

Social Media for Nonprofit Organizations

Part I: From Inception to Implementation to Investment Return

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Everyone knows about the Internet but how should a nonprofit use it? Separate from internal applications to serve day-to-day operations, Internet technology appears to rule everything that's seen and heard. The Internet has its own "hip" insider language, is available globally, and is accessible with a mobile device no larger than a bar of soap. And anyone can use the Internet to study a nonprofit's performance, Google its leaders, read their financial statements, and more – with or without the nonprofit's participation.

Nonprofits usually begin with a web page and many are wonderfully inviting, even exciting. They offer pictures and videos designed to engage people in the organization, advocate its cause, connect them to others, and ask for money. Social media, on the other hand, is today's preferred vehicle for personal, interactive communications. Its chief applications in the for-profit world are marketing and promotion of a company's "brand" or image along with its products. Where does it fit with a nonprofit organization whose mission is to deliver services and community benefits? How much will capturing the interest and involvement of "friends, fans, and followers" cost in equipment, software, and staffing? What is the return, and how long will it take?

audiences.

3. Feed and nurture your initiative and your respondents.
4. Measure and evaluate your results.

To define your objectives, understand the intent is to enlarge and engage your constituency. The traditional use of direct mail and benefit events still serves to reach into the community and invite participation, but these activities usually occur only once or twice a year. Social media is a vehicle with 24/7 continuous activity.

Who are your constituencies? Which of them do you want to reach today? Is it Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, LinkedIn, or YouTube they use? How do you contact them and what do you want to say? Most nonprofits want to develop deeper relationships with those they serve along with donors, volunteers, and community leaders. They also want to increase their participation, energize their loyalty, stimulate their advocacy of the cause, and induce them to give more of their time, talent, and treasure. That's a big agenda, and social media is not the only answer – especially since large parts of your constituency may not be among those who have transitioned to these communication vehicles, so traditional ones still need to be continued.

“Build it and they will come” does not apply to social media. Once begun, responses must be monitored frequently, updated consistently, and reacted to quickly (that means *daily*). Building confidence and trust with each of your constituencies is essential. The “fans, followers, and friends” acquired must be nurtured so that they view your organization as an active leader in a cause they care about. Consistent engagement is social media's best use to keep your organization top-of-mind, which can lead to additional participation. Failing this, it becomes stale and quickly will lose their interest. There is also the risk that engaging a wider spectrum of respondents will likely include some with complaints or negative views. Consider these an opportunity to improve your organization's programs or to correct misinformation or misperceptions.

What does, or should, success look like? What results are essential and what do they actually mean? Can the investment return be calculated? Measurements are important, but website and online metrics are elusive. Which metrics to track? Number of hits vs. click-throughs? Frequency of visits vs. time on site? Are responses coming from current constituents or target audiences, or were they “acquaintances” just passing through? Can you recognize and respond to the difference? Can you tell if they are more engaged than before? Have they changed their contact preference from prior methods (print, phone, and mail) to one or more forms of online contact? Have they increased their giving levels and frequency? And, most important, does analysis lead to any actionable follow-up?

The key test is whether or not a meaningful, valued engagement has been achieved,

one that can be sustained and expanded over time. New contributions are important but the best results come only after time and effort are spent building an involved and trusting relationship with each constituent. Research can begin to identify those “fans, friends, and followers” with potential to do more. Stewardship of all online participants, along with continuous tracking to document results from more focused message exchanges, remains the predominant requirement.

Once your organization has begun such online media activities and has evaluated the responses that demonstrate positive impact, you are ready to move to the next level. Options abound to increase program and service offerings, target new audiences, and expand participation levels, including through coordinated multi-media combinations with traditional mail, phone, email, and more – all with personalized one-to-one messages. These options and more will be explored next month in *Part II: Social Media for Nonprofit Marketing, Communications, and Fundraising*.

Additional Resources:

Internet and Nonprofit Management: Strategies, Tools & Trade Secrets. Edited by Ted Hart, Steve MacLaughlin, James M. Greenfield, Philip H. Geier, Jr. AFP/Wiley Fund Development Series. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010.

“Measuring the Return on Investment” in *Managing Technology to Meet Your Mission: A Strategic Guide for Nonprofit Leaders*. Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2009.

People to People Fundraising: Social Networking and Web 2.0 for Charities. Edited by Ted Hart, James M. Greenfield, and Sheeraz D. Haji. New York: Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2007.

“Social Networks and Mid-Size Non-Profits” in *Philanthropy Action*. November 2009.

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