

Using Facebook Groups to Promote Health: Reflections From *Cooma Get Healthy*

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Introduction

Cooma, a town of 9,700 people in southern New South Wales, was successful in a bid to participate in a pilot of the NSW Healthy Town Challenge - an initiative designed to help rural communities become healthier. Over a six-month period, the pilot utilised the *Get Healthy Information & Coaching Service*[®], paired with local personal skills development and policy initiatives to influence and support new health behaviours. A core element of the local support provided to the town by Southern NSW Local Health District was the Cooma Get Healthy Facebook Group.



"I enjoyed being part of it and feeling motivated to get moving."

Cooma Get Healthy Facebook Group Participant

Approach

The Cooma Get Healthy NSW Healthy Town Challenge Facebook Group was set up in response to the need to connect participants to each other and to the project organisers. Project organisers and participants shared links, photos and documents and fostered close relationships.

Content was created specifically for the Cooma Get Healthy Facebook Group, and participants were encouraged to ask questions and share ideas. The group was moderated to ensure content aligned with NSW Health advice, and adhered to organisational social media guidelines.



"I know I still have a long way to go but I have had so much support since starting this challenge."

Cooma Get Healthy Facebook Group Participant

Results

Around half of the Cooma Get Healthy participants (n=213) joined the Facebook Group. Content analysis of the Facebook Group revealed that it was a useful tool for communicating information, as participants had the opportunity to have their queries answered and complaints could be resolved promptly.

At the completion of the challenge, a community feedback survey demonstrated that the Facebook Group fostered a sense of community among challenge participants and led to distinct camaraderie amongst the members.



"It's been a great learning experience."

Cooma Get Healthy Facebook Group Participant

Conclusion

Facebook Groups can provide distinct advantages over Facebook Pages to help engage rural communities in health initiatives. Rather than just providing a marketing platform, they allow participants to connect with each other and engage in a dialogue with project organisers, and have potential to add significant value to rural projects. Prior to establishing a Facebook Group for a project, consider the commitment required in administration and content creation.

Our Top 5 Lessons Learned

1

Define your social media purpose

Do you want to market to your community or engage with them? Facebook Pages are useful for marketing to people, and can reach a wide audience, while Facebook Groups allow you engage with a smaller group of people interested in a topic. The need for a Facebook Group for Cooma Get Healthy emerged when we identified that we needed to keep in touch with challenge participants, and to create a method for them to keep in touch with us.

2

Consider your capacity and commitment

There can be significant time and cost in engaging in social media. To ensure our Group remained a safe space for members, it required monitoring to ensure queries were responded to promptly and inappropriate comments were removed. For our Group, we had a team of four administrators who could monitor the group, including outside of business hours. The burden was manageable for a short-term project, but may be considerable for a longer-term project.

3

Have a plan for managing risk

Take care to stay on-message and ensure content is evidence-based. In our Group, planning regular content helped to ensure that content was consistent with advice from recognised authorities, and adhered to our social media guidelines. Inappropriate posts from Group members posed an occasional challenge. We curated the Group's content and activity by requiring all posts to have administrator approval, and by removing inappropriate comments as soon as practicable. With consideration for possible repercussions from the poster, posts that contravened the social media guidelines were not approved.

4

Create content just for your community

Facebook Groups become stale if the members don't receive benefits or the content doesn't change. We engaged a graphic designer to create content just for our Group, including branded memes and graphics to promote our events and promotions. We also hosted challenges, exclusive to our Facebook Groups, and provided incentives for participation. As our Group members started to connect with each other, they provided a larger share of the content, and we were able to reduce the frequency of our posts.

5

Promote the Group far and wide

Simply having a Facebook presence is not the end. The Group needed to be easily found by challenge participants. We included a link to our Facebook Group on our promotional material, and key stakeholders, including the project sponsor and challenge advisory group, were invited to join the Group. We also promoted our Group and milestone events on other local Facebook Pages and Groups, such as buy/swap/sell pages and community noticeboards.