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Getting Social Media Right: A Short Guide for Nonprofit Organizations

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Imagine you've written a blog about your cause and readers pick up on it, re-tweeting it to Twitter users 400 times. Is that good? How would you know? To answer those questions with any confidence, you have to know what your goals are for that blog—and you have to know how those goals fit into your use of social media, and your organization's mission overall.

We couldn't answer those kinds of questions ourselves, until recently—until we started studying how nonprofits are using social media, what works best, what doesn't and why. In fact, one early lesson for us came when we tried *using* social media to jumpstart our research *about* social media and didn't get very far. We stepped back, reconsidered, and revised our approach, and with rich input from more than 136 nonprofits (who participated in a survey we conducted) and social media luminaries including Beth Kanter and Craig Newmark, we developed this evolving but experience-based guide to using social media effectively.

This report lays out a rubric we call the "Seven C's" of social media: Cause, Communication, Community, Collaboration, Costs, Capital, and Competition. By challenging yourself to ask questions around the Seven C's, you can quickly begin to organize your thinking about social media, and plan or revise your approach so that your social media efforts create real value for your organization. (Our full data set—purged of any identifying information—survey, and framework are all available for download, and we encourage everyone to examine and share it.)

Cause

What is my organization's mission, and can social media help me achieve it?

Your mission should be the foundation for all of your efforts to communicate and share resources and services—regardless of the medium. So when you think about your website, blogs, tweets, Facebook posts, and the like, keep your overall mission front and center and be explicit about what the connection is between your actions and your cause. Ask: "What is the direct link to our mission for this investment and this activity?" Ask: "Why are we going to post that blog? What are our hopes for it, related to our cause? How will this help us with our strategy overall?"

Many nonprofit leaders do not yet do this. In fact, in a report released early in 2010 by nonprofit technology research organization Idealware ("Using Social Media to Meet Nonprofit Goals," March 2010) 34 percent of respondents said they were using social media *because other organizations were already*

doing so. That isn't much of a foundation on which to build a plan, set goals, or figure out whether your investments are worthwhile.

Social media use should be proactive and linked directly to strategy, not reactive. That means that if your organization is trying to influence a specific action (such as MoveOn.org), your approach likely will be different than if your organization's main goal is to share information (such as the Education Equality Project). Both of those organizations have thoroughly integrated social media strategies but their approaches (and the set of social media tools they use) vary considerably.

Consider a detailed example: Facing History and Ourselves is a nonprofit that provides materials and support to help teachers develop a sense of civic responsibility in their students. As Adam Strom, director for research and development, told us, the organization jumped into social media because it was there, and the organization felt pressure to engage.

"For a while [Facing History] was sharing content on Facebook and Twitter without a plan," he said. After a while, though, the nonprofit's leaders started questioning whether Facing History's efforts were truly helping the work of the organization, and if not, why not. They realized that the organization's Facebook presence was developing a valuable and sizeable network; Facebook's popularity was helping the organization build its brand and spread awareness of its work among teachers and other groups of people it was trying to reach. Facebook was also helping the organization connect more easily and deeply with current and former students who had benefited from Facing History's work. With Twitter, they were far less confident; they didn't know as much about the way Twitter *could* work for them, and the organization's early efforts hadn't built a sizeable presence.

The person who had set up the Twitter and Facebook accounts had left the organization, and Strom knew the organization didn't have the staff time to continue to maintain an active presence on both. And so Facing History suspended its Twitter use—at least for now.

By taking time to reflect—and focusing its efforts on a single outlet—Facing History has developed a better understanding of what social media can do both for the organization and its constituents. The organization now uses social media purposefully to support its cause by building a community that includes current students and alumni; specifically, Facing History offers ongoing support via social media to a growing number of people, and by doing so, reinforces the idea that civic responsibility isn't a one-off concept. As Strom put it, "We're not just a course they took somewhere along the road."

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Communication

What is the right role for social media in our overall communications efforts?

Social media is one tool in an overall communications strategy. It can strengthen an organization's existing communication efforts by making them more immediate (for example, a nonprofit can react to current events through social media, tailoring its message to be timely and relevant to constituents). It can open a channel to a new audience, potentially gaining new support for the organization, or helping people the organization does not reach through its programs or more traditional communications. It can facilitate communications, particularly if the organization's target audience is already comfortable with social media tools. And it can allow an organization's constituents to communicate—with the organization, and with one another—on their own terms.

Consider how leaders at Mobilize.org think about the role of social media. Mobilize.org focuses on bringing together "Millennials" (people born in the 1980s and 1990s) to identify and solve problems on their college campuses and in their communities. According to Ayofemi Kirby, director of communications at Mobilize.org, the decision to use social media was easy because the people the organization wants to reach already use social media; it was a natural extension of the organization's other communication efforts. The key to making social media work for Mobilize.org was to ensure that its use of social media was purposefully focused on reaching that target audience and to have the organization be seen as the resource for all things related to Millennial civic engagement. "Our first goal was to begin creating name-recognition and association with the 'Millennial' movement," Kirby told us. "For example, we started tweeting and re-tweeting about things young people would be interested in, such as student loans, career advice, and college, and "tagging" the tweets with the #millennial hashtag so that we would regularly show up in the Millennial Twitter feed."

