

Nonprofit Use of Social Media – Is it Effective?

Introduction

With advances in technology, nonprofits are faced with a growing array of opportunities to interact with various stakeholders. Today's internet technologies have brought rapid change to both organizational communication and public relations (Curtis et al., 2010). In particular, social networks and social media present unique opportunities for nonprofits to develop and sustain relationships with new and existing stakeholders.

A social network is broadly defined as a set of actors and the set of ties representing some type of relationship among the actors (Grabner-Krauter, 2009). Actors in a social network are connected by a set of relationships such as friendship, affiliation, financial exchanges or information sharing. Social network sites are web-based services that allow users (i.e. actors) to create a public or semi-public personal profile, list other users of the same service with whom they have established a relationship, and explore their list of relationships and the lists of others in the same service network (Boyd & Ellison, 2007, Grabner-Krauter, 2009, Ogden & Starita, 2009). Social network sites provide a virtual community for people interested in a particular subject to simply associate or to increase their circle of contacts. After creating a profile, members can communicate with each other via email, instant messaging, or in a blog-like format. Additionally, they can discover and invite other members or friends of friends into their personal network.

Hundreds of online social networking sites have been launched with similar technological features that support a wide range of interests and practices. These sites can be broadly

classified into four (4) categories: sites that emphasize staying in touch with friends and reconnecting with people (e.g. Facebook); oriented towards work- or business-related contexts (e.g. LinkedIn, XING); geared towards romantic relationship initiation (e.g. Match.com); or aiming to connect those with similar interests such as music (e.g. communities of interest such as MySpace) (Grabner-Krauter, 2009). Facebook, launched in 2004, is now the largest and fastest-growing social networking site with over 500 million users worldwide.

Social media is closely related to social networking and “allows and encourages uncontrolled distribution by using web-based technologies to turn communication into interactive dialogues” (Ogden & Starita, 2009). Social media is distinct from traditional media (i.e. newspapers, television) in that it is accessible, relatively inexpensive, and enables almost anyone to publish or access information. Social media accelerates conversation and allows readers, viewers, and listeners to contribute to the creation or development of the content. In contrast, traditional media generally requires significant resources to publish information. Because social media transforms passive audiences into active members of an online community, it can create strong bonds (Cramer, 2009). Social media can include text, audio, video, images, podcasts, and other multimedia communications. YouTube, internet forums and blogs are examples of social media. Twitter is slightly harder to categorize and acts like a combination of both social media and social networking (Ogden & Starita, 2009).

Social networking is something that we all do, whether we realize it or not, and the most basic forms of social networks are friendship and family ties. Social Network Theory maintains that every network consists of two parts: the nodes and the ties. A node is the part of the network that “acts” and can be as simple as a person or as complex as an organization. The tie is the ways in which the nodes relate to each other and can be anything from email correspondence to

friendship. The nodes are important but without the ties the network doesn't exist. The strength and actions of the nodes directly affect the ties between them, therefore changing the dynamics of the whole network in one way or another. One of the defining elements of Social Network Theory that differentiates it from other sociological sciences is the weight it gives to the relationships between the nodes, as opposed to the attributes of the nodes themselves.

The internet is the largest and most complex example of a social network. Traditionally, most of the activity on the internet has been driven by for-profit entities. However, social media and social networking are beginning to alter nonprofits both in the way they operate as well as their relationships with the public. Increasingly, nonprofit organizations are using social media and networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter to increase brand awareness, gain friends and bolster fundraising. Theoretically, these social networking sites act as an equalizer for organizations, regardless of size or resources. If used correctly, any organization can leverage the internet in an attempt to increase outreach, fundraising and recruitment capacity. The idea of social giving exploits online networks, which offer exponential possibilities for developing personal relationships. Once an organization makes a connection to an individual, that person can leverage his or her personal contacts. In essence, social media and networking is the old adage "friends of friends" gone viral.

