Confessions from the nonprofit world: How nonprofits are using social media (and how they need to change their approach)

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Abstract Social media present a tremendous opportunity for nonprofit organisations to increase membership, awareness and fundraising. When leveraged correctly, these new tools can be truly transformational. But nonprofits are struggling with understanding the resource commitment, the ways to use these tools, and the need to stay ahead of the curve. A successful social media strategy for nonprofit organisations must be based on forward thinking and executive support. Without those two key ingredients, the social media recipe for nonprofits simply does not work.

KEYWORDS: social media, communications, fundraising, nonprofits

INTRODUCTION

Finding something to 'own completely'

I still consider myself lucky to have begun my career at the advent of social media. As I transitioned from graduate school to the professional world, Twitter and Facebook were beginning to explode.[1] It presented a great deal of challenges for many businesses: 'What is Facebook?', 'What are we supposed to be doing?', 'I have no idea where to begin!' nonprofit executives were exclaiming. I had become comfortable with Facebook and Twitter while in college, using it to connect to my classmates. So when it took over the business world, it was already second nature to me. It was not weird, it was not different — it was simple and powerful, if used correctly. A mentor once said that the key to surviving in the business world is to 'find something you understand and own it completely'. I made the early decision that I was going to 'own' social media.

NONPROFITS ARE JUST BEGINNING TO GRAPPLE WITH SOCIAL MEDIA … AND THEY ARE STRUGGLING

One of the main benefits of working for a nonprofit organisation is that they are not always on the cutting edge in terms

of technology[2] — this allows marketers the ability to get comfortable in a job, fully understand the mission of an organisation, and implement new technology at a reasonable pace. This is a good approach when it comes to communication technologies: simply running in every direction pursuing every possible avenue leaves little time and resources to actually develop and cultivate these solutions.

Of course, not every nonprofit organisation can hire a communications director knowledgeable about social media. Moreover, some nonprofit executives may be only marginally familiar with social media and expect more than is reasonable. Indeed, many communications directors are already struggling to find sufficient time to fully customise social media solutions to fit their unique needs. As Clay Holtzman notes about nonprofits:

> 'As technology evolves at a faster clip, nonprofits are increasingly challenged to keep up. While the proliferation of free applications, social media and cheap hardware appears to make technology more available than ever before, such tools are often designed for businesses or consumers — not nonprofits' unique needs.'[2]

Thus, a savvy nonprofit organisation must fully understand the capability of these technologies and how to leverage them for fundraising, membership and other purposes specific to nonprofits *before* anything is done. Many nonprofit organisations, especially the smaller ones, are using social media, but they are not really *utilising* social media — the differences are profound. As someone who has been lucky enough to move around to a few different nonprofits early in my career, I feel that many nonprofits should first make a few confessions and then accept a penance for these early social media missteps.

CONFESSION #1: MOST NONPROFITS DO NOT FULLY UNDERSTAND THE SOCIAL MEDIA RESOURCE COMMITMENT

Getting up to speed

There is a tremendous world of opportunity awaiting organisations that use social media smartly. As Holtzman elaborates: 'nonprofits that can jump the technology gap stand a better chance of securing grants, tracking donors, engaging volunteers and positioning themselves as leaders in their field'.[2]

A recent study by npEngage found a 40 per cent increase in fundraising revenues when organisations leverage their social media networks.[3] But nonprofits must take caution when reading these studies: simply creating social networking sites is not enough.

My first job post–graduate school was with a relatively small, national nonprofit economic think-tank. For more than 70 years, the organisation had thrived on delivering its content and message through a traditional avenue: direct mail. When I arrived at the organisation, leadership had been hearing a lot about Facebook from their children, so they tasked me with getting the organisation 'up to speed'.

The resource problem

There was only one problem here: a lack of time and resources to develop these solutions fully. In addition to social media, I had been tasked with a multi–million dollar marketing budget, a national public relations campaign, a complete website redesign, and a six-million piece direct mail campaign with more than 20 mailings per year. Although this particular organisation was able to address the problem by hiring a communications assistant, such a problem is not uncommon. As such, it forms the foundation for the first confession: too often nonprofit communications

executives are tasked with anything and everything that can be associated with communications, development, marketing and public relations. Inevitably, some areas suffer from a lack of resources. A 2010 study shared by the Association of Fundraising Professionals found that:

> 'While larger nonprofits are increasing their funding for external resources to help them with their social network efforts, the study notes that smaller organisations are holding back. Nearly three-quarters (71 per cent) of organisations said they will keep external resourcing budgets the same. It is true: larger organisations have more discretionary funds to test the value of social networks for their marketing and fundraising. But the research shows that the investment is paying off.'[4]

So what does that investment look like? According to social media maven Beth Kanter there are three levels of social media usage.[5] In order to leverage social media effectively, to really 'test the value of social networks for marketing and fundraising', it is essential to build an online community. According to Kanter, this will take over 20 hours a week. Even in 2013, nonprofit organisations, especially smaller ones, are still hoping that their existing staff can spend a few hours on Facebook or Twitter and see immediate payoffs. But that is just not enough: doing social media well can have tremendous impacts on the bottom line when it comes to awareness, fundraising and membership — but nonprofit organisations need to stop thinking of social media as 'cheap and easy'. It takes real time and resources to do this effectively — small nonprofits wishing to use social media effectively can no longer hold back.

Nonprofit success story: The American Red Cross and the Digital Operations Center

With a three-person social media department,[6] the American Red Cross has dedicated a tremendous amount of resources to its social media efforts. In early 2012, it launched its Digital Operations Center,[7] a system which monitors a variety of social media outlets to determine the areas of greatest need. As Zoe Fox explains, 'the Red Cross will now accept digital volunteers to reply to social media calls for aid. Volunteers can reply to questions such as "Where's the nearest emergency shelter?" or "Where is the nearest food supply?" during emergency periods'. The American Red Cross has a long history of pushing the boundaries of technology and its leadership seems to understand that this requires a significant resource commitment.

CONFESSION #2: NONPROFITS UNDERSTAND THE IDEA OF SOCIAL MEDIA, BUT STRUGGLE WITH IMPLEMENTATION

Ideas versus implementation

There is a big difference between having an idea and then implementing that idea effectively. As the anonymous investment manager and prolific writer wisely states on the New Value Investor blog:

> 'I would like to start by saying that having a good business idea is a great thing. If put to use properly it can make a tremendous amount of money. But in reality this is quite rare. Most great businesses are the result of good implementation, not good ideas.'[8]

Nonprofits executives understand that social media is a good idea. They have seen the promise of social media changing the world like when Kony 2012 went viral (see http://invisiblechildren.com/movedc/). They have seen the viral engine kick into high gear when an organisation faces a significant problem like Papa John's did when a customer tweeted a picture of a racist receipt.[9] They have also seen

companies redefine their image through advertising that is shared again and again by their customers like Chrysler saw with their 'It is halftime in America' ad which aired during the Super Bowl.[10] Social media is an incredible idea — 'why can't we be the next Chrysler?'

Going back to Clay Holtzman, it is important to remember that many of these social media tools have been built with for-profit businesses in mind. Nonprofits can certainly take advantage, but it is going to take time and resources to figure out how to implement the grand idea that is social media. Kanter has formed what she calls 'Einstein's Theory of Social Media' relativity: 'You get out what you put in. You have to invest three to six months before you see results'.[5]

This is the struggle that nonprofit communications executives often face: board members and leadership see these wonderful examples of viral marketing and social media and wonder, 'why not us?' But instead of digging deep enough to figure out why these campaigns are so effective, they assume that these strategies can be easily copied. Combined with a significant underinvestment of resources, implementation can be incredibly difficult.

Making the case for social media

Communications professionals must do a better job of explaining social media before getting leadership support for social media. I am often reminded of my first job when a co-worker insisted that she simply 'couldn't do her job adequately because the organisation did not have an intranet'. To this day, I am completely positive that she had a very limited understanding of what an intranet was. When we finally got an intranet system up and running, she had no idea what to do with it and how to leverage its capabilities. Likewise, many communications professionals make the argument that they 'can't do their jobs

without social media'. Instead of explaining how social media can be used, the argument is often presented that nonprofits *must* use social media.

When leadership finally supports social media, they most likely have based their support on examples from the press, like Kony 2012 or Chrysler, instead of a well-constructed case by the person responsible for communications. This then creates the worst-possible environment: executives with unreasonable expectations of social media, and communications professionals without a solid understanding of how to move forward with their Facebook page or Twitter account. As Ajeet Khurana points out, 'There is almost nothing worse than an inactive Facebook page. Alas! Such pages are quite common — their last status update was months ago, and there have been no relevant updates since.'[11]

To avoid the inactive Facebook page and unreasonable expectations, a well-constructed case for social media needs to possess three components: *resource utilisation analysis, goal statements* and *feedback mechanisms*. First, it is important to be honest about the commitment level required by social media. If presented as something that can be done during off-time, this is not being truthful and will hurt in the long run. Instead, it is important to conduct a thorough resource utilisation analysis, clearly defining the necessary resources and time commitment, and any other assistance that may be needed to do it well.

