Community Engagement Platform Options
(Source: Richmond CVS)

Facebook Groups

Cost: Free

Pros:

- Largest user base: According to a Statista Report, 'With roughly 2.93 billion monthly active users as of the second quarter of 2022, Facebook is the most used online social network worldwide.'
- Proven ROI (Return on Investment). Time and resources of input vs. successful community engagement should be considered.
- Easier to moderate (than LinkedIn).
- More possible / emotive methods of interaction, i.e. photos, videos, events, check-in, share how feeling.
- Notifications more likely seen, group posts appear in news feed.
- Most groups within sector already use Facebook, have own pages, engage on Facebook.
- RCVS already has a Facebook account, therefore less effort to drive traffic towards it.
- Mobile friendly.

Cons:

- Not the best for B2B (LinkedIn is better here, Facebook is more B2C).
- People are more likely to share personal opinions.
- Can't customise design (will always look like Facebook).
- No control, i.e. Facebook can delete your account, your community will always be governed by Facebook.
- Can't add courses.
- Can't add subgroups.
- Sometimes scandals associated.
- Competing for attention as more popular (though as there is a limit to the local sector perhaps this is not so significant).

Resource investment:

To get up and running would be relatively easy. RCVS already has a Facebook profile, presence and the skills and experience with using the interface. Promo would be required to drive traffic to the site though with less steps involved for prospective members to join (as opposed to downloading a whole new app), this would be minimal.

Monitoring would be required though Facebook Groups includes measures to help with this. Engagement, conversation and response to questions will be needed to drive discussion and foster community. This could be a potential volunteer role. Many volunteers will also be comfortable with using Facebook.

LinkedIn Groups

Cost: Free

Pros:

- Business-driven platform (B2B).
- Opportunities for thought leadership.
- Work related mindset.
- Can send emails (though a limited number).
- Mobile friendly (though perhaps not as mobile friendly as Facebook Groups or a specifically designed app such as Mighty Networks or Slack).

Cons:

- Smaller user base.
- Less possible / emotive methods of interaction, i.e. discussions, links.
- Poor group visibility, have to manually seek out notifications / Algorithm bad for group material.
- Throughout research, seems to be less advice / help available on LinkedIn as a group platform.

Resource Investment:

Would be quite easy to get up and running, though RCVS don't currently have an account / presence so this would need setting up. This would also mean that greater effort was required to drive people towards a LinkedIn Group. Would require monitoring though this is said to be less easy than on Facebook. Again, this could be a volunteer role and potential volunteers would most likely have LinkedIn knowledge.

Mighty Networks

Cost: Community Plan $33/month (£28.60 at time of writing) or Business Plan $99/month (£85.80 at time of writing). Community Plan is limited in livestreaming, running courses, charges and analytics compared to the Business Plan. A Table of Features comparing the two plans can be viewed here.

Pros:

- Unlimited members, moderators and hosts.
- Personalisation technology means members get relevant content / algorithm not driven by ads like on social media.
- Can choose who joins / can be private or hidden.
- Website and App so mobile friendly.
- Easy orientation for new members.
- Live streaming (though limited to 5 hours per month from 1 speaker with 50 viewers on Community Plan). Events and online courses could be integrated, though again, Eventbrite is a very well-known platform already.
- Event Calendar.
- Help centre with videos and GIFs as well as team of real people to speak to.
- Could brand to fit RCVS branding.

Cons:

- Not free. Can't find non-profit discount.
- Live streaming limited on cheaper price plan.

- Exists as App that would need to be downloaded, which raises the question of are prospective members going wo be willing/likely to do this?

Resource Investment:

Cost involved – how does this fit into budget or funding? Would need to be set up and branded by team with no previous experience. Would take a lot of promo to drive traffic / encourage prospective members to use an 'unknown' platform. New interface for team to learn to use.

Slack

Cost: Free, Pro ($7.25 USD / £6.27) and Business + ($12.50 USD / £10.81) plans available. Free plan is quite limited in all areas compared to paid plans. See comparison chart here.

Pros:

- Quite reasonably priced paid plans / free plan available.
- Relatively well-known name, quite straightforward interface.
- Real-time nature promotes connection and contributions – good for conversations.
- Strong native apps for mobile.
- Threads promote subsections of discussion.
- Comes with recommendation from Digital Expert, Aliyah Bakheit.

Cons:

- Free plan looks quite limited (can't see non-profit discount).
- No moderation features.
- Not functional for organising a large community.
- No option for events.
- Can't brand your community.
- Would have to encourage new users to download app / use new platform.

Resource Investment:

Potential cost. Promo needed to drive people towards using new app. Possible need to educate new members on how to use. New interface for team to learn to use.

Discourse

Cost: $100 a month with 50% non-profit discount. Is the option to self-host as is open source software, though this is not ideal.

Pros:

- Moderation by flagging system.
- Trust system gives members abilities to help maintain community.
- Spam-blocking.
- Summarize button to condense long topics.
- Positive behaviours encouraged through likes and badges.
- Open source – belongs to user as much as company.
- Now intuitive means of interacting, e.g. mention someone with @name, paste in images, reply online or by email.
- Works on phone or tablet.

- Interface looks very simple and easy to use – this would be good so as not to exclude any of the less tech-confident members of the sector.

Cons:

- Relatively expensive even with non-profit discount. Option to self-host would require lot of time and resources.
- Less popular application – are asking prospective members to download / learn how to use.

Resource Investment:

Cost / self-hosting, which would require a lot of time and resources. Promo required to encourage new users / potential of having to educate new users on how to use (though interface looks very intuitive).

Hivebrite

Cost: Pricing varies based on a number of factors, including your community size, technical integrations you may require, and other variables. When asked quoted $7,000 per year for Essentials plan.

Pros:

- Import and export member data.
- Powerful search and targeting features.
- Mass updates.
- Can integrate with CRM.
- Integrated email marketing tool and event management.
- Can create group hierarchy, e.g. clubs or subchapters.
- Full moderation.
- Direct messaging in-app.
- Can tag people in posts or comments to make sure they see them.

Cons:

- Lack of customisable options.
- Technical support not as good as some of competitors.

Resource Investment:

Cost will, presumably, be involved. New interface for both team and prospective members to learn to use. Promo will be required to encourage new users to create account.

Circle

Cost: Basic $39/month (£33.82), Professional $99/month ($85.85). Basic is limited in live stream and video, analytics and CSS customisation compared to professional plan. See comparison table here.

Pros:

- Access areas to different groups with private spaces and group chats.
- Add formatting, media and emojis to posts and can embed third party tools.
- Add own brand colours, use custom domain and integrate directly with your website. Though limited on basic plan.

- Interactive livestreams. Though not on basic plan.
- Direct messages and group chats.
- Event spaces with calendars and RSVPs.
- Weekly digests.
- Searchable member directory.
- Analytics integrations. Though limited on basic plan.
- SSO (Simple Sign in) – can unify external log in system (e.g. use same details to log in to member space of website). Though limited on basic plan.
- Support network available including workshops, training, office hours and checklists.

Cons:

- A lot of attractive features either limited or not available on basic plan.

Resource Investment:

Would require set up by team, including learning how to use a new interface. Links to website so perhaps less promo required to drive traffic. Potential need to educate new users on how to use.

Conclusion

Though purpose-built, paid-for options will most likely have more forum-specific features and better help and support available, any platform that is not Facebook or LinkedIn will require a bigger push to get prospective members to create a new account on a different platform or even download a new app. Advice states that it is hard work to create a successful community group so any barriers to this should be avoided. Also worth considering is whether the paid features will be made use of to an extent that would make the cost worthwhile.