Social media are not a fad or a trend. With near universal access to the internet and the ubiquity of mobile phones and e-mail, the use of social media will only continue to expand (Kanter & Fine, 2010). Social media and social networking have shifted the emphasis of internet service from being centered around consumption to becoming more interactive and collaborative, creating new opportunities for communication between for-profit, nonprofit organizations and the general public (Henderson & Bowley, 2010). These markets could be a nonprofit's dream,

offering millions of interconnected, engaged consumers. While this technology presents seemingly limitless possibilities for nonprofits, a review of the literature and current research will help to determine its applicability and usefulness for organizations in general.

Literature Review

Examples of the Successful Use of Social Media by Nonprofits

The American Red Cross (ARC) has been identified as one of the major success stories for integrating the use of social media and technology into an organization's communication strategy. The organization uses a variety of social media strategies to empower the public to either seek or give help during a disaster. Their use of social media includes Facebook, Twitter, the photo-sharing site Flickr, YouTube and various blogs. Their successful use of social media can be seen in the response of the ARC after a devastating earthquake struck Haiti in early January 2010. Within five hours of the quake, the ARC was able to release a short video that supplied detailed information about the state of the island and its residents on the organization's YouTube channel. In less than 24 hours, the Red Cross initiated a text relief campaign in which wireless users wanting to help were asked to text HAITI to 90999 and a \$10 charge would later appear on their phone bills. The campaign was promoted by way of both traditional and social media and social networking sites.

Over the next 36 hours, the campaign raised more than \$4 million, making it the most successful texting fundraising effort ever. As of March 2010, the total raised by texting was more than \$32 million, accounting for about 12.5% of the \$250 million the organization had raised for Haiti. The Red Cross's Haiti fundraising example proved to be an exception to many previously held concerns about mobile commerce. It also allowed the Red Cross to connect with a younger

group of donors, a target base the organization previously had a very hard time soliciting donations from.

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), the nation's largest organization working to end animal cruelty, is also an avid user of social media. The Humane Society started utilizing social media early on by establishing a profile on MySpace and later expanded to other networks. More recently, HSUS has focused most of their efforts on Facebook and Twitter, though the organization has active presences on many social networks, including YouTube and Change.org. "Our goals for social media tie to our organization's vision of building a movement to confront animal cruelty and celebrate animals worldwide," said Carie Lewis, the Internet Marketing Manager for HSUS (Currie, 2009). Social media has allowed HSUS to connect with existing supporters, encourage the spread of information and awareness, and facilitated the Humane Society measurably reaching new people.

In 2009, the organization launched the United States Spay Day Photo Contest as one part of its overall effort, in addition to traditional broadcast media and other social media outreach. The contest took place on Facebook, where more than 45,000 pet lovers entered their pets' photos and encouraged their friends to raise money for spay/neuter efforts worldwide. It raised more than \$550,000. Grace Markarian, online communications manager at the Humane Society said that integrating social media into their fundraising campaign "...helped us increase awareness and reach audiences that we would not have normally reached" (Kanter & Fine, 2010).

The Red Cross and the Humane Society are not alone in their successful use of social media. Social media strategies have helped the Ocean Conservatory's International Coastal

Cleanup become one of the largest events of its kind, growing from a single site cleanup to a coordinated global effort that in one day mobilized 400,000 volunteers to pick up 6.8 million pounds of trash in 100 countries (Searce et al., 2010). Greenpeace partnered with scientists to track whales using GPS while they migrated south through dangerous waters where the whales are hunted. Greenpeace called the campaign the Great Whale Trail and encouraged supporters to become involved by making personal fundraising pages in support of the cause. The result was the creation of more than 5,000 personal fundraising pages, raising more than \$120,000.

