



SOCIAL SPACE

As social media explodes, do clubs still have a role to play in the digital age?

Katy Dartford investigates.

Climbing: a world of solitary adventures, commitment and self sufficiency. A real chance to get away from the fast paced, Big Brother world of the internet? Think again. In the last five years, social media has exploded. Facebook now has 1.23 billion users – roughly 17 per cent of the world’s population – Twitter has 500 million accounts and there is a dizzying further array of social media, such as LinkedIn, Pinterest, Meetup, Google + and Instagram.

We now live in a world where people interact with each other more online than they do in real life; a world where, for some, Facebook and Twitter have replaced the need for conventional methods of interaction. What does this brave new world mean for clubs – is it a golden opportunity to reach new members, or a threat to their very survival?

Increasingly, climbing and walking

clubs – whether enthusiastically or reluctantly – are using social media to promote themselves, arrange trips, share news and information, have a debate or get feedback on issues. But in doing so, are they in danger of making themselves obsolete?

Dan Brown, from the Maidstone Mountaineering Club, has a blunt reality check: “Organising a partner has become much easier, but the only time I did that I faced death with a totally inexperienced climber who didn’t tell me he couldn’t belay on lead, even after being asked. In the end, we climb with people we know and trust, and that’s how it always should be.”

But if social media connects people, surely it could be a good thing for clubs, especially those struggling to recruit new members or organise meets? If it helps get people car sharing and joining one another on crags and walls, then that has to be a positive? Dan agrees, but simply thinks we should all just “adapt and carry on climbing”. From his perspective, social media hasn’t really changed club membership: “We’re still an active club, and since I dragged the club kicking and screaming into the digital age 12 years ago, we’ve been ahead of it. But the club’s preference is still for email rather than social websites.”

One trend in the club has been a drop

in the number of social meets. Malcolm Phelps, another active member of the club, explains: “The popularity of weekly or even less frequent pub meets during the week has fallen off. Active members are happy with one evening a week at the climbing wall and a separate pub meet isn’t needed. One of the functions of the pub meet was to arrange the weekend, and it’s now much easier to arrange that via email.”

Despite the drop in meets, “our club still feels like a club, albeit relatively informal,” reckons Malcolm. “We do have fixed events, such as an annual dinner and Christmas and New Year meets, and despite no longer producing a club journal, people write up their trips and share photos on our website. There is still a role for clubs like ours. It still feels like a club and a good core of active members ensures that any new members can gain experience if they want to. Our club has adapted and still works.”

Paul Highams – who revamped the Tunbridge Wells Mountaineering Club’s website to bring it into the modern era – also agrees that email is still best for their club: “We had 150 emails to the new member email account in the last two years. We have a Google calendar and from that that we use IFTT (If This Then That) to send calendar updates via email, Facebook and Twitter.” But, he says, Facebook and Twitter don’t get used much at all: there are only 89 Facebook followers and our Twitter feed has just 40 followers. “The most likely explanation? The club’s membership profile is mostly over 50.

Where are the younger members that the club would no doubt like to attract? The chance are that they’re hanging

out on the Facebook group, South East Climbers. Catherine Gallagher – a regular face out on the Southern Sandstone – set up the group to arrange meets and general chats. “Yes, it’d be a shame to see the traditional climbing clubs and meet ups die,” she says, “but everything changes, and social media groups like this one are just an informal way of doing the same but with more flexibility.” But even she agrees that the one gap that social media can’t fill is training: “The only downside is that it makes it more difficult for newbies to get started without going on a course. Which is good news for instructors though!”

Another benefit of a club is being able to commit and take the risk to book accommodation. Malcolm Streeton is from the Wessex Mountaineering Club, which has been around for over 50 years,

“IS IT A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY OR A THREAT?”

and currently has about 130 members. He thinks that there is more to being a club that a Facebook group can offer: “It’s definitely getting harder to get new, younger active members to join, but we are still succeeding. We recognise that for the club to have a role, it has to do more than just provide a means of contact, since Facebook does that for free. One of the key benefits is being able to make the commitment to book accommodation a long time in advance and take the financial risk if we don’t fill all the places. We do need to offer more, though, and training is one area we are increasing, helped by BMC grants.”

What about the bigger clubs? Iain Mackenzie set up the social media for the Climbers’ Club: its Facebook public page (245 members), private page (256 members) and Twitter account (3,248 followers). He thinks the Climbers’ Club will always have meets, so its role will not change, but: “The way in which it engages with its members is changing. It’s historically veered away from Facebook and Twitter – there was a lot of negativity and concern over privacy – but the way it now works is putting a lot of those fears to bed and people are seeing the benefit of it, although there are still the doubters.”

So how has the Facebook page changed the interaction of people in the club? “People are using the private section of Facebook, where lots of internal connections and communication take place. The public

page on Facebook doesn’t get as much use, but it’s a way to communicate with the wider community. With over 3,000 followers on Twitter, it’s kept very simple: keeping people up to date with things like how to book a hut, meets, guidebook launches and how to join.

The Alpine Club has 832 followers on their Facebook page and 26,301 followers on Twitter. Laetitia Sterling from the club says “Primarily, we use Facebook to notify people of events. For Twitter, we’ll tweet any news we pick up to do with mountains, mountaineers, big climbs, conditions, etc. But we keep the Facebook notices and tweets to a limit: we don’t want information overload. Right now, we don’t use Facebook like the Climbers’ Club with regular discussions. That all depends on the members – they may move that way one day.”

At the other end of the spectrum are the climbing walls – who do attract the younger climbers. They tend not to join clubs, but form their own informal groups to climb with. Fred Stone manages The Arch Bouldering Wall in London: “The Arch has been on Facebook since before we even opened the first site in London Bridge. At that time it was just a way of spreading the word to people who hadn’t heard about us, partly as we had no advertising budget or any real idea of how to go about promoting the business. Over time, though, I think our idea of how to use social media has changed quite a lot. We now use Facebook, Twitter and Instagram primarily as a sort of hub to keep in touch with existing customers and friends, and give them somewhere to communicate. I see a lot of people organising impromptu visits through Twitter and Facebook, mainly through posts of the “fancy a climb this evening?” kind, but occasionally also by setting up groups on Facebook or What’s App. I think this form of extra sociability in real life aided by the online world is really encouraging, especially as indoor bouldering is the kind of climbing that least requires any partners.

“Yet, as useful as it is, I don’t think social media is essential to us. A climbing wall is so much more friendly than a fitness gym, so everything it needs is already there in a way. For example, we often get asked about running outdoor climbing trips by beginners,

> FURTHER INFO



Facebook has 1.23 billion users, with 45-54 year olds the fastest growing demographic. 189 million of Facebook’s users are mobile only and Velocity Digital reports that 25% of Facebook users don’t even look at their privacy settings. In a recent BMC survey, 97% of young people said Facebook was their primary source of information about climbing and walking.



Twitter has 500 million accounts. Their fastest growing demographic are the 55-64 year olds.



Meetup helps groups of people plan meetings and form offline clubs.



YouTube reaches more 18-34s than any TV network.

Source: www.huffingtonpost.com and BMC Young People’s Survey

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but personally I prefer to see these things happening more naturally through friendships that begin at the wall, leading to a little group trip maybe up to the Peak or Southern Sandstone. I think these road trips, where you inevitably get lost and share in some sense of adventure among friends, are such an integral part of the climbing experience that I wouldn’t want to substitute them with anything too sanitised.”

“It’s the same with social media,” he mused, “It can’t replace the real thing, only facilitate it.”

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