Digital advertising for LGBTI activists: What we learned at the latest ILGA-Europe Skills Boost

Blog, Inclusion and Equality, Communications, Strategic Communications

> At ILGA-Europe, one of our goals is to equip activists with new skills and knowledge to help them amplify their voices and make a meaningful impact in their communities. One of the ways we do this is through our regular online Skills Boosts. Our latest one was all about maximising the potential of digital advertising.

We are committed to empowering LGBTI activists across Europe and Central Asia through our Skills Boosts. These online sessions cover a range of critical topics such as media relations, fundraising campaigns, and communication strategies. By equipping activists with the necessary skills and knowledge, we help them amplify their voices and make a meaningful impact in their communities.

In our last Skills Boost we dove into the world of digital advertising, with a special focus on helping LGBTI organisations maximise their reach and effectiveness online. Jean O'Brien, digital consultant and founder of Digital Charity Lab, was with us to share her expertise on how LGBTI organisations can get started with digital ads. Jean is an expert in using digital channels to build support for causes, and she shared her top tips for understanding, using and testing digital ads.

1. You almost definitely need a paid ad strategy

The reach of organic content (i.e. content that's posted for free, with no ad budget) on social media decreases every year. These channels were all built in order to sell ads, and it's very difficult to get a good return with free activity only. You may find that some organic posts do well but then the next ones will perform badly. There's no consistency, and you really need to be able to count on a channel to deliver, if you're putting time into it. A majority of non-profits need some kind of budget for paid digital ads.

2. You just need enough budget to run a test campaign

If you don't currently have a budget for ads, consider halting other activities to free up funds. For example, if you are boosting posts, stop that and allocate the budget to proper ads instead.

Aim for a budget of up to €1,000 to run a lead ad campaign (see more in point 9). Once you measure the performance of this campaign, you can make the case for more budget.

If there is genuinely no budget and no chance of getting one, then review whether you can continue with certain channels at all. If you're putting a lot of time into organic posting on Instagram which brings in no return, that's a waste of resources and you can consider abandoning that channel entirely.

3. Meta Ads are the best place to start

There are many options for paid digital, including Google Ads, TikTok, Meta, LinkedIn, Twitter / X, etc. These platforms all have different strengths. When you're starting off with a small ad budget, I recommend focusing on Meta Ads, as they have the most powerful ad algorithm. The Meta platform includes ads on Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, so you can reach very different audiences within it.

It's also really worth applying for the Google Grant and setting up Google Grant Ads, if you have enough resources to do two ad channels. Google donates up to $10k in search ads each month, and it's a great channel for reaching warm audiences. Find out more in Digital Charity Lab's online course in Google Grant Ads.

4. Learn how to run your own Meta campaigns

If you always hire agencies to run your Meta campaigns, it makes each campaign more expensive. Learning how to run campaigns and do split-testing yourself, will get you much better value with your Meta Ads. Plus it's great professional development for your team.

5. Understand Meta Ad objectives

Meta Ads allow you to choose different 'objectives' – you'll define what you want to achieve from your campaign. It's very specific and literal so be careful: if you choose 'video views', Meta will just find people who watch a lot of videos. If you want people to watch a video and then take an action, you're better off choosing a conversion objective instead. Meta has absolutely immense amounts of data on its users, and it knows which people are most likely to take an action. Choose your campaign objectives with care: they're really important, and easy to get wrong. If you don't tell Meta the right strategy, it won't find the right people.

6. Every campaign needs 50 results in order to really perform

This is how Meta Ads platform works:

1. You set an objective for your campaign (such as leads; or conversions like purchases or donations)
2. Meta tries to find the first 50 results. If it's a lead campaign, it needs 50 leads. If it's a donations campaign, it needs 50 donations.
3. Once it has the first 50, it then uses those results to build a statistical model, to find more people like the first 50. This is when the campaign starts 'optimising' – i.e., finding the best audiences for the ads and the best cost per result.
4. If Meta can't find the first 50 results, it shows 'learning limited' and the campaign will not perform as well.

When you're running a Meta Ad campaign, you need to give it enough budget and time to find the first 50 results. If you don't, the campaign won't perform well. This obviously makes things more complicated when it comes to objectives like donations: it can cost a lot of money to get 50 donations. That's why I recommend starting with a lead ad campaign (see more in point 9).

7. Go bigger than you may be used to – bigger budgets, longer run times, broad audience

Non-profits often make the mistake of splitting their Meta Ads budget across lots of very small campaigns – €100 here, €75 there, 2 days here, a week there. A much better way to spend your budget is to consolidate it into one lead campaign (see more in point 9). It means you'll be able to get the first 50 results, and do proper creative split testing to get a really good cost per result. Once you have your best creative, you can run the ads for a long time on a small daily budget, constantly growing your mailing list and getting really good value out of the campaign.

Try broad audience targeting when you're doing your lead campaign. The Meta algorithm is really good at finding the right people.

8. Creative split testing is crucial

The more creative variations you use, the more chances you give Meta to find the relevant people. Meta makes split testing really easy, with its 'dynamic creative' ad format.

The way many charities work is: they spend a lot of time developing the look and feel of a campaign, create a few core designs based on the creative concept, and then just use those designs in their Meta ads. But if you start by

testing more images, and more that are significantly different, you'll be pleasantly surprised with the results.

Test five headlines, five primary texts and at least five images in each campaign. Meta will give you the exact breakdown of which are achieving the most volume and the best cost. Once you know the best performers, you can remove the ones that aren't working and continue the campaign with the best creative.

9. A lead campaign is a great place to start

Lead ads are a very effective ad format on Meta, that allow you to capture contact details directly on Facebook and Instagram. Meta's lead forms are very user-friendly and quick for people to fill in.

With a lead campaign, you can capture people's contact information and move them to a platform where it's easier and cheaper to contact them – such as email or SMS. Once you have contact details for a supporter, you have multiple opportunities to talk to them. You can develop a long term relationship, and get long term value from the campaign.

Lead campaigns will work with small budgets – you can run an effective lead campaign for around €1,000.

Start learning and testing!

There is definitely a great opportunity for LGBTI organisations to use Meta Ads to build support. You just need to ensure that the budget is adequate, and that you're supported to learn the platform and fully understand good strategy before you're expected to bring in results.

Sources for learning more about Meta Ads

- Join ILGA-Europe's private communications support group to get access to the recording, slidedeck, and 46-page guide from the Skills Boost on Digital Ads which Jean ran for LGBTI activists in June 2024.
- Jon Loomer – Meta Ads expert who shares extremely useful information on his website
- Digital Charity Lab – free and affordable digital skill-building for non-profits

Don't miss our next Skill Boost! Join our Facebook group Communications support group for LGBTI activists where we regularly post upcoming opportunities to boost your communication skills.