

How social media can make a difference



By [Colin Cullis](#)

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What story on radio would get almost 800 people to share a single Facebook post?

John Maytham presents the afternoon drive show on 567 Cape Talk and recently picked up on a motion by a city councillor to change the design of the park benches in the Company Gardens to prevent being able to sleep on them. The current bylaw forbids sleeping on benches, but law enforcement officers often have to wake people (mostly homeless) from sleeping on them, the new motion would seek designs for a bench that would make it hard to sleep on and so make it easier to enforce the bylaw.

The following day (a Friday) John was sent a letter from a former homeless person, Shaun Shelly who explained that the occasional nap in the sun on a bench in the Company Gardens was one of the very few pleasures a homeless person has. The letter talked about his time on the street and his return to society and asked that we not take this away from the homeless. The letter was posted on Friday afternoon to Facebook with a link to the post also shared on Twitter.

Social media makes a difference

By Monday over 75,000 had seen the letter, there were 792 shares, 126 comments and 610 likes. Other media had picked up on the story too and on Monday afternoon the councillor that had made the motion had told the station he was withdrawing it. The social media reaction played a big part of that decision. Social media demonstrated its ability to reach a wide audience quickly and to make a difference, but it did also come with some important lessons.

Withdrawing the motion did not change the bylaw that makes sleeping on benches prohibited and despite the ground swell of support for the sentiment that the homeless should be allowed to use the benches none of those that had taken to social media to express their views on the subject followed through to see it actually addressed. A subject can gain traction very quickly on social media but with so many sources constantly adding stories a subject can also lose traction just as quickly. It is the perfect medium for creating a spike in awareness or driving a clear call to action, but it is unlikely to sustain itself. Publishers should be responsive to stories that get a strong reaction and ensure they post updates and options for what those engaged with the story can do to develop it. The bigger challenge is finding a story that will be noticed among all the others competing for attention. The best indicator of that is the same as it has always been, great stories told by great storytellers will stand out irrespective of the medium used to tell it.

It is important to track the size of your follower base but it is more important to track how well you can engage them with the stories you post. CapeTalk tries to post regularly but the focus is on content that will generate comment and shares more than just likes. The benches of the Company Gardens will not change, but you still can't sleep on them. The issue remains

of how best to help the homeless overcome the issues that drove them onto the streets in the first place and to find opportunities to re-integrate them back into society. Our next posts will look to tell those stories.

ABOUT COLIN CULLIS

Colin Cullis strives to find new and better ways of telling stories everyday in his role as product owner for Primedia Broadcasting's talk stations, 702 and CapeTalk. His searching often throws out fascinating insights into innovations and trends that are changing the way we live, and inform his weekly feature on The Money Show with Bruce Whitfield, called Business Unusual. Tune in on Wednesdays just after 7:30pm to hear more from Colin.

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