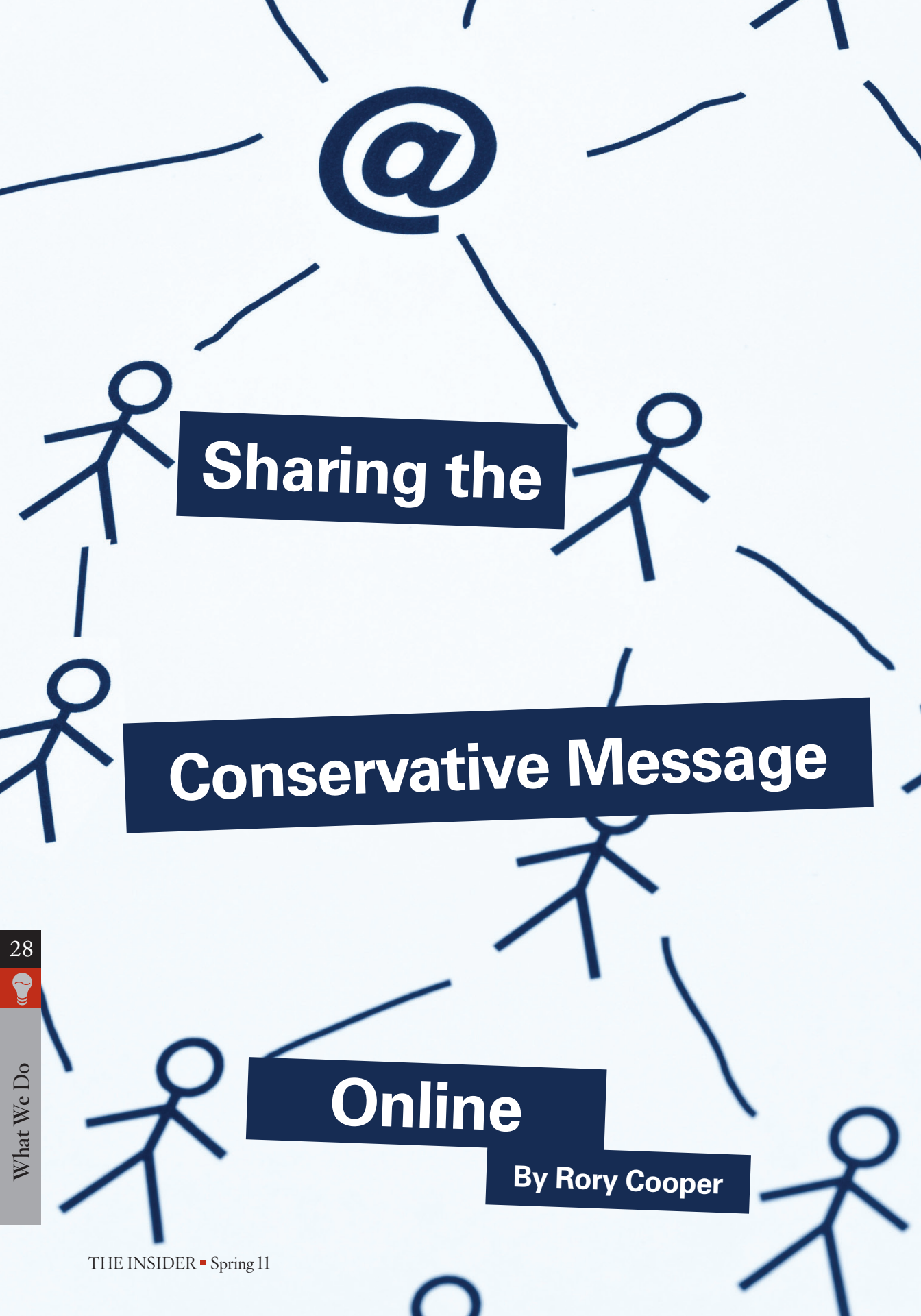

Sharing the Conservative Message Online

By Rory Cooper

A social media strategy is essential for any organization or business in America. As recently as 2009, having a professional Facebook or Twitter account was a luxury and most were simply designed to broadcast a message or advertisement. That is no longer the case. In today's entrepreneurial and connected world, creating a conversation among your stakeholders rises to the top of any communications strategy.

Take Ford Motor Company, for example. When Ford unveiled its newly designed 2011 Ford Explorer, its marketing strategy relied heavily on Facebook. And what was the result? Ford generated a 200 percent greater return than a typical Super Bowl ad, and at a fraction of the cost.

Americans embrace social media every day, many without even knowing it. When you leave a review of a product on Amazon.com or "like" an article you read online, you are participating. You are using online tools to share with your family, friends, peers, and even strangers what you like and dislike, helping them make consumer decisions. While only 14 percent of Americans trust traditional advertising, 78 percent of consumers trust peer recommendations.

Whereas traditional media, such as television or newspapers, broadcast a message in one direction, social media is more of a public conversation. This trend of interconnected information sharing and socializing is only growing. In 2010, Kindle eBooks outsold paper books over the holidays, and only one of the top 25 newspapers saw an increase in circulation.

If you think this is a passing fad, think again. Facebook added over 200 million users in less than a year, and has over 500 million active users and growing. Over half of the world's population is under 30 and 96 percent of the millennial generation are part of an online social network.

