

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this kit is to assist the Scrabble division/state/club to best get its message out and ultimately grow their base. It has been divided into two areas: communication and promotion.

There are certain assumptions on which this document is prepared:

- the most important being that the local level is the best place to promote because it is at “the coalface”.
- Nothing beats local knowledge.
- Another notable assumption is that this is for divisions that are actually seeking some guidance. I do not want to try to convince someone to do something if there is no problem to solve, and when I do offer thoughts, it is predicated on adding them to what the local division already has at its base.

That said, this kit provides guidance through the **options available**: it has been developed from three years of practical application to providing communication for competitive Scrabble. It is not purporting to be perfect but, as with most business applications, the best lessons are learned when things go “wrong”: key learnings have been included in here so that these errors are not replicated.

At the end of this piece, there are sample communication and promotion strategies set at certain degrees of activity.

Which leads to the first key point of this kit. if a communication and/or promotion strategy is attempted you need to have the required level of enthusiastic person/s behind it to keep it going. You do not want to embark on something ambitious only for it to not succeed due to lack of reinforcement.

The last thing I want to do is give the impression that everything has to be done below or else you will not succeed.

Do what is manageable and then developments can be made from a sound base.

A: COMMUNICATION

The digital age provides a variety of options when communicating to members and potential members.

There are two essential purposes of communication. Acquisition and Retention. Acquire means you want to grow (communications mixes in with promotion here) and when you get more, you want to communicate with them to keep them coming back.

It is usually prudent to adopt a multilevel communication strategy for the following reason.

There is no one specific best communicator. A great web site is useless if it doesn't drive people to it. Tweeting tournaments sounds like you are in touch with the new generation but if your main players aren't on Twitter..... And so on.

Let's look at each of them.

Website: An Internet site is typically expected in today's environment. It provides a reference point for people wanting to join and gives information to keep players coming back. The success of a website requires four things.

1. It has to look good and invite people in.
2. It needs to be easy to navigate.
3. It needs to be up to date.
4. You need to be able to measure reactions on the site.

Remember, you are not just catering to current players. New people will visit. You want to be able to get data on what they do.

Suggestion: Use visual cues that are designed to attract: it will be covered more below (in social media) but people react more to photos they find interesting.

Email and Bulletin Board Services: The BBS is a popular form of communicating in Scrabble. It's relatively private and ensures people who go there are more likely to be engaged. It is, however, not popular in terms of numbers. Test it one day to see how many people actually react to a post. Post something with a link in it but set the link up as a trackable link: e.g. a goo.gl link. You can see how many people click because you posted from there. If it is not as many as you want, it is time to move to another medium.

Emails are more valuable. People are more likely to engage with emails: an email newsletter sent regularly is a great way to keep your network informed in a private manner and provides you with a contact detail of your players other than a Facebook account. This cannot be overemphasised in importance.

Social Media: This is the biggie. It's the one people think needs to be done but it is also the one fraught with the most danger. The reason for this is that people fall into a lazy assumption that just by being on social media, that is enough. And then, when nothing results from it, the safe assumption is to blame the media.

From a communication perspective, the rules of thumb on social media are as follows:

- the more local the Scrabble connection (e.g. club, playing league), opt for something simple like a Facebook Group.
- the further you go up (e.g. State or National division), a Facebook page is better because you can advertise/promote
- Twitter is advisable if you know there are people locally who use it and have an interest in Scrabble (this is easily testable by executing a saved search by location). Otherwise, your message will only be picked up by either luck or if you like to tell celebrities things.
- Instagram is great for getting pictures out
- Reddit has a very limited Scrabble base (as does Google+). Posting is ok but, as a rule, do not expect much traffic or engagement.
- No matter which medium you use, post your content with something easily searchable. Eg, use a hashtag of #scrabble

The big learning is to understand your medium first; how it operates etc. This will be covered more in Promotion.

Traditional Media: TV and print media are still viable options depending on where you are in the world. The positive for it is potential reach of what you communicate - these are still amongst the biggest forms of communicating. People still watch TV shows, read newspapers etc.

