

SECRETS OF MODERN UNION ORGANIZING

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In years past, when AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Elizabeth Shuler spoke at conventions throughout the country, she would ask those in attendance to stand. Slowly, she would ask attendees to sit down based on age, with only the younger people standing at the end. By the time everyone over 35 years old was seated, only a handful of people usually remained standing. Shuler didn't sugarcoat things when she said, "We haven't done a good job attracting younger workers and getting them involved." Her words have had an impact. According to [a study by the Economic Policy Institute](#), workers younger than 35 have accounted for 76 percent of new union membership since 2017.

Recognizing the tactics unions are using to recruit new members is crucial for any company that wants to operate union-free. Today, organizers can convince enough of your employees (30%) to sign online authorization cards and petition the National Labor Relations Board for an election *before you even know you have organizing activity*.

A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE

Currently, just [10.3 percent](#) of workers belong to a union. That's in sharp contrast to the 1950's, when 35 percent of workers were unionized, and even a sharp drop from the 1980's, when around 20 percent of workers paid union dues.

But America has experienced dramatic changes in workplace demographics. The traditional image of a union worker is that of someone older, male, and employed in a blue collar industry. Today our workforce has become younger, more diverse, and less likely to be in manufacturing - or even classified as an employee at all. From tech to transportation to service and delivery, gig and remote workers have changed the way people get work done.

So organized labor has shifted vast energies, focus and resources to reach today's worker. In fact, labor unions know many workers are an untapped market; one whose sense of security has been adversely impacted by health, economic and financial crises, making them much more open to what union organizers have to say.

AN UNTAPPED MARKET

Unions have good reason to see opportunity: in 2017, just 7.7 percent of workers aged 16-34 belonged to unions (versus 12.6 percent of workers 35 and over). But what are unions doing now to reach this changed workforce? Workers are more


likely to be wary of promises of “more” than ever before. Companies are far more savvy about how they’re connecting with and educating their own workers. So labor organizers have developed new tactics, and statistics show they’re working, in fact, studies show that union win rates increased to [77 percent](#) in the first half of 2019.

WHAT UNIONS ARE DOING

Unions have created a three-pronged strategic approach in order to reach workers in largely white-collar and service-based industries. They are exploiting the power and influence that come with social media and viral campaigns, and they are looking at unconventional industries and smaller employee groups that had been previously ignored. Finally, they are connecting with younger workers, and in fact hiring and recruiting new organizers that match the demographics of those they’d like to sign up as new union members.

Let’s take a closer look at this three-pronged approach to see exactly how this strategy has taken shape:

UTILIZING THE POWER OF ONLINE RESOURCES AND SOCIAL MEDIA



Without question, social networking has very explosively transformed day-to-day life, providing a platform to connect within our online and offline communities, communicate with those community members, and receive instant gratification in the form of responses.

FINDING COMMUNITY ONLINE

Much of the recent news regarding social media focused on usage among adults over 35 years old (and that’s a subject for another study), but the fact is, younger users are still far more numerous. Among 18-24 year olds, nearly [80%](#) have a Facebook profile, as do 84% percent of those who are between the ages of 25 and 34. In the United States, 79% of the population has a social networking profile of some kind.

Workers today are also more likely to be constantly connected to their online communities. While almost every social network user has a cell phone, a whopping [81 percent](#) have smartphones, making sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and SnapChat your employees’ constant companions. Many Americans now use their smartphone as their primary means of online access.

About twenty percent of American adults are “smartphone-only” internet users – meaning they own a smartphone, but do not have traditional home broadband service.

Union organizers no longer have to hold in-person meetings. Developing community online is as easy as setting up a Facebook group, and posting content workers can rally around. [Targeting specific workers is easier than ever](#) with Facebook ads based on demographic parameters like job title, geography, age, interests, “likes,” and even specific website visits.

Once an employee provides the union with their basic contact information such as email address or mobile number, organizers are off and running. They can provide an online authorization card, and have enough of these cards signed virtually to petition the NLRB for an election before an employer *even knows team members are talking to organizers*.

It’s vital for companies to teach employees to [protect their personal information](#) by carefully reading privacy policies and terms and conditions before releasing any data online. It is critical that team members know who they are giving their (and the company’s) sensitive information to — and of course, the key message to communicate again and again is that their best source for company information is their employer.

NOT ABOUT KNOWING, BUT KNOWING WHERE TO FIND IT

Today, it’s no longer about having knowledge, but more about simply knowing where to find information. Workers are skeptical, and verifying information or going more in-depth online is truly second-nature. Unions took advantage of this instinct with basic informational websites early on, and are now regularly reinforcing their presence on social media sites, seen as relatable – and credible – by workers.

