
DEVELOPING A SOCIAL MEDIA STRATEGY

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WHAT IF I TOLD YOU ONLY 185,000 OUT OF 200 MILLION FACEBOOK MEMBERS worldwide have ever given money to a charity through Facebook? You might be disappointed at the lack of generosity. You might assume that not many Facebook members are interested in charity.

Now what if I told you that not only do almost 200,000 nonprofits have a presence on Facebook, but also that 25 million Facebook members have expressed support for a nonprofit cause on the site and have shared that information with their friends and networks? Well, then you might say nonprofits on Facebook are experiencing tremendous success – especially in terms of raising profile and awareness. This example, like many others in the social media world, shows that success depends entirely on how you define your goals.

Social media tools can be extremely valuable for nonprofit organizations, and they can create new ways to engage with volunteers, donors, constituents, students, and others. A plan or strategy for these tools helps to define an organization's goals, audiences, and resources. Without a strategy, nonprofits risk wasting resources and missing targets.

Social media are changing traditional forms of nonprofit communication in three major ways:

- First, *connection*. Social media use digital or online tools to connect people with common interests, passions, professions, and more.
- Second, *interaction*. Social media allow an audience to respond and interact with other individuals and with the organization.
- Third, *information flow*. Social media change the way that information flows. It used to be that information moved from one source to an audience (as with a traditional press release, for example). Now information flows in a more viral, multi-layered way.

There are myriad social media tools and mechanisms at the disposal of nonprofit organizations. Traditional websites with interactive elements like *The Philanthropist* and freestanding online networks like Idealist or Charity Village are basic examples of social media at work. Many nonprofits have blogs or online journals, using platforms like

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Wordpress, TypePad, or Tumblr to tell their stories. Others have pages on Facebook and LinkedIn to take advantage of their supporters' social or professional networks. Still others use digital media platforms like Flickr and YouTube to disseminate photos and videos of their clients and services in action. Some nonprofits use the popular micro-blogging site Twitter to send out updates and news items to followers. Others have buttons on their websites for readers to share their links using Delicious, Digg, and other tools. A few nonprofits use Ning, an online platform for people who want to create their own social networks around specific interests or topics, while others use Meetup, an online network that helps supporters find in-person meetings. This is just the beginning – FriendFeed, StumbleUpon, Technorati, and so many others offer different solutions for different needs.

In order to navigate the increasingly complex world of social media, it is essential for nonprofits to reflect on their own needs and to create a strategy. The following questions provide one way to start.

WHAT IS YOUR GOAL IN ENGAGING IN SOCIAL MEDIA?

For example, is your goal marketing? Would increased exposure through social media reinforce your organization's brand? Or is your goal outreach? Would social media provide a forum to recognize and cultivate volunteers, donors, or journalists? The United Way of Toronto has used social media to great effect in this area. For example, it uses Twitter to thank its volunteers and multiplies the 'gratitude effect' by having its Twitter feed appear in real-time on the main page of its website. Is your goal to increase fundraising through the use of social media? Would you use social media to talk about appeals and campaigns, to recognize donors, and drive traffic to your donate page? What other goals does your organization have? Perhaps you would like to use social media for community building or creating an online space for virtual dialogue. The South Asian Philanthropy Project, which I co-founded, is an organization that is doing this through a blog and a Facebook group.

WHAT AUDIENCE DO YOU WANT TO REACH?

If your desired audience is rather tech-savvy, you may have to compete with a range of other information sources – ones that your audience may already read. If they are not very accustomed to new technologies, then you will need to plan for a longer ramp-up period to encourage adoption and to think about how to draw in newer users.

WHAT RESOURCES DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION HAVE AND/OR NEED TO EXECUTE A SOCIAL MEDIA PLAN?

Many of the tools listed above have free or low-cost options to get started, so resources of staff time rather than of money will be most important. For example, in its "We Are Media" project materials, the Nonprofit Technology Network recommends a baseline of approximately five hours per week to manage a social media pilot project.

**HOW WILL YOU KNOW IF YOU ARE SUCCESSFUL
IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA SPHERE?**

The amount of money raised would be a reasonable metric for a fundraising goal, but web traffic or an increase in volunteers would be more appropriate for an outreach or marketing goal. Metrics are available through the different social media platforms – for example, the number of members on Facebook or followers on Twitter – but it is important to establish benchmarks for your own organization and not compare yourself against nonprofits that have different goals or resources.

After answering these strategic questions about your organization's social media goals, a few key principles may help you in executing your plan.

Social media tools demand that an organization and its representatives be *genuine* and *interactive*. In the words of nonprofit social media expert Beth Kanter on her own blog: “The most important thing for nonprofits is to shift from messaging to conversation starters based on listening.”² As a start, use Google Alerts and other similar Internet tracking tools to find out what your audience is already saying about your organization.

Adopt a written social media policy that spells out what it means for your organization to stay on message with these new communications outlets as well as what individual employees can and cannot say using social media tools, for example, in the event of an actual or communications crisis.

Finally, start small. Try a pilot project in social media such as a weekly blog or a Facebook group, just like you might do with piloting a new community service. Successfully implementing a pilot project will allow you to demonstrate an upward trajectory of growth as your organization expands into new social media spaces.

NOTES

1. Based on a description of Facebook Causes application by Kim Hart and Megan Greenwell, “To Nonprofits Seeking Cash, Facebook App Isn’t So Green,” *Washington Post*, April 22, 2009.
2. Beth Kanter. (2010, May 20). 9 Ways Nonprofits Can Excel Using Social Media. *Beth's Blog*: <http://www.bethkanter.org/socialmedia-nonprofits-excel> [September 15, 2010].

