
LESSONS FROM THE “FRONT LINES”: ONE ENGO’S FORAY INTO THE BRAVE NEW WORLD OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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THE ORGANIZATION I WORK FOR, THE CANADIAN PARKS AND WILDERNESS SOCIETY (CPAWS), is facing the same challenges as many other NGO’s these days – our traditional donor base is aging and the response rate to our direct mail prospecting campaigns is declining slowly but surely.

But it’s not just funding to keep our organization growing that motivates our interest in using social media to communicate with Canadians. We’re also motivated by our desire to continue to build our “constituency” of wilderness conservation activists – people who are in the know about our issues and can be called upon to voice their support to decision-makers at critical moments.

We’re only too aware that, as trends in young people’s engagement in politics and charity diverge more and more from their parents’, our success in meeting them where they are – online and networking with each other like crazy – will be more and more critical to keep our organization relevant, vital, and growing.

With this in mind, we began our adventure into social media in 2005, when an opportunity dropped into our lap. We inherited a pioneering effort by a creative environmentalist named Steph Legault to create an “e-activist network” of Canadian wilderness conservation supporters, called “wildcanada.net.” Steph decided to move on to other pastures, daunted to some degree by the challenges of creating customized “activist software” for Canadian application.

With wildcanada.net and a \$14,000 per year subscription to an e-advocacy software package, CPAWS gained a list of about 25,000 subscribers and the ability, for the first time, to track their actions online. We really didn’t know how well it would work, but we began to communicate with these people about our conservation campaigns, offering them opportunities to send letters at opportune times to decision-makers as well as the chance to “unsubscribe.”

By and large they did not unsubscribe, and so we were off. We recognized that continuing to build our “e-list” was going to be a critical component of our campaign engagement and fundraising activities from then on – even if the “how” was a bit of a black hole.

By 2006, we began to plot a route forward to harness the growing power of what was then being referred to as “web 2.0.” Tools like Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, and various forms of “peer to peer” fundraising were still in their infancy.

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We decided to consider two main routes simultaneously along the virtual highway. One would allow us to diversify our sources and means of obtaining donations from individuals. The other would help us with “friend-raising” – adding to the list of warm bodies we thought would be likely to voice their support for our cause and tell their friends about it, if we gave them an easy way to do so.

For the uninitiated, Facebook is a site where you can post cute pictures and comments so that all your friends can see them. Flickr used to be the place to do this, but it has been largely supplanted by Facebook. YouTube is a site where you can post the videos you just took with your smart phone and watch everyone else’s as well as check out the latest TV shows and music videos someone has uploaded.

In 2007, with advice from a leading e-fundraising consultant, we were one of the first Canadian NGOs to use a “peer to peer” tool developed by a firm called Artez. We launched an online contest that enabled our supporters to create their own web pages and invite their friends to help them win a competition to raise funds for a campaign we were running to protect a spectacular wilderness gem called the Nahanni. We exceeded our relatively modest goal of raising \$20,000, showing that the predictions of our advisor were right. This web 2.0 tool had the power to engage a small number of highly competitive individuals in raising funds from their friends for our cause.

The following year, buoyed by our success and again with the advice of the e-fundraising firm, we launched a more comprehensive e-fundraising strategy. Unfortunately, we had decidedly less positive results, at least in terms of net dollars raised. We built an “e-giving” site that offered donors the chance to send “virtual” cards as gifts to loved ones on special occasions in recognition of donations to the organization. We also launched an e-appeal campaign via e-mail whereby we tried using a variety of writing styles to request donations from individuals with whom we were in touch. It turned out that people thought the e-giving site looked great. They also didn’t seem to mind getting the donation appeals. They just didn’t respond by and large. We learned that most still seemed to prefer sending gifts you can actually feel and touch.

On the positive side, the dreaded “unsubscribe” rates of our e-subscribers stayed low, while the coveted “open” and “click through” rates of our messages stayed at or above industry averages.

On our second front – aimed at “friend-raising” as well as fund raising – we joined forces with Mountain Equipment Co-op (MEC), Canada’s biggest outdoor-gear retailer, which had the guts to explore this new territory with us. Together, we turned to a leading social marketing firm, which advised us to create a new web 2.0 site that would be a “hub” for engaging outdoor recreationists in a new online community in support of wilderness conservation. MEC made a very significant financial commitment to developing this new approach with CPAWS. We also benefited from a generous grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. Both supported our work on this project and continue to do so today.

It took one year from the stage of initial concept to the launch of our project called The Big Wild: Canada’s Wilderness Protection Movement, and that in itself was educational. A year from concept to launch in the old media world didn’t seem like such a big deal. A year in the social media world was very big indeed – it was more like a decade.

While we were busy hiring a leading Canadian ad and web development agency to create our new custom web 2.0 site, the technology world was blasting ahead. The site the agency created for us was intended to customize the characteristics of the then-still-fairly-new social media tools including Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, and peer-to-peer fundraising. However the end product did not live up to our expectations.

We learned a lot from this adventure. First, even with major investment, building custom social media tools is a risky proposition. Ours were full of bugs and didn't function nearly as well as the ones that most people online were already using. Second, most ad agencies and web development firms have never met a cause they didn't think they could help, but few have actually proven their abilities in the brave new world of social media marketing. Third, the pace of change during a year in social media is like 20 years in traditional media, so what you think you can accomplish with a one-year project development plan will be affected by factors you can't predict.

On the positive side, we also learned something. Social media tools offer charities ways to engage with the 40-and-under crowd that just didn't exist 10 years ago. They can also build buzz for a charity's causes in unexpected places. For example, a low cost but creative video we uploaded to Facebook and YouTube last summer was shared around the head office of a major corporation by one of their employees who saw it and liked it.

Great minds are rapidly creating new ways for charities to use social media tools that will make them much more affordable and do-able in the future. One of the tremendous benefits of entering into the world of social media is that we're gaining young, new employees and contractors who are using their creativity and skills to communicate about our cause to their peers. CPAWS is looking at one software tool right now to create a customized social media network that would enable us to do essentially for free what would have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars just two years ago.

Has it been a challenging and at times frustrating path to try to navigate through the social media world? Absolutely. Would we have missed being part of it? Not for a minute! Will we continue to experiment in social media to promote our cause? Yes.

As more and more nonprofit organizations venture into the social media world, we're convinced there will be break through moments. Our work with MEC on The Big Wild continues. With Statistics Canada reporting that, for the first time, Canadians are spending more hours on the Internet than watching TV, mass communications has reached a turning point. The world is moving online – fast – and the viewing of “user-generated content,” thanks to social media tools, is rising at lightning speed. To continue to have an impact, we're certain that charities need to be in the social media game.