For example, during the 2020 pandemic crisis (COVID-19), the CWA immediately began targeting workers online with [“COVID-19 Information for Non-Union Workers,”](#) as well as an online form to fill out to have an organizer contact them. By providing an instant resource, the CWA was able to capture the information of workers who felt mistreated during the crisis. The UE followed suit, giving workers [5 steps to organize](#).

Crafting the [perfect online communication strategy](#) begins with understanding the [Employee Engagement Journey](#). With effort, companies can create an approach to reaching leaders and team members online that is accurate, trusted, and able to answer any

concern, leaving the union's online strategy to fail to build momentum or community.

TARGETING UNCONVENTIONAL INDUSTRIES - IN UNUSUAL WAYS

2 Unions may be known for representing workers in industries such as manufacturing, construction, automotive, and healthcare, but they are now looking for workers in fields they once ignored. They're also secretive about their actions, making many union-backed efforts look like they're led by workers.

Typically too young, and with turnover too high to hold a representation election, fast food workers have been the target of union organizers over the past decade. Employees at Burgerville, a fast-food chain in Portland, Oregon, pushed to unionize under what was touted as their own union. Actually backed by [the IWW](#) (or "Wobblies," one of the most [historically militant](#) unions in the U.S.), the Burgerville workers became the first fast-food workers to organize in 2018.

Rideshare companies have also been targeted by unions in recent years, and there, unions took the route of legislative efforts. Finally, in May of 2019, the National Labor Relations Board stated that because drivers are not employees but rather contractors (who set their own hours), [they cannot unionize](#) for the purpose of bargaining collectively. Not to be deterred, the union created a dedicated app to bring workers together, ["as seamlessly as if they shared a water cooler."](#)

Gig workers at grocery delivery service Instacart [staged protests](#) over working conditions in 2020, [encouraged by the UFCW](#), who had been working to organize Instacart workers. The UFCW also [backed protests](#) by Amazon workers and employees at Whole Foods (owned by Amazon). To the general public, and in the press, on the surface these tactics look like workers are coming together to improve working conditions for themselves, but often, worker support for these actions is thin. Instead, unions like the UFCW use the press coverage to convince workers of the union's strength.

OUTREACH TO MORE IMPRESSIONABLE SUPPORTERS

3 Behind the scenes, labor unions have also begun implementing outreach groups designed to target younger people to become organizers. Now held on an annual basis, the AFL-CIO hosts [Union Summer](#), a "paid internship," in which participants take part in "hands-on, movement-building workshops on organizing, young worker activism, social media, and leadership development."

The sessions also include “discussions with expert speakers on policy and legislative issues affecting young workers.”

In addition, there are organizations targeted exclusively for younger workers. In San Francisco, [Young Workers United](#) was formed to “improve the quality of jobs for young and immigrant workers” who are “concentrated in industries, such as retail and restaurants, that have received very little attention from unions and advocacy groups.”

Similarly, the [AFL-CIO’s “NextUp” Program](#), aimed at creating younger activist workers was formed in the Washington, D.C. area and is now active in 5 regions across the country. They meet on a regular basis to “fight to rewrite the rules of the economy” and focus on “the lack of education that young union members and the public have in reference to the labor movement.”

Education is one of the areas that unions believe will make the biggest difference in their ability to recruit new, younger workers. At a recent Young Workers Summit, attendees selected “access to better education on the role of the union movement” as their top area of interest.

Utah AFL-CIO past President Jim Judd shared that sentiment when he said, “I’ve been in classrooms where I had the opportunity to ask students why they are in school rather than out working. A lot of them didn’t know that they were in school because labor unions fought for child labor laws. I had to explain to them that they were able to go on vacations with their families because the labor movement fought for paid vacations and that the reasons their parents weren’t working 10 hours a day seven days a week is because we fought for 40-hour work-weeks.”

RECOGNIZING THE TACTICS IS YOUR BEGINNING

The [tactical side of the unions’ strategy](#) is ever-evolving. You can be sure it will take the form of home visits - not a new tactic to be sure, but one unions are using more and more. Unions are engaging with the press to extend the reach of their social media organizing strategies. They’re also using text messaging as soon as they’re able to [gain employee phone numbers](#) - a direct line to employees’ most vital communication device.

Now that you know the tactics, let’s talk about getting proactive.

SECRETS OF MODERN UNION ORGANIZING

HOW YOU CAN RESPOND AND STAY UNION-FREE

HERE'S HOW TO RESPOND - AND REMAIN UNION-FREE:

Despite organized labor's ability to exploit online conversations, and introduce themselves to new supporters, there are positive steps you can take to stay ahead of union activity and keep your organization union free.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO JUMP IN AND MONITOR SOCIAL MEDIA.