Secondly, all goals must be clearly defined. By off-handedly stating that social media will increase donations or memberships, executives will expect this payoff. If these are not comfortable goals then they should not be stated. Instead, the goal may be to 'engage our audience in a one-on-one manner' or 'allow our members the opportunity to engage with us in a natural and comfortable setting'.

Finally, mention must be made of the role of continual feedback and analysis. How does one know if social media are working? How do executives know if they should continue to invest resources? By explaining the feedback mechanisms in play, this provides the means to evaluate progress towards the organisation's goals. If the goal is 'engaging our audience', will this be measured by progress in the number of fans or the number of comments per Facebook post? Defining these mechanisms at the onset is integral to eventual social media success.

Ultimately, the challenge for any nonprofit is implementation. According to a study by KRC Research:

> 'Nonprofit executives (83 per cent) understand that social media makes it easier for supporters to organise independently [but] most nonprofit executives (79 per cent) [feel that] the true value of social media has yet to be determined for their organisations'.[12]

Failure to implement social media properly risks losing executive support and the battle for additional resources will never be won. It is too easy for leadership to point to examples like the Papa John's receipt mishap or employees being fired over what they say on Facebook[13] as reasons not to use social media — whether justified or not.

Nonprofit success story: Operation Smile and Pinterest

Operation Smile is a nonprofit organisation that helps treat facial deformities such as cleft lips and palates in children. When the organisation decided to explore Pinterest as a social media avenue, they clearly had a strong implementation plan. One of their boards, 'Before & After', shows pictures of babies and small children pre- and post-surgery. As Arik Hanson suggests, 'What better way to show potential donors how their

money makes a marked difference in people's lives?'[14] And what about the bottom line? Hanson adds that 'Operation Smile posts photos of the surgeries its patients need, then adds a price tag for the gifts right on the photos. Brilliant!' When social media are properly implemented, there is little doubt of the impact. However, nonprofit communications professionals must be sure they know where they are going with social media *before* they get started.

CONFESSION #3: MANY NONPROFITS ARE CONSTANTLY BEHIND THE CURVE AND PLAYING CATCH-UP

Playing the catch-up game

At every job since graduate school, I have had to help my organisation play catch-up. Most of them did not have active social media accounts and all of them needed new websites. The reason for this is simple: nonprofit organisations tend to use a 'wait and see' approach to technology. As Monte Enbysk explains:

> 'To the surprise of the nonprofit sector, internet technology is enhancing good works. Relief agencies such as the American Red Cross have demonstrated how effectively online systems can speed cash donations to earthquake-ravaged parts of the world. Smaller nonprofits have found the web to be a blessing for locating discounted items and organising people to support causes. Foundations and charities have found success with e-philanthropy — the securing of pledges and donations over the web — and made it a vital part of their fundraising strategies'.[15]

This all comes as a 'surprise' because most nonprofits are not pushing the boundaries as the American Red Cross has consistently done. Instead, they wait until they see repeated examples of success and then try to mimic this success. Nonprofits

tend to be risk-averse: any step that presents risk is a major concern for organisations that often struggle with funding.

The problem with playing catch-up

The primary concern here is that in being so risk-averse, especially when it comes to technology, nonprofit organisations tend to open themselves up to another form of risk: falling behind. Playing catch-up with social media means losing out on a lot of the initial momentum and excitement that exists at the beginning of any technology craze. Furthermore, there is a risk of missing out on tremendous savings by ignoring what is often an efficient solution to certain existing problems:

> 'especially in tough economic times, thoughtful use of technology can be the most efficient way for a nonprofit to communicate more effectively, engage with donors, evaluate programs and schedule volunteers, or simply research and keep up-to-date on legal requirements and funding opportunities'.[16]

This is not to advocate pursuing every new technology that pops up on the horizon, but nevertheless, nonprofits must be more open to risk. If an idea fails to have the expected impact (after giving it enough time under the Einstein theory), then it is time to move on. However, the organisation that always waits for someone else to go through this testing period will never take advantage of the golden opportunity that exists at the infancy of new technology.