Other examples include The Nature Conservancy, who teamed up with an application provider to launch (Lil) Green Patch on Facebook in 2008. In September of that year it was rated as the number one application on Facebook and the initiative engaged 6.3 million people and saved more than 70 million square feet of rainforest in Costa Rica. Charity: water raised more than \$250,000 from 10,000 new donors through the groundbreaking Twestival event which brought together Twitter communities from all over the world for more than 200 events in February 2009 (Kanter & Fine, 2010). The use of social media became mainstream after President Barack Obama's election campaign combined grassroots organizing with online tools to mobilize more than 13 million supporters and raise nearly \$750 million for his 2008 election (Searce et al., 2010).

While these organizations are high-profile examples of nonprofits that have been extremely successful in implementing and using social media to reach various goals, it is important to review the literature to determine if these platforms do indeed offer infinite possibilities for nonprofits in general.

Current Research

The University of Massachusetts' Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research recently published its third report in a series of studies on the usage of social media by charities in the United States. Based on a list compiled annually by Forbes Magazine, the study compared adoption of social media in 2007, 2008 and 2009 by the 200 largest charities in the United States. Forbes' list of largest charities is assembled based on the amount of private, nongovernmental support received in the latest available fiscal year. The researchers based their analysis on detailed interviews with the executives of the charities that responded to their request. The resulting participants were diverse in mission, average gifts, revenue and geographic location (Barnes & Mattson, 2010).

The first study, conducted in 2007, revealed that these large nonprofits were leading large and small businesses in their usage of and attitude towards social media. Seventy-five percent of charitable organizations reported using some form of social media including blogs, podcasts, message boards and social networking. More than a third of the organizations reported utilizing blogging as an engagement tool and forty-six percent considered social media important to their fundraising strategy (Mattson & Barnes, 2007).

A year later, the 2008 study showed that the previously identified lead still existed with eighty-nine percent of nonprofits utilizing social media. The percent of those blogging increased to fifty-seven percent and a comparable forty-five percent believed social media was a key part of their fundraising strategy (Barnes & Mattson, 2009).

The 2009 study revealed that nonprofit organizations continued to outpace the business world in their use of social media. This study indicated that ninety-seven percent of charitable

organizations were using some form of social media and that social networking (96%) and Twitter (90%) were the most commonly used tools. Nonprofits also reported an elevated presence on Facebook (93%) and MySpace (30%) than other sectors. While other sectors had all increased their adoption of blogging since 2007, nonprofits remained in the forefront for the third year in a row with sixty-five percent. Forty-two percent of participants reported that social media was very important to their fundraising strategy and seventy-nine percent of those organizations viewed social media as at least “somewhat important” to their future strategy (Barnes & Mattson, 2010).

In August 2009, Sage Nonprofit Solutions contacted 7,500 subscribers of The Chronicle of Philanthropy inviting their participation in an online study of nonprofit use of social media. Large nonprofits made up the majority of the respondents, with almost fifty percent reporting operating budgets of \$5 million or more. An additional thirty-five percent had operating budgets of \$1 to \$4.99 million and only three percent reported operating budgets under \$500,000. Topics of the survey included: types of social media utilized by nonprofits, length of time participating, specific tools used, goals for participation, success with participation, and reasons for not participating.

The results of the survey demonstrated that eighty-eight percent of participants participated in some form of social media, with the majority using general social media like Facebook and MySpace (79%) and blogging or microblogging (45%). More than half of the participants had been using social media for less than a year and twenty percent spend more than five hours per week using social media. The most reported reasons for using social media included “sharing our story” (82%), building a community (82%), public relations (77%) and donor engagement and retention (66%). While seventy percent of respondents indicated that

success with social media is somewhat or very important to their organization, only nine percent were satisfied with their success so far. Of the respondents that haven't adopted social media, forty-five percent were unsure of the relevance and advantages to their organization and others cited the lack of time and resources (Sage Nonprofit Solutions, 2009).