The negative is you have no necessary control over content the further you go up the chain. Local papers are usually starved of content and crave local material. You can fashion a press release and it will usually be considered verbatim. Try the same at a major news network and, unless you are dealing with someone on your wavelength, it will be treated very differently to what you want.

Anecdotal evidence has it that local media can go either way in terms of success but you are more likely to get local contact than if you were fully reliant on your major TV network.

Again, know your market: radio (and “community” radio if you have it) can be equally useful as you have time to communicate your message.

B: PROMOTION

We know the mediums that are available to us but the question always arises: what are we going to say?

Promotion, specifically correct types of promotion, is paramount.

Before we even get to the issue of what content to provide when we are promoting (or communicating for that matter), there is one overriding consideration and I will touch on this before we even get to promotional strategies.

KNOW YOUR MARKET.

It is a very simple concept but one vastly misunderstood. What top level competitive Scrabble players want is vastly different to what the kitchen table or social club player wants.

Why is this important? If you don't understand your market, then whatever time and money you spend on promoting will be wasted if your message is not one the people you want to target will engage with.

Equally, the more select you make your target, the more select your medium must be.

Growing the base to get more people at tournaments/clubs requires different promotion to ensuring you attract the next Nigel Richards.

Get to understand the demographics of your target area, get to know what other like-minded groups do and you are part way there.

Thankfully, a lot of this data is already available. Facebook provides it for you for no cost if you run a Facebook Page and you want to advertise.

I run a regular search for this as I have advertised before at a state level; the demographics will determine how I fashion a message.

The next thing will cover content. The rules are the same for every medium you do: know your market. Post in a way your market will engage.

In short, your content needs to look good enough to interest people and actually makes them interested enough to want to do something.

As a follow up to this, if your posts are not being read, reconsider your content. Personally, I revisit the content styles/times on a regular basis to ensure I can reach my target markets.

If your posts are not attractive enough to get people to interact with them initially, Facebook will assume the post is not worth looking at. Guess what happens then? They take their time letting your fans know.

It sounds very underhand and unfair but it's very much a commonsense approach. They provide their customers (us) with content we are supposed to find interesting. If we do not like it, we are hardly likely to come back, are we?

Real time apps like Twitter do not worry necessarily about this but as they are very niche, it is very likely they could move to something similar at a later stage. Facebook is the biggest on the market, they did not get there without knowing something that works.

Twitter is a great medium when done right: it is the media's favorite way to source information. Journalists and radio producers regularly trawl it looking for something to file. Do it right and you have a ready network to attract more players.

The lessons from all this:

- if content you post is not being read or actioned by anyone, something needs changing. The medium you use is not going to change what it does so it has to be done by the poster.
- Different segments have differing interests. One size does NOT fit all. And never will. The market has to dictate your message communication.

Tips for increasing content:

- make your post easy to read
- use photos with people in them (tag them so their friends see)
- post it at a time when you know people will see it
- change your post type the next time if no one reads it.
- links with great photo content get a better viewing figure.
- Insert things you can search by. For example, hashtags or common phrases. But do not do it just to try to get attention. Tweeting about Harry Styles (because of his Scrabble activities) or pictures of cats may get you good view figures but your target market could well shake their heads at what you are doing.

C: TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

Thank you for reading this far into this kit. You may be wondering many things as a result.

So, how does this relate to Scrabble? But, who's going to do all this? Do I need to have an IT degree to do all this... and do we have the time? Will this work? And so forth.

The question as to how this relates to Scrabble has been brought out in the discussions of player numbers, initiatives etc.

How many times does the debate rage over what has to be done to "grow the game"? Go for youth? Go for money? People don't think they are good enough...

How often do people end up becoming more pessimistic about things as a result?

And then things stay the same?

As mentioned in the introduction, how much of this you take on is really up to your own resources. It is far better to do something manageable and grow than go over the top and have to pare back.

The great thing about so many of the things mentioned above is that, once you have the basics set up, the time devoted to it can be quite manageable. Facebook posts can be scheduled in advance, you can manage content from your phone on the go etc

The key though, and I keep coming back to it, is that it needs to match the level of resources you can put into it.

