



# The Power of Social Media for Nonprofit Organizations

**WHITE** paper | Nonprofit Series



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## The Power of Social Media for Nonprofit Organizations

Just a few years ago, social media was an emerging technology extolled more for its technical virtues than its ability to appeal to the masses. Over the years, there has been a significant change in the way people participate in social media and use it to humanize the interactions between organizations and the public.

According to a report by Danah M. Boyd of the University of California-Berkeley and Nicole B. Ellison of Michigan State University, the first true social networking site, sixdegrees.com, was launched in 1997. The site was the first to combine elements such as creating profiles, listing friends and searching networks for friends and acquaintances. The concept has taken many forms and incarnations since that time, but the underlying success rests with the ability of social sites to facilitate reaching out to a wide audience with the touch of a few buttons.

### Nonprofits are Using Social Media

As the use of social networking sites began to increase, businesses took notice. Savvy companies realized that reaching out to consumers in the social media sphere gave them the opportunity to cast a wide net in a targeted way. For example, corporations could place advertisements geared toward women on popular fashion blogs, potentially gaining the attention of thousands of women per day. The shift occurred when companies recognized the key to success lay in interaction, e.g., giving audiences the ability to have two-way conversation. And, it wasn't long before nonprofit organizations followed suit.

The largest nonprofit organizations are outpacing corporations and academic institutions in the adoption of social media.

According to a study conducted by Dr. Nora Ganim Barnes, Ph.D. of Dartmouth and Eric Mattson of Seattle-based Financial Insite Inc., the largest nonprofit organizations are outpacing corporations and academic institutions in the adoption of social media. The study found that social networking and video blogging are the most common tools used, and 80 percent of respondents feel social media is at least somewhat important to the nonprofit's future strategy.

March of Dimes, for example, uses social media as a platform to share real stories and keep supporters up to date on the latest news about the organization. March of Dimes has a presence on several platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr, as well as a blog. While not every organization has the capacity to manage numerous platforms, organizations such as March of Dimes recognize the benefits of determining where its audience is and telling its story in that space.

### Forging Relationships

The rise of social media is largely attributable to a combination of the increased accessibility of online tools and the desire to feel connected to users of similar backgrounds, interests or experiences. How

better to galvanize supporters of a cause than to create a community where they can converse with an organization and each other? But the organizations most likely to achieve success also understand how to build a relationship online and gain the trust of their audiences.

Consider the interactions you have with friends and business colleagues. Success comes from open, honest communication and building rapport in a collaborative manner. Participants

in social media do not want to be talked at, sold to or consistently hit up for money or time. Social media is about establishing an ongoing bond which feels positive and valuable to the audience.

## Participating in Social Media

In order to derive the most benefit from including social media in your marketing plan, it must be part of an overall business strategy. Each of the tactics employed must directly support the organization's strategic goals and objectives. With so many social media platforms available, which sites and tactics are the most appropriate? The answer is: It depends. Questions to ask include:

- How much time do I have to devote to social media each week?
- What are the organization's main goals and objectives?
- How can social media help meet those goals and objectives?
- What does the organization want to accomplish through social media?
- In which social media sites and platforms are our audiences engaged?

Despite the desire to blanket the social media space, it is not always appropriate to participate on every platform available. Following are some of the most popular sites and tools:

**Facebook** – utilize Facebook to communicate softer news and build community.

**Twitter** – stay connected to followers by sending quick updates or relevant information that is timely and interesting.

**Flickr** – manage photos and other images while sharing them with the public. For nonprofit organizations, this is an efficient way to feature photos of events and activities.

**YouTube** - upload and share video clips with the public. Like Flickr, another multimedia source to share events and activities.

Properly engaging in social media may keep your organization at the forefront of people's minds. Use the opportunity to reinforce who the nonprofit is.

**Blogs** – share more in-depth ideas, tips and expertise related to your cause.

**Podcasts** – record news and information about your organization, framed by relevant current-events data, to educate audiences.

**LinkedIn** – be introduced to and collaborate with other professionals. A good venue for development directors to stay connected to their corporate donor contacts and prospects.

In addition to creating your own social media presence, nonprofit representatives should also consider participating in other groups' social media sites. Comment on blogs, join Facebook fan pages and watch their online videos. Not only will you learn from their tactics, but you will also expand your network.

### Social Media Messaging

For the greatest chance of success, nonprofit organizations should incorporate a mix of messaging objectives geared specifically toward social media users:

**Brand awareness** – properly engaging in social media may keep your organization at the forefront of people's minds. Use the opportunity to reinforce who the nonprofit is and what it stands for. Ensure that each platform is clearly branded.

**Education** – utilize social media to provide information to the public about the issues your organization addresses. For example, share links to news stories or studies that support your mission, even if the news is about other organizations.

**Marketing and fundraising** – while you don't want to bombard your followers with messages of your nonprofit's latest event or fundraising campaign, it is appropriate to occasionally reach out in this way. Social media can and should augment traditional marketing and fundraising techniques.

