

Jennifer Lao: Advancing WTS-LA in Social Media



Jennifer Lao (WTS-LA Social Media co-chair and MBI Media project manager), Photos © John Livzey, 2017

Amazon.com CEO Jeff Bezos said, “If you make customers unhappy in the physical world, they might each tell 6 friends. If you make customers unhappy on the Internet, they can each tell 6,000 friends.” That means two things. One, social media is powerful. And two, social media is not as simple as many people believe. No one knows this better than WTS-LA Social Media co-chair and MBI Media project manager Jennifer Lao.

Starting her career as an engineer at Boeing, Ms. Lao then pivoted to solid waste recycling for HDR. It was then when she first realized that necessity and ultimate power of communication.

“I was developing recycling plans and zero-waste plans that included a lot of technical information, but once the plans were complete and submitted to the clients, I was left wondering if they were successfully implemented. I thought we came up with these great ideas to get to zero waste in landfills. However, I would tell friends and family about these plans, and I quickly realized that no one understood the terms I was using. That’s when it really hit home, if people don’t understand what ‘diversion’ means, how can we encourage them to reduce, reuse, and recycle more? I recognized that so much of the success of a project depends on how well you communicate its objectives and processes, its benefits and impacts. I wanted to be on that end of the spectrum; to know what was being discussed by the community and to take those comments back to the team and improve the project.”



Today, as a project manager with MBI Media—a woman-owned community outreach and media firm—Ms. Lao uses her technical knowledge and communication skills to inform communities and provide essential feedback to project teams.

“Currently, I’m working on the Link Union Station project. It’s a project to modernize the station and make it more efficient and better at meeting the needs of all stakeholders, whether they’re tourists or

commuters or my mom and dad. We want to make sure there are appropriate amenities and that the trains are operating in the most efficient manner possible. To do that, we've been providing a lot of outreach with stakeholders in and around the area to make sure their concerns and input are included as a part of the environmental process, which we're in the middle of. I really enjoy being able to connect with the community in a city I consider home."

Ms. Lao is also managing the outreach on the West Basin Municipal Water District ocean water desalination plant project. But she's also using her considerable skills in another area.

"I saw [WTS-LA Special Advisor to the President and past WTS-LA president] Sheila Given at an event. She said that the chapter needed to add to its social media expertise, and I was eager to fill that need, so I joined the chapter and became the Social Media chair. We have an excellent communications team and our volunteers are amazing. [WTS-LA VP of Membership and Communications] Liz and [WTS-LA Print Media chair] Eileen are fantastic! It's been great working with them and being able to continue what's been done in the past and implement new ideas as well, like the new [WTS-LA Facebook page](#)."

So, in addition to launching and expanding the chapter's new Facebook presence, what does Ms. Lao have planned for the chapter in terms of social media?

"I have two immediate goals. One, I want to continue to grow our followers. We've had continuous growth in all of our social media accounts this year, and I want those tools to help us recruit more members, volunteers, and sponsors. My second goal is a little more involved. I've always been interested in creating a story that shows people what's involved in the running of the chapter. My respect for the organization has only grown since I've been able to peek behind the curtain and see how decisions are made and how things come together. I want to convey that story to the public, so that they can see the care and commitment that goes into this organization—and be encouraged to join the team. I want to recognize the people behind the organization and the events that take place. What really stood out for me is the amount of time people dedicate to the chapter. It's all volunteer-based, and everyone invests so much time, energy, and effort; and we're all moving toward the same goal."

Social media has tremendous power. As Jeff Bezos explained, you can reach thousands—millions—in seconds. And with great power comes great responsibility. Fortunately for WTS-LA and its social media program, no one knows this better than Jennifer Lao.