With this in mind, here are three examples of communications/promotions for samples using a Scrabble perspective.

Example 1 - starting small.

Communication is done at a small but intimate level (e.g. a regular email newsletter). Your clubs may advertise with their local press.

A Facebook group is maintained to get people to add their friends into with regular content mentioning tournaments.

The website set up has links to all clubs and any social media content.

This low level strategy is easy to maintain, keeps your members informed with contact details maintained by the organization.

It maintains the integrated approach I referred to earlier.

It will lead to very slow organic growth but is manageable and very inexpensive.

Example 2 - Growing slowly but surely

You have the base of Example 1 but you have put together a Facebook page to promote your state or nation. There may be some dabbling in Twitter but only if there appears to be locals doing it too.

Some of your bigger clubs have very active and enthusiastic members who now use sites like meetup.com to attract members, and because they know their market, they are getting a very good number of people to come along.

These members buy some of the merchandise (rotating boards, word lists etc) so you are getting some small financial growth that can assist with additional promotions or prize money at tournaments etc. Training days may be occasional but beneficial.

Some sponsorship may be coming in as a result.

This level sees greater prominence and the greater chance to grow, It has not lost its base and is branching out in an effort to ensure its members are still enjoying their experiences with Scrabble clubs and tournaments.

The website has been revamped and the presentation improved.

By now, you may be wondering... What if we have all this and we have some very enthusiastic and passionate members wanting to do more? What can be done?

Here goes... Building from the base you have above.

Example 3 - Full on strategies

The Nation (and State where appropriate) has its own Facebook page. It posts regularly with content that they know their fans like (e.g. photos with their friends tagged). It works on retention because they want to keep people informed.

They also run an email newsletter off Facebook from a private database notifying of tournaments, special events etc. Subscribing to this newsletter is part of a call to action button on their Facebook page.

This call to action is part of an overall website that appears as a link on their Page and on their Twitter profile.

The Page has been newly revamped to a format which is easy for people to use and enjoyable in the process.

The website shows which media the Association is on (eg Facebook, Twitter, Instagram).

DIFFERING content is posted in those media so the experience is unique to the person reading it. They can communicate on either level and they will get a reply almost straight away.

The website makes reference to the club networks, again in a format that reflects the digital age

Acquisition is either handled at club level or by advertising at a State or National Level. Or both. Whoever does any advertising, it is a co-ordinated effort and targeted using proven methods of success to demographics that are achievable and meet the goal of the Association.

The Clubs may have their own webpage, or a Facebook Group for communication. Depending on size, an email newsletter would go out.

They use other club “networks” like MeetUp, where they have seen other Scrabble Clubs post and get new members but they do it not because they feel they have to be there but post content that matches their target market.

The target market is defined initially and is as general as possible. You can always train up rather than move your perceptions downward. This, in the author’s opinion, is the biggest obstacle competition Scrabble has to get over. Make it fun, easy and more people come in... Make it look all too difficult or that you have to know the anagrams of AAMMRSSU or AEIMOOOP to get past a low ranked player and no one comes along.

This last example is the full-on communications and promotions model: it has the potential for growth and retention is front of mind at every stage of the process.

It should never be considered until your base is sound and you have people on board to follow it through. Growing too quickly or without support/base is a classic reason for business failure in general so it should not come as a surprise the same principles apply here.

Ensure you are doing what you can - if it works and is manageable then the rest will come. Plan to grow and you may find the resources are more readily available than when you first thought.

D: CONCLUSION

I trust you found this kit useful and added some insights into communicating and promoting at the relevant level. The ultimate message is that communication and promotion is not something that should be relied upon of others. Taking ownership at a local level allows the right people the best chance of growing the game at a grassroots level.

The examples mentioned are not exhaustive in their options - other suggestions to grow (e.g. Scrabble training schools, integration with spelling bee competitions) may well be appropriate in your area - and if they are successful then it is well worth continuing.

Manage it properly and success can be achieved.