Mobilize.org has seen measurable results from these efforts, too, with traffic to its website being consistently highest on days when the organization is most active on Facebook and Twitter.

Community

What groups of people might we reach (or create) through social media?

There's great potential for nonprofits to bring people together, either to help one another get the most from what your organization can offer or to mobilize on behalf of your organization. The key is thinking about the natural boundaries of each potential "community" you can identify and keeping an eye out for

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groups that begin to emerge on their own, as a result of something they have in common regarding your cause or organization's offerings.

Ask: What natural "groups" can we identify around the work of our organization? (Beneficiaries, board members, peer groups, funders, alumni, activists?) What might a community built through social media help them do? What might group members want to do? Could we strengthen an existing group, such as activists, through a social media channel?

Facing History's newfound ability to stay connected with its alumni is one example. The alumni group is easy to identify, and Facing History is finding that social media is an effective means of staying connected with that group and building on the impact they've already felt through their previous interactions with the organization. Facing History gets "wonderful, unsolicited contact" from past students, Strom said, which only reinforces the organization's belief that social media has great potential to support alumni to continue to engage in civic activities.

Christen Chambers, vice president of engagement management at Fox Digital Media offered this advice: "Best-of-class social media strategy clearly targets very specific market or audience segments and customizes the strategy to meet their needs. I would never recommend a one-size-fits-all approach because you can never fully penetrate your audience that way."

Collaboration

How can we help our communities? How do our constituents want to be engaged?

Once you've identified potential communities, ask: How can we empower them? What tools and supports can we provide? Are we getting in their way? How can social media help bring the various stakeholders of our organization together in productive ways? Look for "if only" clues in their communications with you and with one another. What are they wishing they could do?

When Facing History identified its alumni as a promising community that could be helped via social media, the organization's work didn't stop there. In order to help alumni—and make it easy for them to help one another—Facing History's managers have done a lot of listening and plan to do a great deal more. Strom said that the organization's Facebook page allows for much easier, open conversation with its constituency than its website does. The organization is "getting comfortable with more free conversations," he said and is learning from those conversations about how the organization can be more effective.

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Nonprofit social media consultant, blogger, and book author Beth Kanter also raised another point: Collaboration means opening up conversations about social media *internally*, as well as with external stakeholders. Social media may be controlled through the communications department, she said, but it "can't be siloed in the communications department." In *The Networked Nonprofit*, a book Kanter wrote with social media expert Allison Fine, the authors cite the American Red Cross as an example of how social media can help an organization internally. According to the book's account, prior to 2008, the Red Cross had gone so far as to block Facebook access from employee computers. But a multi-year effort by the organization's social media manager, Wendy Harmon, demonstrated how social media could bring the organization closer to its constituents and supporters. For example, Harmon used social media tools to engage with external bloggers, many of whom had published harsh words about the Red Cross at the time of Hurricane Katrina. Harmon's effort ultimately resulted in a social media policy that encourages Red Cross employees at all levels to participate in social media as "ambassadors" for the Red Cross.

Costs

What is the real cost of making social media work for us?

Many social media tools are free, but the time and technology necessary to configure, update, and monitor them is not. It is easy to be fooled into thinking that social media is a great cost-saver. But when you're thinking about integrating social media into your arsenal of communications tools, weigh the potential benefits against the investment you'll have to make (in technology, in dedicated staff, and so forth) to have impact. Doing this is hard, because it's very difficult, particularly early on, to gauge the potential benefits. It's also difficult to spot all of the costs associated with social media. (Remember, just because a video can go viral doesn't mean it will go viral for free. Successful social media requires marketing and relationship building, and those efforts come at a price, as well.) Social media should be held to the same standard as any other expense your organization incurs.

Put another way, don't ask yourself "How much do we need to spend to be active in social media?" Instead, raise issues of cause, communication, and community, and then muster your team to get specific about how social media fits into your strategy and what's needed to make it happen over time. What *exactly* will need to be done to use social media the way you'd like to use it? What will it cost to commit time and resources to stay current with your social media communications, so that your organization doesn't appear out of date? What resources can you reasonably expect to budget towards that end? Will any other activities you engage in be redundant once you're using social media, and would stopping those activities free up any resources? "Don't stop doing stuff that works," Kanter advised, "but reallocate

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to provide time to do things that social media may actually perform better than current methods [of communication or community building]."

Where possible, use data to inform your decisions. This will be hard to do at the beginning, but it's important to bring data to bear as soon as you can. The leadership team at Mobilize.org, for example, has begun thinking about the return on investment of the time the organization invests in social media using basic metrics, such as the number of people it engages, the number of tweets and re-tweets that mention the organization's efforts, and the number of comments that Mobilize.org blog posts receive. Kirby said that the team also is trying to think explicitly about how social media multiplies the nonprofit's reach.

Capital

How can we use social media to raise money for our cause?