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Facebook gets more weekly traffic than Google. And it's not just the "kids" driving that traffic. The fastest growing demographic on Facebook is 55- to 65-year-old females. In fact, 57 percent of people on social networks are over the age of 35. Half of Facebook users log on every day, and the average user has 150 friends.

In other words, the challenge isn't to embrace the now, but to recognize the future of media sharing. The Heritage Foundation has had success sharing its message and its research through social media; that success has come through doing a few things consistently. Here are five things that we focus on at The Heritage Foundation:

1. DELIVER QUALITY CONTENT.

The Heritage Foundation is fortunate to have some of the brightest scholars doing

high-quality research. Behind every 140-word tweet is a well-written, thoroughly documented research paper. That seriousness we bring to the medium gives our tweets, posts, and updates credibility. That in turn gives us the buy-in we need get our scholars interested in using social media, too.

2. ENGAGE IN A CONVERSATION.

Currently, The Heritage Foundation has over 315,000 Facebook fans. That is more than the Republican National Committee, the Democratic National Committee, USA Today, the Washington Post, MSNBC, and nearly all peers and rivals in the public policy community. But numbers can be misleading. With a large enough budget, you can inflate your bandwidth through paid-advertising. Heritage has built that community organically, by delivering Facebook-friendly content and encouraging interaction. The more people interact with us, the better placement we get on their news feeds, and the more growth we experience.

Heritage has integrated sharing technology into its Web sites and utilized cutting-edge software to harness these platforms, use them better, and measure results. Heritage delivers unique experiences. For example, we offered Facebook users a live feed of House Majority Leader Eric Cantor speaking at Heritage, which allowed the Facebook audience to ask him questions directly.

3. USE ALL THE PLATFORMS.

In just the last six months of 2010, over 400,000 people clicked on a link on Facebook to read more on Heritage.org. On Twitter, 550,000 did the same. Some may dismiss Twitter as juvenile or even voyeuristic. "I don't want to know what someone had for breakfast" is a typical complaint. But using Twitter is essential to participating in the modern media landscape. Twitter has over 175 million users and grows at a rate of 300,000 users per day. On Twitter, Heritage has over 120,000 followers who click-through, distribute, and interact with its content daily.

Heritage is able to track what stories reporters are covering, what Members of Congress are saying about legislation, and what narratives are building on particular issues. News breaks first on Twitter, so simply keeping an eye on it allows us to react in real time. Sometimes it gives us a head start so that we can proactively communicate our analyses.

A comprehensive digital strategy should also include blogs, video, and e-mail, as well as optimizing your search engine performance. In 2010, Heritage averaged over 8,000 views per video on YouTube, which is a 162 percent increase from the year before. We're

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accomplishing this rapid growth by producing shorter and more dynamic videos that supplement our research material, by giving a quality introduction to our work, and by providing links and access to more information.

YouTube has also become a key resource in pushing for greater government accountability, as any Tea Party member will tell you. In 2009 and 2010, it finally became impossible for legislators to say one thing in D.C. and another at home. Camera phones and Flip cameras allowed embarrassing gaffs—like Rep. Pete Stark's statement that "the federal government can do most anything it wants"—to be broadcast quickly across the nation.

YouTube is the second largest search engine in the world. Google is the largest. And Heritage spends time studying what search terms are trending, where its sites are ranked, and using Search Engine Optimization (SEO) techniques to improve those search engine rankings.

Heritage's blog, The Foundry, is a top-five blog in News & Opinion on Kindle eReaders, and features rapid responses to the day's news using the same quality Heritage research and analysis that is the organization's foundation. Many think tanks employ separate bloggers, but The Foundry is largely made up of blogs written directly by experts in their field. The Foundry is also home to The Morning Bell, a daily e-mail newsletter that gives 170,000 subscribers Heritage's latest research and analysis on the news of the day.

4. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE.

The Heritage Foundation's primary mission is to put conservative ideas into the public marketplace and especially to make them available to Capitol Hill. But beyond that we aim to communicate with our 710,000-plus members and the broader public generally. Every audience has to be considered and its preferred method of engagement understood—whether it's 18-year-old college students, 29-year-old congressional staffers, 50-year-old researchers, or 65-year-old retirees.

Juggling so many constituencies can be tough. If you try to be too informal and edgy, you may not reach the retiree. If you send out boring, policy-laden tweets, you will probably have a hard time reaching the college student. Just like with any form of public writing or speaking, you need to capture attention while maintaining the integrity of your brand. And the best way to maintain your integrity is to speak honestly and encourage a civil discourse.

5. PLAN FOR THE LONG RUN.

If you follow sports, you know that teams build their programs looking out several years. Teams identify what pieces they need in order to make an immediate impact, but also think about building towards a long-term goal. This strategy is easily transferred to the online space.

You need to identify where you need an immediate impact, and fill that space. Then think how that growth will help you in the long-run. If you have the resources for only one team member focused on social media, then you have to ask yourself what strengths you need to lay the groundwork for future growth?

Heritage began with a few visionaries delivering a steady stream of online content. It grew by adding pieces, working with outside bloggers and influencers, using buy-in to diversify content, and building towards a long-term strategy. The more diversified content and diversified platforms we used, the stronger we got in every area. This strategy can also help you share the message of conservatism and enable others to do the same.

Mr. Cooper is Director of Communications for The Heritage Foundation.