In April, 2010, the Nonprofit Technology Network, Common Knowledge and The Port Network published the second *Nonprofit Social Networking Benchmark Report*. Between February 3 and March 15, 2010, 1,173 nonprofit professionals responded to an online survey regarding their organization's use of online social networks. Survey respondents represented small, medium and large nonprofits and all nonprofit segments. Compared to their earlier findings in 2009, the report indicated that nonprofits continued to increase their use of online social media, with Facebook and Twitter as the preferred networks. Eighty-six percent of respondents indicated that they had a presence on Facebook, a sixteen percent increase from 2009. Twitter grew as an outlet of choice for nonprofits, moving from forty-three percent in 2009 to sixty percent in 2010.

In terms of motivation for social media usage, marketing the organization was the major focus for the respondents with ninety-two percent designating it as a priority. Forty-six percent indicated that fundraising was an important role for their social network presence. While fundraising was an important goal, it was not universally successful. For example, of the forty percent of organizations that confirmed receiving donations from Facebook, seventy-eight percent of these organizations raised \$1,000 or less in the past twelve months. Additionally, only 3.5 percent of organizations raised \$10,000 or more during that same time period (NTN, 2010). While the return on investment for many of these organizations is unclear, they continue to

devote limited resources to their social media channels. Almost eighty-five percent of respondents indicated that they devoted at least one-quarter of a full-time staff person to maintaining – marketing, managing and cultivating – their social network presence. Roughly two-thirds of the survey respondents dedicated one-quarter to one-half of a full-time resource and almost nineteen percent committed three-quarters of more staff to their commercial networks (NTN, 2010).

With over 500 million users alone, Facebook offers an almost undeniable platform for nonprofits to reach stakeholders and promote their mission. The population of Facebook for nonprofits has been driven by the introduction of Causes. Causes allows users to mobilize their social networks to benefit U.S. registered 501(c)3 charities and every user has the ability to create a cause for an issue, recruit others to join, keep others informed and raise money (Ogden & Starita, 2009). When the Causes application was posted on Facebook, more than 30,000 causes were created in just six (6) months supporting over 12,000 existing nonprofit organizations (Fine, 2010). As of July 2009, members of Facebook had given a total of \$10 million to 26,000 causes (Ogden & Starita, 2009). However, only a fraction of the 180,000 nonprofits that use Facebook Causes have raised more than \$1000 (Schipul, 2010).

Waters and colleagues conducted a content analysis of 275 nonprofit organization profiles on Facebook to determine exactly how the social networking site was being used by the organizations to advance their mission and programs. The profiles were evaluated for the presence of items representing organizational disclosure, information dissemination, and involvement. The researchers found that nearly all of the organizations understood the importance of disclosure in their profiles with ninety-seven percent listing the administrators of their Facebook profiles and ninety-six percent providing a description of the organization (96%).

Only eighty-one percent of the organizations provided a link to their website and seventy-one percent used the organizational logo on Facebook. Surprisingly, fewer than half (43%) of organizations provided the mission statement of the organization, and less than one-quarter (22%) provided any sort of organizational history (Waters et al., 2009).

The analysis revealed that the most often used strategy for information dissemination was use of discussion boards. However, of the 204 organizations that used this strategy, more than a third had not used the discussion board within the past month. Additionally, although forty-four percent of the nonprofit organizations posted news announcements on their profiles, very few took advantage of the multimedia capabilities. The organizations also failed to publicize their public relations efforts with only twenty percent providing summaries of their campaigns and only five percent posting press releases (Waters et al, 2009).

When looking at involvement, the content analysis revealed that the most common strategy for involving the organization's supporters was simply providing an email address for organizational representatives. Only thirteen percent provided an outlet to make online charitable donations and an equal percentage listed current volunteer opportunities. Eight percent of the organizations provided a calendar of events to encourage involvement (Waters et al., 2009).

The researchers concluded that the nonprofit organizations were open and transparent about who maintained the site and what they hoped to accomplish. However, they failed to take advantage of the interactive nature of the social networking site.

