

Embracing New Technologies

the RMT Experience: 2006

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RMT is committed to enhancing its communications strategy through the use of new media as a tool to bring the union's campaigns and everyday business ever-closer to each of its 75,000 members.

Over the past 12 months the union has enhanced its work in this area, through several initiatives, including:

- The appointment of a full-time dedicated web editor, working within the RMT communications department, for the first time.
- A £35,000 revamp of the RMT website (www.rmt.org.uk), including a simpler design incorporating several new features. New site designed by Poptel Technology (www.popteltechnology.coop), a London-based co-operative which designs and hosts websites for several British trade unions.
- The creation of regional subsites, providing six RMT offices across the United Kingdom with their own platform within the main RMT website.
- Webcasting the RMT annual general meeting as well as several smaller sectoral conferences of the union.
- The production of campaigning DVDs, explaining the work of the union, as a tool for recruitment and retention.
- Interactive virtual tour showcasing RMT's new National Education Centre.
- Union circulars, containing latest workplace developments such as pay talks or other industrial matters are distributed electronically to members on an industry by industry basis (i.e.: rail, road, maritime or bus).

Overview

RMT is a specialist union organizing workers in the rail, shipping, bus and road transport industries throughout the United Kingdom. It is Britain's fastest-growing union and, in fact, one of only a handful with growing memberships. Workers in these industries are attracted to RMT in ever-growing numbers, thanks often to the union's reputation as an uncompromising fighter for members' pay and conditions.

One of RMT's great strengths lies in the fact that members are encouraged to involve themselves in the union as much as possible. Unfortunately everyday union jargon, and the internal workings of the organization, remain a mystery to many. Information and communication technologies can be used to open the organization up to members, thereby bringing them closer and making them a more conscious, active partner in RMT affairs.

Web Editor

Until the appointment of its first full-time web editor in December 2005, RMT relied on its press officer to update and develop the previous website. Clearly this was incompatible, in the long term, with the union's desire to further rise to the challenges and opportunities offered by ICT.

The creation of the new post sent a signal the union was seriously confronting the issue. The successful applicant, while having some previous experience in website maintenance, was recruited as much for his journalistic skills gleaned from working in traditional print media over many years.

Webcasts

As referred to above, for many union members the actual workings and democracy of their organization are something of a mystery. They know that the union will fight their case when it comes to winning better terms and conditions but may know little about how the decisions and policy, which affect their working lives, are arrived at.

RMT decided to utilize new technology to lift the lid on such internal decision-making process, beginning with the union's parliament, its annual general meeting. In July this year RMT became the first British trade union to webcast an AGM.

The broadcast was restricted to the members-only area of the RMT website to allay fears that delegates who criticize their working conditions in a conference speech, or any other issue relating to their employers for that matter, may face disciplinary action from their managers on return to work.

Along with the AGM, two smaller RMT grades (sectoral) conferences were similarly webcast. Having webcast a total of three events in 2006, RMT plans to double this number to six in the coming year, meaning nearly half of the union's conferences will be available for viewing online. In time it is expected that coverage may grow to 100 per cent.

The union is confident that introducing such transparency into its decision-making process can only encourage interest from, and help involve, ordinary RMT members in the activities of their organization. Anyone viewing the webcast will have recognized in AGM participants' delegates and full-time officials alike "people not dissimilar to themselves and their workmates, discussing issues which they would likewise have recognized in their daily working lives.

Fears that conference delegates might object to being broadcast or might tone down their contributions from the rostrum proved unfounded with the cut and thrust of debate proving as vigorous as in any previous year. Only twice over the

three webcast conferences were cameras and microphones turned off (and then only for a few minutes) on request of delegates who required anonymity.

Each webcast costs the union in the region of Â£2,000. While initial viewing figures have been in the low hundreds RMT still regards this as a good investment. By opening up conference proceedings to the wider membership, the union has made a statement that it stands for openness and transparency in its affairs. Next year's webcasts are expected to draw bigger numbers in line with an expected increase in general traffic to the website as RMT members become more and more accustomed to using the Internet. In addition, it is expected that greater, and earlier, notice of forthcoming webcasts will be distributed through RMT publications and other media.

Regions

As well as its head office, RMT has six regional offices around the United Kingdom (based in Glasgow, Liverpool, York, Birmingham, Bristol and London). Web training has been provided to staff at these regional offices and each has been given its own section of the main RMT website (e.g.: www.rmt.org.uk/scotland) giving them autonomy to develop and promote their own local campaigns, education courses and organizing drives etc. Obviously a standard style and consistency is required and, for this reason, the web editor oversees these microsites to ensure that this is carried through.

Campaigning DVDs

Over the past two years RMT has produced, in association with Platform Films (www.cga.org.uk/platform), four short DVDs as tools for recruitment and retention and to explain the union's aims and purpose clearly to new members. Well-known broadcast personalities, such as the comedian and left-wing campaigner Mark Thomas, have been used to present these DVD films. They have been distributed free with every copy of the union's monthly magazine RMT News and used in organizing drives by branches and regional councils across the country. Visitors to the RMT website are able to view the Mark Thomas-introduced video, which resides on the home page.

Virtual Tours

As mentioned above, RMT aims to use new technology to attract and involve ordinary members into union activity by demonstrating what goes on a "behind the scenes" of their organization. In October 2006, the union opened its National Education Centre at Doncaster in the north of England. RMT has commissioned a 3D virtual tour of the centre, throwing open the doors to visitors to the RMT website to enable members to see the kind of facilities provided for their own use.

Further virtual tours are planned for RMT's head offices, introducing members to various departments, such as Industrial Relations, the Organizing Unit and the Boardroom (where the union's governing Council of Executives meets). In a similar way to the conference webcasts, these tours help demystify the union's activities in the eyes of the ordinary member.

Distribution of Circulars

RMT's new website enables members to subscribe to mailing lists for circulars produced by the union's Industrial Relations department. Thus a worker may instantly receive, via email, the latest update on pay and conditions within their own industry.

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