

Digital campaigning for Trade Unions in Transformation

An interview with Alex White, Director of Growth, Australian Council of Trade Unions

Alex White explains Why Trade Unions should engage in digital campaigning, what works and what does not, and what is the power of analytics to maximize impact

Alex, since many years now, ACTU has invested a lot of efforts in digital campaigning. Can you tell us why Trade Unions should engage in digital campaigning?

Alex White: All campaigning is digital now. Almost every country has high or increasingly high use of smart-phone and social media use.

For over a century, in-person workplace organising, based on human contact, has been the predominant way to build workers' power and to run campaigns. Traditional organising allows unions to identify future members and delegates, and to consolidate its presence in the workplace. During disputes, it is often face-to-face meetings and one-to-one organising that can be crucial in shifting workers to take action.

Accordingly, no other organization can yet rival the union movement in the ability to consistently organise and mobilise in workplaces and in the general community. However, face-to-face organising isn't the first or last tactic that union campaigns should use.

Digital organising can supercharge traditional organising, and it can be seen as an amplifier of the actions that are already happening, not a replacement. Digital communications and campaigns should connect members, potential members and supporters, and provide a starting point for organisers to have genuine organising conversations. These conversations increasingly happen online or as a hybrid of face-to-face and online -- via Zoom, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Telegram or other tools.

It is important that digital organizing and the use of tech tools are not siloed into a digital team. Rather, the most effective way for unions to engage in digital campaigning is to provide training and development to *all* organisers - in addition to legal and industrial relations staff and others who interact with members regularly - to use new online communications tools and channels.

Thank you so much Alex. Building on the previous WHY question, let us jump to the WHAT question: can you share with us the experience of ACTU with digital campaigning and what you learned so far? What works and what doesn't?

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has been a pioneer in digital campaigning before I started as the Director of Growth in 2020, going way back to 2005 and our landmark campaign: "Your Rights at Work".

A key learning over the years, but especially in the aftermath of the pandemic lockdowns, is that digital campaigning needs to have a real-world impact.

As such, there are a lot of vanity metrics in the digital and social media campaigning. These metrics are typically easy to measure and promoted by the platforms: However, just because you can measure something doesn't mean it is meaningful. Things like the number of Facebook likes or Twitter followers, or engagement rates are not always useful metrics for unions as they are generally not tied to the union's strategy to success (i.e., to win a campaign; to advocate for legal change; to increase membership; etc.). Having a lot of Instagram followers does not necessarily contribute to success, nor to provide guide for what to do next with your campaign.

Instead, we've learned to increasingly focus on digital metrics that have a real impact on our defined objectives. This involved a lot of discussion across different teams to ensure we are as aligned as possible, and that we have a shared understanding of what success looks like.

Now, what works and what doesn't, really depends on the campaign objective. For example, where we know that a particular campaign target is very attuned to Facebook criticism, our efforts may focus on mobilising our online activists to engage with this criticism on Facebook. We equip our digital activists with the necessary information to engage on that platform.

In another example, our digital campaign efforts aim at encouraging our supporters to send emails to the campaign target (e.g., Members of Parliament), calling on them to support or oppose a particular legislative reform. We built a customized digital tool that enables our supporters to do this easily, and this also allows us to measure the impact of our activities.

Overall, a key lesson for digital campaigning is the importance of not relying on one single tool or communication channel. We use email and social media campaigning, and also have a robust set of web tools. Which one we use is determined by what we're trying to achieve.

Things brings us to the HOW question: ACTU has invested a lot in analytical capacity. Can you tell us more about the power of analytics to measure the impact of digital campaigning?

Understanding online analytics helps you make decisions on more than guess work and anecdote. Almost everything online is measurable and trackable.

A lot of powerful analytic tools are provided free by Google, but it can be a bit of work to get a handle on how in-depth this data can be. Analytics can get very technical and complicated once you go beyond the basics. For unions with sufficient budget, it is definitely worth engaging a specialist to help set up the union's analytics.

The key to getting the most out of your analytics is to determine from the outset what the objectives are. Your union's campaign website may have several goals: get online petition signatures, allow volunteers or new members to sign up etc. Your analytics will let you see just how effective and successful you are at doing those things. To start with, there are a whole range of free resources on how to set up your goals in Google Analytics, including tips and support.

A lot of ACTU's emphasis has been towards understanding mostly two things: Firstly, who are our target audiences? We have taken a lot of time to understand workers' attitudes to unions and work, and have developed a detailed understanding of who we are trying to communicate with, whether it is encouraging workers to join their union, or to support our campaign, for instance for wage rises; Secondly, what particular communication channels (e.g. social media, email, advertising) are most effective and efficient, and what messages are best at encouraging people to take action? We use tools that allow us to measure the conversion rate of particular communication strategies. The conversion rate is the proportion of people we communicate with that take a desired action, such as joining the union, signing a petition, etc. Again, there are lots of free and inexpensive tools that can assist with this, and most email and website platforms will offer the basics.

Great. Are there any concluding remarks you would like to share?

Sure, the final thing I want to say is to re-emphasise that digital campaigning is not a replacement for traditional campaigning. Rather, it is an amplifier, and it can help to make union campaigns more impactful. As with all campaigns, specific tactics should be determined, depending on the objectives, target group, timing, etc.