While Waters and colleagues focused their attention on nonprofits of all sizes, Ogden and Starita conducted similar research that targeted mid-size nonprofits, defined as organizations with annual budgets of \$1 to \$5 million. Their target list of organizations for the survey was

obtained from two different sources: nonprofits identified through Facebook’s Causes (excluding religious and political organizations) and those in Charity Navigator’s database (also excluding religious organizations). From the original targeted list, a total of 256 organizations answered at least part of the survey and 212 completed the survey in its entirety (Ogden & Starita, 2009).

The results of Ogden and Starita’s research indicates that the majority of participants used social media to generate publicity or general marketing, followed by attracting new donors, improving existing donor relationships and attracting new volunteers. The respondents indicated that they found social networking less useful for all of the initial motivations with the exception of improving existing relationships. Additionally, seventy-four percent of the organizations reported that either they had raised less than \$100 or that they did not know whether they had raised anything. Similarly, eighty-five percent of the organizations reported attracting twenty-five or fewer new volunteers or were not able to determine if volunteers had been attracted. In terms of staff time invested, fifty-one percent reported devoting one to five hours per week to social networking technologies.

Although this study suggests some ambiguous results as to the effectiveness of social networking, fifty-nine percent of the survey respondents reported that the “effectiveness” of social networking was increasing and almost three quarters (73%) planned to increase their use of social networking in the future (Ogden & Starita, 2009).

Local Experience

To determine how nonprofit organizations in the Richmond metropolitan area were utilizing social media, I developed a brief, six-question survey and distributed it via email to local organizations on the Richmond, Southside and Rappahannock arms of the Connect

Network. These networks are designed for citizens who want to strengthen their community and provide information, resources and instant access to nonprofits, civic leaders, volunteers and others interested in improving their local areas (What We Do). The survey covered the specific types of social media used by nonprofits, the organizations' goals for using social media, their success in accomplishing the identified goals, success with fundraising specifically, their annual budget, and type of organization. In total, 87 local nonprofits completed the survey.

Of the 87 survey respondents, 82.8 percent of the organizations indicated that they used social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. Additionally, 43.1 percent of the respondents indicated that they used "other" forms of social media, with the majority of these organizations identifying Twitter as their forum of choice. Almost a third (32.5%) of the organizations utilized blogs, 14.9 percent employed podcasts and 18.7 percent reported using message boards. Additional respondent comments indicated the prevalent use of email blasts, list serves, and newsletters.

In terms of their goals, an overwhelming majority of the responding nonprofits (96.3%) indicated that social media was a means to increase awareness of their cause or organization. Other goals included attracting new volunteers (63.8%), keeping volunteers informed/engaged (68.8%), creating an interactive space for sharing (58.8%), fundraising (58.8%), program delivery (41.3%), customer service (25.0%), and market research (12.5%). Specific comments included an organizational focus on collaboration, education and news delivery.

When asked whether they viewed their experiences with social media as successful in achieving their identified goals, more than two-thirds of the respondents (67.9%) indicated that they believed their organization's use of social media had been successful including 12.3 percent

that stated that they had been “very successful”. Only 16 percent of the organizations believed that they had been unsuccessful and an additional 16 percent did not know if their use of social media had been successful. The majority of comments were from those organizations that believed their efforts were either unsuccessful or were unable to determine success. These comments indicated an inability to measure success and a sense that traditional methods yielded both more volunteers and greater fundraising capabilities.

In regards to fundraising via social media, 35.9 percent of the respondents revealed that they had been successful in raising funds through Facebook; 3.2 percent had been successful in fundraising with MySpace; and, 3.0 percent had raised money through their use of Twitter. However, of the organizations who successfully raised funds through Facebook, only two organizations had raised more than \$1,000. These organizations raised \$5,001 to \$10,000 and \$10,001 to \$25,000 respectively. The single nonprofit that successfully used MySpace for fundraising brought in less than \$1,000 while the organization that generated funds through Twitter earned \$1,000 to \$5,000. In their comments, many of the responding organizations stated that measuring fundraising success as a “direct result” of their social media efforts was difficult.

