

Social media activism hits a home run

21,000 'likes'



in 2 days

REPORT: ABIGAIL GOH, DAVID SUN
 and ANDRE JOSEPH THENG
 tnp@sph.com.sg

SHE never thought the post would generate so many likes. Just two days ago, food distribution group A Packet Of Rice launched a campaign on its Facebook page.

For every "like" it received, food caterer Jessie Catering would contribute 50 cents towards their purchase of packed lunch for distribution to needy families. That was the pitch.

Their goal was to hit 1,500 "likes" by the end of the month, but it was achieved within seven hours.

Now, two days on, the page has already garnered more than 21,000 "likes" and has been shared about 4,000 times.

The publicity-shy organisers of the group, which goes door-to-door distributing meals to needy families and the elderly who live in one- or two-room rental flats, did not wish to comment.

But Miss Stella Tan, the sales and marketing manager at Jessie Catering, said she did not expect the overwhelming response.

Surprise

"It really took us by surprise. Initially, we were worried that we wouldn't be able to reach the target by the original deadline," she said.

"I guess a lot of people just want to help." The campaign has been closed and Jessie Catering will stick to its promised contribution of \$750, which translates to 250 lunch packets.

Social media here has been often criticised be-

cause it is seen as a space where negative comments snowball.

But, as seen here, it can also be used as a powerful tool to fuel movements and promote positive action among netizens, social media experts say.

Sociologist and National University of Singapore (NUS) associate professor Tan Ern Ser said: "Social media can reach many more people and almost instantly."

"It can also engage a more targeted audience of like-minded people, and once it is deemed to be credible, it can be rather effective in its mobilisation efforts."

Cases of animal cruelty or abuse also garner much attention online, spurring netizens to not only like or share these stories online, but also to take action.

Last Tuesday a member of the public saw a severely injured silky terrier roaming around a coffee-shop in Clementi and called the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) to pick it up.

Upon examination, an SPCA veterinarian concluded that the injuries were caused by an object tied tightly around its snout.

SPCA posted photos on its Facebook page that day and appealed for those who may know the owner or recognise its microchip number to come forward.

Making waves

The story made waves online. As of yesterday, three posts on it garnered a combined total of 1,900 shares.

Nail technician Kimberly Chew, 28, was so moved that she has offered to adopt the dog.

Her friends have opted to pitch in with donations for its medical bills.

A Singapore Management University (SMU) social media expert, Dr Michael Netzley, said that online activism fuelled by social media "is more than just a trend - it is a fact of life".

"We live in a network age where, for the first time in human history, people can organise themselves as a network in a sustained way across time, because of social networks, of which social media is but an example.

"With digital networks, it is much easier for like-minded people from around the world to connect, cooperate, and support a cause," said Dr Netzley.

Said Prof Tan: "Social media can reach a mass

Tech-savvy do-gooders

HERE are a few groups that have made use of Facebook to aid in their cause:

Project Awareness (below)

Founded by singer Elson Soh, 25, and two of his friends, it organises people to visit needy families and help them with cleaning, as well as hand out meal and food vouchers.

Said Mr Soh: "It was meant to be a sideline kind of thing. I never expected it would become so huge."

After four months, it has more than 500 volunteers and has reached out to more than 100 families.

Chope Food For The Needy

A movement to pay food forward by buying food from hawker stalls in advance, so that the food can be given to the needy.

The Morning Greeters

A group of runners who greet people with a smile while on runs in parks, to spread a culture of friendliness and positivity.



A 'LIKE' GOES FAR: Food distribution group A Packet Of Rice's online campaign hit its goal of 1,500 'likes' in seven hours.

audience, allows for group discussion and immediate feedback.

"The networking, information flow, mutual support, and potential for mobilising people can certainly facilitate activism."

Dr Netzley said: "Networks expand your resource base at low cost. Large numbers of people are connected and one can share compelling content, and it is relatively easy for anyone to do. Anyone has the potential to be the source of activism."

"You will see more and more of this, and the trendier form that I like to call 'Facebook activism', in the years to come."