Thanks to leadership support, NYSARC, Inc., the largest provider of services to people with developmental disabilities in the USA, has been able to try some cutting-edge technologies and explore new ways of using existing technology — experiencing both success and failure along the way. On Facebook,

experience shows that posting a picture of a child with a developmental disability can achieve a 20 per cent interaction rate with fans, but a long blog post may drive very little traffic to the website. With Twitter, it is possible to reach people previously thought impossible through traditional methods — reporters, legislators, etc — and target tweets accordingly, focusing on major news. Pinterest has been problematic, however, as it is difficult to know what should be pinned and how better to engage members who are unfamiliar with the platform.

NYSARC has launched an innovative campaign with Musicians 4 a Cause where they have created four songs unique to their field — written and performed by professional musicians — and are using Blackbaud's 'Friends Asking Friends' platform to generate donations by getting members to encourage their friends and family to download these songs (see http://songsfornysarc.org). All members can have their own donation page which can be easily posted to their social media accounts — a great way of leveraging the power of our collective, connected networks. There is no guarantee that this campaign will be enormously successful, but reasonable goals have been set based on budgetary expenses and the performance of other campaigns by Musicians 4 a Cause.

To be truly successful, nonprofits must be willing to accept some degree of risk and at least attempt to stay with the technology flow. Otherwise, the rollercoaster ride of waiting and running to catch up is enough to make anyone tired and frustrated. It is also worth remembering that many communications professionals deal with change aversion.[17] Imagine what it is like for audiences to have a huge change every five years or so. Would supporters not prefer gradual change over time?

Nonprofit success story: NYSARC and Livestream

NYSARC, Inc. is the largest nonprofit provider of support and services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in the USA. Like other large nonprofits, NYSARC has many regional offices in New York State (55 to be exact). With the continued slow growth of the economy, travel has become increasingly difficult for organisations to fund. So when NYSARC decided to bring *The Facts of Life* actor and author Geri Jewell to its annual convention, staff understood that many would be unable to attend the presentation.

Thankfully, NYSARC is willing to take some risks and stay ahead of the curve, and Livestream was engaged to deliver a live web stream of Jewell's presentation, allowing remote viewers to share the stream directly in Twitter, ask questions through a chat interface, and then share a recorded presentation over their social media platforms. The technical setup required for pulling off such an event is mercifully simple: any camera with an HDMI-out port will do if combined with one of Livestream's 'Broadcaster' units, available for about US$500. Connect the camera to the Broadcaster, connect the Broadcaster to the internet, and, with the push of a button, live video is streaming to the relevant page on the Livestream website. End-users do not have to install any extra software (assuming their internet browser is relatively up to date) and promoting the stream is as easy as sharing a webpage link. In addition, there is no limit on the number of people connecting to the stream. The only downside to the software as it currently exists is that it is not possible to 'lock down' the stream to specific users — all the streams are open to the public, which may carry certain risks for some nonprofits.

Innovative web streaming that incorporates live chat is a form of social media integration that is only possible when nonprofits stop playing the catch-up game and start looking ahead to the future.

CONCLUSION

Doing penance for social media sins

Whether you have worked for a nonprofit organisation that has not dedicated enough resources to support the social media experiment or you are an executive who has struggled with the amount of risk inherent with keeping up with technology, nonprofits struggling with social media should consider doing some penance. For this particular set of sins, consider following the nonprofit guide to emerging communication technologies (Figure 1).

Social media certainly will not be the last technology that provides an evolutionary step for communication. As such, it is necessary to approach emerging communication technologies like social media from a forward-looking, but comprehensive, angle.

Develop a comprehensive plan

First, it is vital to recognise the emerging technology of interest to the organisation and develop a plan for implementation. If this was 2006 and Facebook was opened up to businesses, the key would be to understand Facebook's impact at the college level and propose how it could affect the nonprofit. The argument cannot simply be that 'everyone else is doing it'. Instead, the argument behind using new technology must be backed by a comprehensive communications plan.

A good communications plan should be as forward-looking as possible, so ask what resources will be required? If you understand the executive team, what elements will they be looking for if you are to receive a mandate from them to carry

Figure 1: The nonprofit guide to emerging communication technologies

out this plan? How will the technology be evaluated and progress be reported back to the executive team? It is important to understand the next steps in the nonprofit guide to emerging communication technologies before developing the plan. The ability to anticipate future problems will lead to a better plan. For example, if you know that the executive director has a major interest in increasing fundraising dollars, figure out a way of incorporating this into the plan. Make sure to take note of donation metrics *before* implementing the plan — this way, should the need arise to report data based on correlation (as social media are unlikely to lead *directly* to donations), this provides something with which to work.

