

MEDIA

Planned Parenthood Turns to Tumblr to Reach a Younger Audience

Advertising

By MARTHA C. WHITE JULY 24, 2016

As it undertakes an ad campaign in celebration of its 100th anniversary, Planned Parenthood of New York City is trying to reach a younger generation with a message about sexual and reproductive health. That message does not shy away from what one expert in nonprofit marketing called “the elephant in the room” — abortion.

To connect with those who were born after *Roe v. Wade*, the organization and its advertising agency, Kraftworks, turned to the microblogging social network Tumblr.

“We really are doing this partially to get a younger audience engaged in supporting Planned Parenthood,” said Neil Kraft, the chief executive of Kraftworks. “They do, to some extent, take it for granted.”

The campaign, called *Care That Counts*, features stories of patients, staff members and volunteers told through text, photos and video to create what Carrie Mumah, a Planned Parenthood spokeswoman, characterized as a series of vignettes done in the style of the popular photography blog *Humans of New York*.

“We’ve done the campaign in a friendly, approachable way,” Mr. Kraft said, with the intention — and the hope — that the frank, first-person tone will alleviate some of the stigma around talking about abortion.

Using Tumblr is a smart move, said Bonnie McEwan, a nonprofit communications consultant who worked for Planned Parenthood’s national office for two years beginning in 1998. “You can target people so much more finely now, particularly with a cause like Planned Parenthood,” she said.

While the Tumblr stories cover topics like birth control, cancer screenings, gynecological exams and testing for sexually transmitted diseases, the campaign’s inaugural story, posted on July 9, featured a patient who went to Planned Parenthood for an abortion after her birth control failed.

“We really never want to diminish the fact that we provide abortions,” said Adrienne Verrilli, associate vice president for communications at Planned Parenthood of New York. “It’s really important to us to elevate the stories of real people who are accessing our abortion services.”

Starting the conversation has already increased the number of patients who want to share their own stories through the Tumblr campaign, she said.

“It’s actually remarkable the number of stories that are about an abortion experience,” Ms. Verrilli said.

She and Mr. Kraft acknowledged that a strategy reliant on people willing to put their faces and first names on abortion narratives might not play as well in other parts of the country.

“In the depths of the red states, I’m not sure how well it would be received,” Ms. Verrilli said, although she added that Planned Parenthood’s national office was “incredibly supportive” of the Care That Counts campaign.

The other inherent drawback in social media marketing is losing control of the conversation, especially with a polarizing topic like abortion. But the campaign’s creators said they felt that was a risk worth taking.

“There are haters everywhere, and Planned Parenthood is clearly a hot-button topic,” Mr. Kraft said. “We’re opening it up to that, but everything gets opened up to that.”

One story is being posted to Tumblr each day for the 100 days leading up to the organization’s anniversary on Oct. 16. Roughly two weeks into the campaign, Ms. Mumah said it had reached more than 100,000 people on social media. The posts had garnered more than 5,000 likes, shares and comments, which she said made the campaign the organization’s most successful foray into digital marketing to date.

“I’m wondering if the social climate has emboldened women, particularly younger ones,” Ms. McEwan said, pointing to current events like the legalization of same-sex marriage and Hillary Clinton’s presidential campaign.

“There’s a real changing of the guard here of young people willing to tell their stories,” Ms. Verrilli said. “Young women are taking the issue of abortion back, and really owning it and advocating for it.”

This kind of approach might not be as effective with conventional marketing channels, communications experts say.

“Doing this on social media is the perfect platform for this kind of campaign because it’s very human. It puts a face on it,” said Barbara Cave Henricks, president and chief executive of Cave Henricks Communications. “That’s why people go to social media, for a story.”

As for the topic of abortion, avoiding it would be a mistake, Ms. McEwan said. Planned Parenthood has been so closely associated with abortion for so long that the appearance of dodging the issue would be demoralizing for the staff, donors and advocates — and would be unlikely to quell the controversy the organization already faces.

“Planned Parenthood has always relied on its staff and clients and volunteers to carry the message,” Ms. McEwan said. “There’s going to be controversy no matter what around these topics. They don’t want to appear to be avoiding the question.”

Ms. Verrilli agreed.

“We know a lot about controversy, and we’ve been out on social for many years,” she said, adding that the group had no intention of downplaying its role as an abortion provider. “We’re proud of our work.”

A version of this article appears in print on July 25, 2016, on page B1 of the New York edition with the headline: Planned Parenthood Seeks Out Next Generation on Tumblr.