The nonprofits that responded to the survey represent organizations of varying size and nature. More than half of the respondents (55.8%) represented organizations with annual budgets of \$500,000 or less and only 16 percent reported budgets greater than \$5 million. More specifically, the breakdown is as follows:

- Estimated annual budget:
 - Less than \$100,000 (22.1%)
 - \$100,000 to \$500,000 (33.7%)
 - \$500,001 to \$1 million (9.3%)
 - \$1,000,001 to \$5,000,000 (18.6%)
 - \$5,000,001 to \$10 million (7.0%)
 - More than \$10 million (9.3%)

These organizations were primarily those whose focus was on social services (20.0%), education (24.7%), arts and culture (15.3%) or health services (12.9%).

Conclusion and Recommendations

With the boom in internet technology, it is clear that the nonprofit community is feeling pressure to jump on the social media and social network bandwagons. With an abundance of free tools like Facebook and Twitter, the barriers-to-entry in the social media and social networking spheres are so low that just about any nonprofit can join. Indeed, the Dartmouth Center's research indicates that nonprofit use of social media has outpaced that of large and small businesses for three years in a row. In the local area, more than three-quarters of the nonprofits that completed my survey indicated that they used social media sites like Facebook with even more organizations using other forms of social networking including blogs and podcasts. Research also reveals that these organizations view social media as effective tools to accomplish goals and plan to increase their use in the future (Ogden & Starita, 2009).

While there are clear examples of nonprofit organizations that have successfully used Facebook and other forms of social media to raise funds for their organization, fundraising success is certainly not universal or guaranteed. In both the Nonprofit Technology Network and Ogden and Starita research, the majority of organizations who had raised funds through their social media endeavors had generated less than \$1,000 and \$100, respectively. These results were echoed in my survey of local nonprofits, where only three organizations raised more than \$1,000 as a direct result of their social media presence. In all three cases, the organizations reported annual budgets of more than \$1 million with one of the organizations reporting a budget

of \$5 to \$10 million. So, while social media can certainly be used to support fundraising, it should not be thought of as a primary fundraising vehicle since it has not been proven to be universally successful. Social media should always be integrated into an existing funding strategy.

In most of the large, national studies, successful nonprofits are typically sizeable organizations with budgets and staff large enough to dedicate a significant portion to a strategy that might not necessarily result in a positive return on investment. Because large nonprofits have more people, they have a greater ability to allocate the staff time required to undertake an initiative such as social media. In fact, the Dartmouth studies only focus on the very largest charitable organizations in the country. Certainly these organizations' experiences with social media strategies may be vastly different than those of a small, relatively new nonprofit. While the Ogden and Starita study focused on mid-sized organizations, their classification of "mid-size" is questionable. Ogden and Starita classified mid-size organizations as those with budget of \$1 to \$5 million. For many localities, budgets of this size would represent large organizations. In the Richmond metro area, the only two nonprofits that raised more than \$5,000 through their social media efforts (i.e. Facebook) had budgets of \$1,000,001 to \$5 million, which constitutes relatively large organizations for the area.

From the existing research and the experiences of local nonprofits, it appears that social networking sites may be more valuable in forming online relationships with potential donors and volunteers than for raising money. An important measure of the success of social networks is not how much money they bring in, but how many of its users they attract, and the quantity and quality of interaction on the site. Indeed, local and national studies indicate that the primary

goals of social media usage by nonprofits are to raise awareness of the organization or cause, attract volunteers, and keeping key stakeholders informed and engaged. And, when questioned about the perceived success of their social media endeavors, most nonprofit organizations believe that their efforts are indeed successful in attaining these goals.

Kanter and Fine recognize that organizations have a rich mix of supporters, from the lightly touched to the super-energized. They suggest that nonprofits utilize a ladder of engagement to help better understand and assess their efforts of moving supporters to deeper levels of involvement. The levels of engagement are defined as follows (Kanter & Fine, 2010):

- *Happy bystanders*, including blog readers, friends on Facebook and personal acquaintances such as coworkers.
- *Spreaders*, people who are willing to share information about a cause with other people.
- *Donors*, who contribute financially to a cause.
- *Evangelists*, who reach out to their personal social networks and ask other people to give time and money to the cause.
- *Instigators*, who create their own content, activities, and events on behalf of the cause.

