

Website, Marketing and Development Report

National AGM 2020

Much of my Plus time this year was taken up with the WASH payment issue. (For those who haven't heard the outcome, after a great deal of time and hassle, the resolution was that WASH had the money all the time, they hadn't realised because it was credited to their account at the same time as another cheque, so the amounts didn't match and there were some confusing entries afterwards.)

Last year at the National AGM I presented the best part of a years careful research on where we should go with our national image and website, with solid reasons why we should go down a particular track. I have to say I was disheartened by the reaction. At least I hoped to be thanked for the work. But, with few exceptions, there was seemingly a knee jerk "I don't like it". What chance is there if this is the response to any serious attempt to move forward?

What's the Point of Advertising?

Whether it's the old way in newspapers, libraries and so on. Or on the web. Or through Facebook or any other social media. They all basically do the same thing. Generate interest. But then what do we do?

Effective advertising generates enquiries. But then what do we do with them? Either they will be located near an existing, active group, which is great we can invite them along. But our successful groups are already doing good advertising, so in a way, it's duplication.

Or – and here's the rub – they will not be located near an active group. Some groups are very small and hardly do anything, So what could we invite them to? And there are large areas of the country where there are no groups at all.

So what do we do? My view is we endeavour to measure where there is the strongest interest and focus on opening groups there. But how do we go about doing that if they are miles from an existing, active group which could support them? We need to have that discussion at our National AGM this year.

So Where Should We Be Trying To Open New Groups?

I have been doing that research using a range of sources to come up with blended information.

Obviously London is top. But it is hard to target. It is hard to get enough detail to see exactly which areas of London would be best for new groups. Although there are tons of people looking there is also tons of competition. People tend to be much more transitory. Groups are likely to get more people who will just dip in, with long term members harder to find. With so much choice there is a "Meetup culture", people just find the best event happening that weekend, with no loyalty to any particular group.

In favour, of course, we already have successful groups around London and it would be relatively easy to open groups nearby.

Personally, I hope to try with Ealing / Acton / Chiswick. We have been highly successful in that area in the past, we really should be able to make a go of it and it should be relatively easy for us to do.

Other groups around London may have ideas of good areas too.

But the real gold nuggets for us are the areas of strong demand and low competition. They are -

Brighton and Eastbourne
Leeds
Hull
Merseyside (but not Liverpool)
Leicester

We should target them first, then move on to the second tier, where there is still strong demand, but not quite as strong as the top tier –

Wolverhampton
Wigan
Coventry

And in the third tier we have –

Hereford
Aylesbury
Bournemouth
Huddersfield
Ipswich
Middlesborough
Swansea
Manchester
Derby
Swindon

I have excluded Scotland. There is strong demand in several places like Ayrshire, West Lothian, Dunfermline. But I'm assuming just not feasible for us.

These three tiers are well ahead and clear targets. The rest are in the long tail.

Points for Discussion

So where do we go from here? We have got a discussion on the agenda and there are key points we must talk about and make decisions about what we really want to do –

The Difficulties -

- Plus is very prone to internal disputes. We can be very hard on each other. And especially hard on anyone who tries to change anything. How can we build consensus and work together?
- In the past there used to be a good culture of competition between groups. But now it is working against us. Now we have got to work together. There is a feeling that “any idea which is not mine will be attacked”. There's almost a horrible feeling groups want other groups to do badly - “Your failure is our success...” How can we change that culture? How can we support each other?
- I was disheartened by the reaction and lack of support from most people I got after I presented my work at the conference last year. (And over the WASH issue, which was a lack of banking clarity and not our fault at all. Even after the conference, the dinner dance was ruined for me by very unpleasant scenes. We are far too quick to blame and attack each other. We have no chance if we can't find a way to work together and support each other to overcome difficulties. We are all volunteers. We are all doing our best for the organisation we love. And nobody is perfect!)
- How can we build a consensus? How can we support people who are trying to drive change? And here's the massive one – **even if** we are not 100% convinced ourselves it is the right way to go? Is it better to try something than do nothing and just fade away fighting amongst ourselves?
- We are tiny now. The number of divisions we are split into is ridiculous. But no proposal to restructure will ever get 75% because of course people will never agree. So how can we find a way to all work together as one organisation?
- How can we find time to stop being bogged down in the day to day running of the organisation and look at the big picture?

