FACEBOOK FOR NONPROFITS

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OUR PLAN WAS TO BEGIN A SERIES OF COLUMNS ON THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY by civil society organizations with a glossary of terms and tools with a balanced consideration of the benefits and challenges inherent in each. Like many plans, ours has been overtaken by events. Pundits, journalists, bloggers, and even politicians had become aware of (some would say obsessed with) a new Facebook group: Canadians Against Proroguing Parliament at http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=260348091419&ref=ss, but you'll need to be a member of Facebook to get access. We have chosen, therefore, to focus on this example as our starting point.

Using social media – even Facebook – to bring individuals together to coalesce around an issue is not new, even in Canadian federal politics. A very recent example occurred only a year ago, when the three opposition parties were maneuvering to form a coalition government. At the time, a Facebook group entitled Canadians Against a Liberal/NDP Coalition Gov't was formed and had 126,466 members in mid-January of this year. (Yes, the group is still within the Facebook site, at http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=51442165364&ref=search&sid=1060489322.2815261383..1.) Neither memory nor a Google search have turned up much attention in the mass media (like CBC and newspapers) nor micromedia (like Twitter and blogs) to this group a year ago.

Almost exactly a year later, Facebook has again been the locus of such activity, but this time against prorogation. Both mass and micro media began to pay attention to this group: commentators, bloggers, and news reports all began to report the rising numbers. At least one Conservative spokesperson said that the group would have no credibility until it exceeded the number of members in last year's Facebook group. Although that number was reached and exceeded, there has been no indication that the group has credibility with the governing party. Even among media pundits, there is consensus that what is more important than the group itself has been what it could leverage in terms of more traditional protest tactics: letters to Members of Parliament, and rallying and demonstrating in cities across Canada. With more than 209,000 members leading up to the date of the scheduled demonstrations, there was wide speculation of the extent to which this would translate to numbers on the streets. Police estimates of more than 3,000 people on Parliament Hill and approximately 10,000 in Toronto far exceeded the expectations of pundits and prognosticators.

In the midst of all the profile and excitement, there are some fundamental questions that could be asked about this group and its effectiveness. These are the same questions that

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any group using Facebook (or other social media that will be discussed in future columns) could consider, ideally in advance of picking up the tool. Here are a few of them.

What is the tool being used for? It could be to get media attention or to build support for a cause, as was likely the case for the anti-prorogation group.

What results can be expected from using this tool? Did the originators of the anti-prorogation group, for example, hope that the Government would recall Parliament sooner? Were they hoping for massive demonstrations in front of every legislature in Canada or in Ottawa? Did they hope that political support for the governing party would decline? Did they anticipate that political support for other parties would increase? And did everyone else - the other 209,000 individuals who had joined the group, share the same goals? And does that matter?

What results can be demonstrated from using this tool? Just for the sake of argument, let's assume that all the goals described above were shared by all the group's members and that all were achieved. To what extent could the group actually be sure the outcomes were the result of their effort? If the intent was to bring attention to the group, this can be demonstrated both by the number of members, and by the number of newspaper articles, blog entries, and other media attention garnered. Beyond that, short of polling, how could the causal effect be demonstrated? In other words, it's darned near impossible to know that using a particular social medium achieves the results being sought.

How effective was the initiative? A cost-benefit analysis might be tempting since, in theory, it didn't cost anything. But, of course, given very limited human resources (paid or volunteer), the costs may have been enormous. What else did not happen because of the effort invested in this aspect of a campaign? When social media tools are used, the organization using them gives up considerable control over the message, and even the goals and results. Have there been hidden costs, in terms of using limited political capital, or endangering some relationships through such a public means of articulating one's views? What kind of follow-up will be needed to acknowledge and sustain any new supporters or contacts?

These questions imply that such campaigns are most effective if they are part of a plan; otherwise, even if they are popular and are therefore deemed to be successful, they may or may not further the goals of the organization. They may or may not support other work by that organization or its partners. And in a field of more than 300,000 Facebook groups, a huge proportion of such campaigns, no matter how well considered and planned, never get noticed.

In the next issue of The Philanthropist, this column will describe the experience of one civil-society organization's experience (so far) with social media. In future issues, we will consider what social media and other technological tools exist and the opportunities and challenges they create for those who choose to use them.