provide content.

When someone agrees for you to share with them, it's time to prepare. Remember to try to de-jargonise your findings and make them relatable to the audience. Really think about what your findings mean to real people, not just your research field. Practice explaining your findings to a friend or family member that knows nothing about research or your content area, and see if it makes sense to them, and what questions they have. Then just get on and have fun with it. People love people who are enthusiastic and passionate about their work. You don't have to be perfect, and no one will notice if you stumble over your words a bit, The important part is that you tried.

Your other option is to self-host, and create blog, video, or audio content about your research and expertise yourself. There are so many resources online to help you to learn the technical aspects of doing this, and very similar advice applies as described above. The more that you can engage, solve problems, and be relatable, the more that people will love learning from you.

So you've given it a go, and it was a bit messy, but you learned a lot. The final thing to do is to remember to capture the impact from your knowledge translation work. Remember that end-of-year report that you always have to write? It will be so much easier if you capture your reach along the way (I wish I took my own advice here). Crude measures of reach are fine, but so much data is captured by social media and anything digital, so you can get really nice numbers to put in your report. Try asking the podcaster/blogger for the number of downloads or reads two-weeks after your story was published. Create a system to record all of this, and add up the number of people that saw your work. Getting your hard-earned

new knowledge out into the world is so important, and the more that we all act on this, the more impact we will see in real life.

So that's it- my tips on using social media for research awareness, recruitment, and knowledge translation. I'd love to know more about how researchers use social media- your success stories and fail forward moments! I'd also love to hear your questions if you have them. Please get in touch at zali.yager@gmail.com.

Also- If you are interested in learning more about strategies to achieve real-world engagement for your research, you might just like the Well Researched Membership- where likeminded academics gather to learn about how to achieve impact while maintaining their wellbeing. Find out more and join the wait-list here.

Dr Zali Yager is a researcher in the Institute for Health and Sport at Victoria University, with current projects aiming to enhance body image in mums, and in adolescent boys.

Zali is passionate about creating research impact while preserving our wellbeing as high-achieving, perfectionists, using evidence-based strategies.

You can find Zali on Twitter, LinkedIn and instagram.