Social media is an interactive conversation, and everything that unions make available online in the interest of recruiting new members (and the responses they receive) is, more often than not, available to employers if they are willing to look. Because there is a great deal of information currently online, this task may be tedious and seem time-consuming, but it should be viewed as an important part of any union awareness and prevention strategy.

Twitter and Facebook both provide easy and excellent resources to gather information that unions publish concerning their latest organizing targets. This often includes the strategies and types of materials the unions may use to aid in their efforts. As an ongoing proactive, educational measure, an anonymous Twitter account can follow most major unions. Many union locals - something that may be even more useful to you - are also on board in many cases. On Facebook, an employer wouldn't necessarily want to monitor a pro-union account, but they can certainly check any non-private pages or groups. (NOTE: A labor attorney should be consulted in the event of an active organizing drive, in order to avoid any appearance of surveillance.)

Another option that both platforms offer is a robust search, allowing you to search

Social Media Use By The Numbers Among Millennials

(born late 1980's to early 2000's)

41% Use Facebook Daily
35% Are on YouTube Daily
29% Use Instagram Daily
25% Use SnapChat Daily

Over 60% Say
"Social media is an important source of
news and current affairs."

A quarter say they check social media first
thing when they wake up

YouTube reaches more adults 18-34 than
any single cable TV network.

62%
of Twitter users are
under 34 years old

71% of those with Internet access have a
Facebook profile

46 million Americans
check social networking sites
several times a day

by company name, hashtag or keyword and see every related update. The larger the company, the greater number of results, but having information on what's trending in your industry or local area can provide great insight.

A tool from Google that can help you with social media monitoring is [Google Alerts](#). Google Alerts will complete a recurring inquiry, based on selected keywords. Results can then be provided on a daily or weekly basis. Keyword suggestions include company name, competitor's names, and any relevant unions.

Unions have also stepped up their digital content strategy, and you can use what they publish to gain insight into their latest strategies. – of vital importance for employers. You should regularly check out the website for the union most likely to target your employees. You can also keep ahead of union tactics and strategies by educating yourself about union partners and resources such as [UnionTrack](#).

"BUT THE KEY THING TO REMEMBER IS THAT PERCEPTION IS REALITY. IT'S IMPORTANT TO YOUNGER WORKERS THAT THEY CAN VIEW THEIR COMPANY AS AN EMPLOYER OF CHOICE."

FOCUS ON ISSUES THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO YOUR EMPLOYEES.

There is truly no one-size-fits-all list of worker concerns, and that is especially true when a workforce consists of different generations. Beyond the traditional concerns of wages and benefits, pay special attention to more non-traditional issues, such as:

- Work/ life balance: flexible hours and schedules, telecommuting/remote working options.
- Positive corporate culture: feeling connected with strong relationships
- Reputation & Global focus: working for a company that has a strong reputation in the world
- Challenging work: ready to contribute in a challenging environment
- Advancement opportunities: want to be able to "work up the corporate ladder."

When evaluating their likelihood of success in organizing a company, one of the core issues that unions consider is employee concerns. But the key thing to remember is that "perception is reality." It is important to younger workers that they can view their

company as an employer of choice.

Anonymous employee surveys are a good initial gauge of this perception; along with open and frank ongoing dialogue between employees and direct supervisors. Whenever an issue is raised, the company should review it and respond appropriately, particularly with younger workers who expect to be heard.

CREATE YOUR COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

Now that you recognize the tactics unions are using, and know what matters to your employees, it's time to create your proactive strategy. Remember that you, too, have the ability to communicate with employees like never before. In addition to communicating a union-free philosophy via traditional approaches (such as video, posters, flyers and meetings), there are a number of steps you can take to connect with workers in ways that feel familiar and credible.

Begin connecting with your team members on day one with a new hire orientation message that includes your union-free operating philosophy. Create an ongoing [sense of belonging](#) with [employee-dedicated social media](#) accounts. Educate and empower front-line leaders with both [labor relations knowledge](#) and the [soft skills](#) that create great, cohesive teams. Be sure your HR team is equally on-board and able to [recognize union organizing tactics](#).

In the long-run, communicating the truth with honesty and transparency is the best strategy of all. By being authentic about your company's desire to nurture and maintain its direct connection with employees, you can overcome any "new" tactic union organizers may use to try to convince your employees otherwise.



ABOUT THE INSIDER NETWORK

The Insider Network is a Projections resource, a community where those dedicated to maintaining a direct and positive relationship with employees come to get ideas on:

Coaching Leaders
Addressing Union Organizing,
and...
Getting UnionProof!

If you'd like to stay on top of the latest in labor relations news, you can subscribe to our [Join The Conversation Newsletter](#) and access to the news as well as our latest publications and tools.