Pursue a mandate from leadership

Secondly, nonprofit communications professionals must pursue a mandate from leadership to carry out the comprehensive communications plan. Without a clear mandate, the argument for more resources will always fall flat: 'The main benefit of determining the mandate is that it increases the likelihood that it will be met. Whether it is restrictive or not, by knowing what the mandate is an organisation also knows its limits and boundaries.'[18]

To secure the mandate, the communications or implementation plan must be thorough and clearly stated. It will be necessary to adapt the plan as work towards receiving the mandate progresses. This is when new employees find out a lot about the executive team — what sort of goals do they have and how can the plan address them? As work on these

adaptations progresses, it is important to keep goals realistic. For example, as Claire Kerr notes, 'While there are many excellent examples of charities using social media to inspire volunteerism, tell stories and generate meaningful conversations, when "ROI" is measured by dollars raised, expectations may not reflect reality'.[19]

Still, if part of the plan is that social media will increase fundraising dollars, do some research first and set goals accordingly. An excellent source of information is the annual 'Nonprofit Social Network Benchmark Report' sponsored by NTen, Common Knowledge and Blackbaud. According to the 2012 report, while only 5 per cent of responders indicate that financial measurement is a metric for evaluating social media's return on investment (ROI), the same responders indicate a $214.81 value for a Facebook like over a 12-month period at a cost of just $3.50 per like.[20] Looking at this presentation of the data, it might be appropriate to calculate the overall value of any contact to your organisation and the cost of finding a new contact on Facebook. In this situation, the ROI is not dependent on some direct function of social media, but rather the indirect benefit of increasing the size of the organisation's network. It is still possible to monetise social media to both justify any costs and address the executive team's goals, but without having to set unattainable goals.

Receiving a mandate from leadership should be accompanied by an investment of resources consistent with the communications plan. By setting realistic goals, leadership will have a clear

understanding of the potential payoff and will ideally make appropriate investments. However, leaders should be reminded of Kanter's theory of relativity: social media and all emerging technologies take time to test and evolve. Without this understanding, unrealistic expectations can be set that doom the venture before it even begins. If members of the leadership team expect to see big increases in fundraising in the first few months, they will be disappointed for multiple reasons. Developing the plan before seeking a mandate provides the opportunity to set realistic goals for leadership based on sound data — never let the goals be set without your input.

Monitor the technology and integrate new technologies

Finally, if the first two steps of the nonprofit guide to emerging communications technologies seek to address concerns over dedicating resources and understanding capabilities, the last step is designed to help nonprofits stop playing catch-up. It is essential to monitor social media and other communications technologies constantly: are they meeting expectations? Are our audiences using these new tools? Are the tools having an impact on fundraising, membership or awareness? Are they furthering the mission and are they consistent with the organisation's values? Based on these answers it is possible to make decisions about the future use of certain emerging technologies: do we continue to use them or should we consider moving on?

It is important to address the topic of integration as well. At one point, websites were a new communication technology. Even if an organisation has taken the time to conduct multiple redesigns of the website, there is still a chance that it could be falling behind the curve if other technologies are not being explored. For

example, it is possible to update the organisation's website as much as possible, but without taking the time to integrate the website with social media, it will not be as engaging as it could be. It is important not to have tunnel vision: there will be some truly revolutionary technological advances like the internet. However, by not taking the time to look around, opportunities to enhance our investments, find greater efficiencies and better connect with members and donors may be missed.

Learning from failure

In closing, nonprofit organisations must be more innovative and integrate existing solutions with newer technologies. Nonprofit leadership should be more willing to take risks so that they may reap the benefits of the golden window of opportunity that exists at the infancy of new technologies. We may have missed that window slightly when it comes to social media, but we have done a good job catching up. More importantly, there is a lesson to be learned: whether we are communications professionals, executives or board members, it is vital to keep an eye on emerging communications technologies, develop plans on how to use these technologies reasonably, and not be afraid to fail once in a while. Amy Edmonson writes, 'The wisdom of learning from failure is incontrovertible. Yet organisations that do it well are extraordinarily rare.'[21] Perhaps nonprofits can lead the way in this regard: throw caution to the wind and explore the wonders that technology can offer. Maybe then we will not be writing our confessions, but rather sharing best practices with the rest of the business world.

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