Instigators may even create a new cause or organization to more fully express themselves.

This ladder is not necessarily a linear progression from one step to another and organizations can't control what people do. However, nonprofits can provide abundant opportunities through social media for people to enjoy where they are on the ladder and become more engaged if they so choose.

Such indirect returns, however, pose challenges for nonprofits determining how much time and resources to allocate to social media (Wasley, 2009). The costs of social media can be

as low as the designation of staff time, but it's an important consideration for any organization, regardless of size. Many social media tools are free, but the time and technology necessary to configure, update, and monitor them is certainly not without cost. Again, merely having a social media presence isn't enough; the organization must ensure high quality interactions to keep individuals engaged and raise the organization above the noise that is today's social media realm. Therefore, it is easy for an organization to be fooled into thinking that social media is a great deal. Merely putting together a Facebook page is ineffective if the page is not going to be kept up-to-date and serve as an engaging forum for stakeholders.

The study conducted by Waters and colleagues revealed that a significant portion of nonprofits either were not using their Facebook pages to their fullest potential (e.g. by failing to provide a link to the organization's website or offering ways to become involved) or that the information provided was outdated. Staff time is essential for maintaining a social media presence and should be factored into any cost-benefit analysis. The Nonprofit Technology Network survey found that four out of five nonprofit organizations have allocated at least a quarter of a full-time staff member's working hours to maintaining social networks and more than half of the respondents said they planned to increase the amount of staff time spent on social networking sites over the next year (NTN, 2010). This data suggests that using social media and social networking sites effectively is anything but free.

After reviewing the available literature, one thing is clear: social media should only be one tool in an organization's overall communications strategy. There are obvious benefits to using social media. It can strengthen an organization's existing communication attempts by making them more immediate, open an avenue to a new audience and potentially gain fresh

support for the organization. It can facilitate communications, particularly if the organization's target audience is already comfortable with social media tools. It can also allow an organization's constituents to communicate, both with the organization and with one another, on their own terms. The key to doing this successfully is keeping constituents engaged and differentiating the organization from others. Therefore, social media should not replace traditional channels such as direct mail marketing; social media should merely be used to supplement these more traditional methods. As Ogden and Starita pointed out, having multiple methods of reaching individuals may actually exhaust their willingness to be reached. The key is quality, not merely quantity, and ensuring continuous quality takes important time and resources.

While there seem to be tangible benefits to using social media strategies, there are limits on the available data regarding its usefulness for nonprofit organizations. To truly gauge the utility of social media to spread knowledge, attract new volunteers and keep volunteers engaged and informed, there has to be some way to measure key indicators. Without clear metrics, it's difficult to determine the impact of social media. More research is required before any definite conclusion can be drawn about social media and its ability to engage stakeholders. In particular, there needs to be an expansion of research on the experiences of small to medium-sized nonprofit organizations. Of the major, national studies reviewed above, only the Nonprofit Technology Network's research included a sizeable portion of "small" nonprofits. In their research, more than 40 percent of the organizations reported annual budgets under \$1 million. Additionally, research should focus on the less tangible benefits like "friendraising", generating awareness and engaging stakeholders.

While many organizations believe their venture into social media has been successful, there is very little available data to back up their claims. For nonprofits that are committed to continuing or expanding their social media presence, there should be a clear evaluation of their return on investment. Nonprofits should certainly not invest time and money that could be spent on programs (i.e. the mission) simply because “everyone is doing it”. Social media use should be proactive and not reactive. That is, social media use should always be linked to strategy – every communication effort should be grounded in the organization’s mission. While it may help bolster an organization’s traditional media efforts, social media in itself is not a one size fits all model for nonprofit organizations and should certainly not replace those traditional strategies.

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