The Fundamental Question

- Do we actually **want** to try and grow and recover? Or do we accept we just carry on the same. A few loosely associated successful groups. But they are different and most don't really get involved in national events like the old Plus. Really we just separate out into those few groups and give up on trying to pretend we are a national organisation.
- If that's really what we want, lets stop beating about the bush, stop trying to have “national” conferences, take the decision and say so.
- Or do we want to be a national organisation with a clear single marketing image?

A Way Forward

- If we decide we want to move forward -
- I proposed, and the NEC at the time agreed, we should go ahead with and build a consistent new design and image, for the new website and for our marketing across

the organisation. And I researched what image would work. Do we want that? If not, then what?

- The research was not on what our members want, but on what the outside world wants. Almost inevitably many of our members won't like it, because perhaps the world has moved on. We've Identified the people who are interested in an organisation like ours. If we say "we don't want those people to be interested, we want different people to be interested" what is going to happen?
- Has the world really changed? People say young people are not interested any more. But it isn't true. Going back to the 1980s, Young Farmers were our competition and both organisation were about the same size. But Young Farmers have currently got 22,000 members. Young Farmers shows it's possible. What have they done right that we have done wrong? (And the first thing it says on their website is "You don't have to be a young farmer to join young farmers".)
- One thing it seems they have done right is they have got a really clear national image. Should we copy them? Research on that is already done. Maybe you don't agree. But will there ever be a consensus? Can we ever please everyone? Is it better to do something or do nothing? It's got sound research behind it. At least let's try it. Nothing is set in stone forever, if it doesn't work we can always try something else.
- We will need to be positive, and perhaps not be too open about admitting we have got as small as we have. Let's think and talk success not failure.
- We've got a handful of really successful groups. Successful because they are driven by a few really committed people. How can we scale that? (And not get distracted by fact that all the successful groups are successful in a slightly different way.)
- There will always be some diversity. But it will be hard to move forward if we have the big groups standing up and saying we don't like the national image, we're going to ignore it. If we can't agree to at least try working together there is no chance.
- All the website or any other form of advertising will do is produce enquiries. Fundamental thing we need to work out is what we are going to do with the enquiries. Especially those that are nowhere near an existing healthy group. If we generate loads of enquiries and do nothing with them it's the same as deciding to stay as we are.
- How can we open new groups where the strongest demand is? Even if that's a long way from existing groups. As well as ordinary members, can we specifically try to recruit volunteers? Can we find ways to train and support the volunteers and get it to work?
- And can we accept we've got a powerful argument? We have always welcomed and included people who for whatever reason find it harder to establish a social life in other ways. While we are not a registered charity, we are certainly an organisation

with charitable aims. It is undoubtedly the truth. Plus has always been like that. But some people still struggle with admitting and accepting it. (Which sounds a bit to me like saying they don't want caring supportive people in the group. But there you go.)

- Can we actually offer volunteer “jobs” for the committee positions? With a proper job description and offer real benefits in the form of training, experience and references that will help our volunteers get real paid jobs. There are volunteer job sites on which we can do this. But we need to have everything setup first.
- We are short of resource – there are very few active organisers left. But we still have plenty of money. How can we use that to our advantage? Stupid to go under with money still in the bank.
- How about a conference for new volunteers and organisers. Teach them about Plus. What it is. How it works. What our values are. It will cost money. But we have got money.
- How about we set ourselves the target of half a dozen new (or re-developed) groups by next year?

And Finally...

- Do we fear change?