There are a very few highly visible examples of organizations that have galvanized tremendous numbers of people to action for their causes. (Remember the American Red Cross' "text for Haiti" campaign that raised more than $32M for Haitian relief through text-message donations?) But keep in mind: those "communities" are quickly built; they disband just as quickly, and they are rare. Not many organizations will be able to amass support on that scale at that speed.

In fact, according to the 2010 Nonprofit Social Network Benchmark Report from Nonprofit Technology Network, Common Knowledge, and thePort, of all commercial social networks, only Facebook provided $10,000 or more in revenues in the previous year to any of the surveyed nonprofit organizations. And while 40.4 percent of respondents to that survey said they had fundraised with Facebook, 77.6 percent of those organizations reported raising $1,000 or less.

Social media in its current state can *support* fundraising; it should not be thought of as a primary fundraising vehicle and should be well integrated into an existing funding strategy.

How much can social media support your fundraising efforts? To begin to answer that question, think about how strong your brand is. Also take into consideration whom your donors have been in the past and whether your donor base is "social-media friendly."

"I think of [social media-based fundraising] as an option, but the research isn't there right now to show this a good way to raise money," summed up Facing History's Strom. "Right now we're thinking about constituency building."

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Competition

Who is our competition in the social media space, and how can we differentiate our organization?

In large part, the key to differentiating yourself from others using social media is to keep your own particular audience in mind. As Fox's Chambers put it, "You want to customize the approach as targeted as you can so that your customers feel like you are talking directly to them and not to the general public."

It's also important to stay true to your organization's culture. "Be genuine in your communications," Chambers advised. "If you are not Ashton Kutcher, don't try to tweet like him."

Also make sure you're genuinely comfortable with the social media tools you're using. You don't want to be using out-of-date technology, but that doesn't mean you have to be an early adopter. "The social media tools you use have to be viewed in the same light as any communication and branding approach," Chambers said. "If you are trying to convey an image of being cutting edge, your social media approach needs to reflect that. If you want to be seen as dependable, then your social media tools need to be dependable, too. These tools may be new, but the traditional business practices still apply."

One useful exercise is finding out if other organizations in your field are using social media, and if so, how they use it. If yours is a small organization, what are larger nonprofits in your space doing with social media? What is unique about your mission, and how can you use that characteristic to tailor your social media use? For Facing History, differentiating the organization from others in social media channels means staying true to its educational mission, Strom said: "We want our social media presence to represent our core values."

Weigh In!

Despite the huge amount of discussion and rapidly increasing usage of social media tools, the space arguably is still in its infancy. As such, a reasonable amount of experimentation should and will be an integral part of the process of finding answers to the above questions.

You'll need to engage in a certain amount of trial and error. We will, too. Our hope, however, is that the Seven C's will provide a way to comprehensively think through the risk associated with that experimentation and maximize its potential to tap value from social media.

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We welcome your thoughts, your experiences, your insights, and your “lessons learned the hard way.” Please weigh in here, and help us help other nonprofits multiply their impact through social media.

Additional Resources

2010 Nonprofit Social Network Benchmark Report

(Common Knowledge, thePort, NTEN)

The second annual “Nonprofit Social Network Benchmark Report” offers data and insights on the trends surrounding social networking technology as part of nonprofit organizations' marketing, communications, fundraising, and program services.

2010 Nonprofit Social Media Benchmarks Study

(M&R Strategic Services)

Study intended to help nonprofits identify metrics to help them measure the effectiveness of their social media efforts.

A. Fine Blog

(Allison Fine)

Social media consultant Allison Fine’s blog about social media and social change.

Beth’s Blog

(Beth Kanter)

Social media consultant Beth Kanter’s frequently updated blog covers a wide range of current social media topics of interest to nonprofit organizations.

Groundswell

(Josh Bernoff, Ted Schadler)

Forrester Research blog “for readers interested in social applications and technology empowerment inside and outside companies.”

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The Nonprofit Social Media Decision Guide

(Idealware, New Organizing Institute)

This report includes sections on how social media can be useful for nonprofits, the value nonprofits have found in specific tools such as Facebook and Twitter, and a consultant directory.

Mashable

Widely read blog that provides a wide range of social media-related news.

Red Cross Raises More than $32 Million via Mobile Giving Program

Press release about the Red Cross' mobile giving program to aid Haiti.

Social by Social

(NESTA)

Advice on using social media tools to create social impact. Download the PDF for free or buy the book.

The Networked Nonprofit

(Beth Kanter, Allison Fine)

Social media consultants Kanter and Fine describe in this book how "networked nonprofits" are using social media to re-invent how nonprofit organizations do their work.

Trust Agents: Using the Web to Build Influence, Improve Reputation, and Earn Trust

(Chris Brogan, Julien Smith)

The book's authors demonstrate how businesses can and are building "networks of influence." Primarily aimed at for-profits, but many of the trends apply to nonprofits as well.

Using Social Media to Meet Nonprofit Goals: The Results of a Survey

(IdealWare, Firefly Partners, Balance Interactive, Beaconfire)

This report summarized results of a survey of 459 nonprofit employees who are actively using social networking for their organizations.

Wild Apricot Blog

Blog from software company Wild Apricot dedicated to providing technology and social media information to small associations and nonprofits.

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