**Grassroots organizing/calls to action** – social media is a powerful tool in mobilizing groups of people to volunteer or attend events. It's also useful in times of great need or disaster. In 2009, a global Twitter event, "Twestival," launched with the goal of providing clean water in Uganda, Ethiopia and India. The event raised more than \$250,000.

The Jolkona Foundation, based in Seattle, provides an avenue for younger generations to become involved in giving and see the impact of their donations on a global level. According to an interview with Seattle Social Media Profiles, the organization views social media as a cost-effective way to market itself. The nonprofit incorporates several platforms into its strategy and utilizes them to reach its target audiences.

## What are the Returns?

As with any component of a marketing plan, organizations must evaluate the effectiveness of social media efforts. Measuring return on investment will assist you in identifying which platforms are working, how you might rectify problem areas and ways to demonstrate the value of participation. Organizations can evaluate the number of followers and fans they have, how many engage in conversation with the nonprofit, and what actions they might be taking, such as re-tweeting or reposting information. Monitor what is being said, and whether it's positive or negative. And, determine whether you can tie back media coverage,

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Web sites hits, donations or volunteerism to specific social media campaigns. This information is critical in assessing the value of social media for your organization.

Consider, also, that engagement on social media helps bolster search return rankings when users conduct Web searches. Nonprofits should select key words to be used in a consistent way across their social media platforms, Web sites and online advertising. Then when someone is searching for these keywords, it becomes more likely that one of the online properties will move up in rankings. Groups that do not have a budget for search engine optimization can greatly benefit from this added advantage.

## From Beginner to Advanced

For small organizations, the prospect of getting involved in social media can be daunting. With limited staff and a laser focus on keeping the doors open and ensuring clients receive vital services, nonprofit management tends to refrain from investing in longer-term returns. But by incorporating social media into business objectives, nonprofit organizations can take advantage of the multitude of tools available for little to no cost, aside from the human resource investment.

For those just starting out, here are a few tips and hints:

1. Understand your audience – it's not enough to know who they are. It is imperative to understand what they need and want in a social media relationship. Monitor their conversations and learn their tone.
2. Develop an editorial calendar – create a set of ideas or topics to discuss on social media. Good rule of thumb: Only 10 percent of messages should be marketing-related. The remainder should include thought leadership, brand building and casual discussion.

3. Expect the unexpected – it's not easy to accept critical feedback or abdicate control over what is said about your organization. Learn from the feedback, and use it to create more positive conversation.

As your social media program grows, you may consider devoting more staff time and engaging in more platforms to increase your reach.

For organizations that are thinking about increasing their involvement in social media, there are myriad ways to do so, such as:

**Storytelling** – consider video diaries of your organization's long-term projects, which can be posted on blogs or YouTube. Or ask a client to give a testimonial.

**Contests or give-aways** – invite your supporters to come up with your new tagline. Or ask corporate sponsors to give away a prize on your organization's behalf. Invite participation in contests and giveaways only through social media.

**Mobile giving** – look into incorporating mobile giving into your fundraising efforts. This allows donors to text donations to an organization, through a third party, quickly and easily. After the Haiti earthquake, the American Red Cross raised \$32 million in just one month through a text donation campaign.

## Protecting the Organization

### Security Policies

In early 2009, a hacker managed to secure the password of a Twitter employee and Tweeted from the accounts of President Barack Obama and Britney Spears. Breaches like this can prompt followers to take unwanted actions, such as clicking on links to viruses or providing personal information. The likelihood of this happening is remote, but still a possibility.

Every company and nonprofit organization should have a security policy in place to decrease the likelihood of exposure to potential breaches. Additionally, the security policy can help your fans and followers protect themselves. Security policies can include such recommendations as changing passwords on a regular basis, not requesting account information online and never sharing sensitive documents via social media.

### Personnel Policies

Whether or not an organization is involved in social media, it is wise to implement a social media personnel policy to ensure everyone is aware of how best to represent the organization's brand. For those who engage in social media on behalf of the company, the policies will outline who has the authority to approve and post messages, as well as how to conduct themselves on social media. For those who engage in social media on a personal level, they must be made aware of their responsibility to post information professionally and ethically.

Go to [www.socialmediagovernance.com](http://www.socialmediagovernance.com) for an online database of sample policies.

### Crisis Planning

Policies related to the use of social media are important to ensure the protection of the organization. But if a breach occurs, it's best to be prepared to handle it quickly and with grace. It is important to be honest with your online audiences and address the situation upfront. A social media crisis plan should include:

- Key players who will handle a social media crisis (executive director, IT director, communications director, etc.). Include all contact information for each.
- Protected document with URLs, user names and passwords of all social media properties.

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- Messaging to alert audiences of the situation, the fact that it is being assessed, ongoing updates and how the problem is resolved.

## Conclusion

Many nonprofits are just beginning to dip their toes into the social media waters, while others have embraced it full-force and are utilizing it in strategic ways. Those who are not involved must consider the opportunities online engagement presents and the ramifications of noticeable absenteeism. There is a heightened level of expectation among donors, media and community leaders that they will have the ability to enter into a relationship with a nonprofit organization and clearly see the results of their involvement. Taking the first step, or increasing your involvement, can provide significant returns and build long-term support from your online community.

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