
Example 3: International Centre for Mental Health Social Research

Using Twitter and a blog to identify and prioritise topics for research

About the Centre

The [International Centre for Mental Health Social Research](#) brings together researchers from around the world to undertake a unique research programme applying social science to mental health practice. Based in the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of York, the Centre's research focuses on social perspectives in mental health through the life course from childhood to old age.

How have people been involved?

The Centre is relatively new, and Martin Webber, the Centre's director, wanted to listen to people's ideas for research priorities. He wanted to reach as diverse an audience as possible, but especially people with mental health experience – those using mental health services and those working in mental health. He had already built up a Twitter following (using [@mgoat73](#)) through his professional work over the previous two years. He also has a blog which is independent of his work at the University. He decided to use Twitter and his blog to ask people for their views.

Twitter was chosen because it forms communities of interest (as people choose who to follow), and it's a medium that encourages people to express their opinions. It's also easy and efficient. Martin used Twitter and his blog (the Twitter account and the blog are linked) to tell people about the Centre, to ask them to complete a survey (using SurveyMonkey), and to seek their views about their top question for the new Centre to address.

He ruled out the use of Facebook for this exercise, as he felt it was more informal and personal. The Centre has a Facebook page but it is rarely used and Martin doesn't have time to update it.

Social media was not the only route used to listen to the priorities of people who use mental health services. Other methods were used to listen to priorities – notably by asking collaborators to seek people's views and face-to-face seminars – but these mainly reached internal audiences (e.g. academics).

What were the challenges?

Using social media means that you only reach people who are already engaged, so you might get skewed results. You exclude people who are digitally excluded. And it is hit and miss whether people will see your tweets and blog posts.

What resources were involved?

The use of social media costs very little in terms of time, and nothing in terms of money. Martin spent a small amount of time setting up the survey, tweeting and blogging. He had spent about two years building up the Twitter following, but not with this project in mind.

The impact of using social media

Twitter enabled Martin and his colleagues to reach a wider group of people than had been anticipated, particularly people who are plugged in to the current debates around mental health. It also led to a higher response rate for the survey than expected.

The future

Martin is successfully using Twitter to seek people's views about ideas as he prepares papers for publication. This is often late at night. He is also using it to recruit people to a research study.

Advice to other researchers about using social media to actively involve people in research

“Think clearly about what you want to get out of it. Think about your target audience and select the social media that this group is most likely to use. Use more than one form of social media if possible.

“Make the requirements on people as minimal as possible – e.g. only ask one or two questions.

“Be warm and positive and engaging and enthusiastic. Don't assume that just because you've got a good title or a catchy tweet this will come across to people.”

“People get fed up with you if you are always self-promoting, so pick different things to tweet about, tell people about interesting articles, resources etc.

“In the current university landscape there's a lot of emphasis on knowledge exchange and on impact. But you need to communicate and share what you're doing at the beginning of a project and on an ongoing basis. That engages people so that when you have the results they are already interested.”

Martin Webber, International Centre for Mental Health Social Research, University of York

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Reference: INVOLVE (2014) Examples of the use of social media for active public involvement – International Centre for Mental Health Social Research: Using Twitter and a blog to identify and prioritise topics for research