

SOCIAL MEDIA BRIEF FOR NON-PROFITS

THE SOCIAL MEDIA REVOLUTION

Social media has revolutionized communication: it has changed the way people access and share information as well as the way in which users interact with content and others online.

New technology has enabled communication to move from a controlled monologue to open, real-time dialogue: millions of people across the globe now connect through blogs, microblogs, online chats, RSS feeds, widgets, social networking and bookmarking sites, video and photos sharing services, virtual worlds, wikis, mobile applications and more.

Alongside technological advances, user expectations and information handling habits have also evolved immensely. A 'democratization of information' has taken place, and social web users are no longer satisfied with being passive consumers of publications or recipients of one-way messages. Instead, people participate and comment, expect to be able to share information easily, want information to be visualized/embeddable as well as presented in an engaging, original way, while also expecting smooth use of technology. People also want to be able to connect with others online, building so-called 'ambient intimacy' among users who may never physically meet. Additionally, people like to use tools and rewards that add to their self-expression, visibility or 'social capital' online. Moreover, social media enables users to pool their power, creating strength by numbers. Contributing to common projects or goals and the harnessing of 'collective intelligence' is also one of the key characteristic of the new communication age.

Social media is an umbrella term for the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction and the constructs of words, pictures, videos and audio.

In addition to the above developments, the media sector has also undergone a major transformation. With newspaper subscriptions and TV viewing down, traditional media has had to alter the way in which they provide news and reach out to audiences. Many have done so by establishing a strong online presence, presenting multimedia content suitable for the new social media environment, as well as opening up their sites to the public and a multitude of guest writers and 'citizen journalists'.



Despite these changes, people increasingly dismiss traditional media. The immediacy of social media communications, combined with growing skepticism and marketing literacy, has resulted in the public turning to peers as well as other non-traditional online sources, such as online opinion leaders and bloggers, for information, news and analysis.

These opinion leaders, or so called 'e-fluentials', find and make sense of the mass of information available online on behalf of a large network of fans. E-fluencers thus break news to, and sway the opinions of, thousands of people while also influencing peers and decision-makers. Connecting with the sources relevant to ones target audience has hence also become a central component of any outreach effort today.

These and other changes have resulted in a new communication landscape, briefly summarized above. It enables unprecedented interaction with others, allowing users to create and promote content that can reach and engage audiences worldwide. These new tools also present immense opportunities for social change projects and non-profit globally.

The use of social media tools is widespread and continues to grow rapidly. There are for example:

- More than 300 million MySpace and 350 million Facebook users
- 14 million articles on Wikipedia
- 20 hours of video uploaded every minute on YouTube. The site is also the worlds 2nd most popular search engine
- 4 billion images uploaded on Flickr
- Twitter has more than 18 million users and an average of 3 000 000 tweets a day

SOCIAL MEDIA AND NON-PROFITS

The social web offers non-profits effective, new ways of advocating, communicating, campaigning, fundraising, and establishing thought leadership. The tools also allow organizations to collaborate efficiently and work more cost-effectively. Moreover, new technologies and platforms enable service users/beneficiaries to part-take in developing ideas and designing solutions to problems that affect them.

Some of the numerous ways in which social media help organizations include:

- Substantially increasing visibility among target audiences, including the public, media, political decision-makers and donors.
- Enabling real-time information sharing, particularly facilitating communication in and from the field.
- Ensuring better reach for news and information material as well as creating dialogue on social/development issues.
- Building and partnering with a support base who advocate and fundraise on behalf of an organization/issue.
- Spurring real-life action and social mobilization, including mass lobbying or health-message uptake.
- Facilitating cooperation through effective, free online collaboration tools.

The possibilities of engaging wide audiences through social media are immense. However, leveraging these tools effectively requires a shift in thinking. In addition to adapting to a new the communication culture, making the most of the social web will require new skills, a change in priorities, new ways of managing people, projects, risks and resources, and a willingness to surrender some control.

Adoption will also require organizations to develop long-term, phased strategies for participation, to invest in learning, and if necessary to re-allocate resources away from top-heavy content creation/publications (where much goes unread) to information suitable for the social web. Organizations will particularly need to focus on creating value for visitors, providing messaging/content that drives action and enables novel ways of engaging in their issues.

Change is often challenging. Why then should non-profits employ social media?

Firstly, social media is not a fad, it is here to stay and as user levels rise, there will be



more and more pressure on non-profits to engage with people where they are, on their terms, and in more personal ways. There will also be increasing pressure on non-profits from donors and other stakeholders to make the most of the opportunities presented by these new tools and platforms. Refusal to engage will become very difficult to justify.

More importantly, the potential to make the world a better place with the help of new technology is tremendous and the role it plays in social change projects and international development will only increase over time. Organizations that grasp the true impact of social media and harness these tools in support of their goals will, in the long-term, remain relevant and be better equipped to serve the people whose lives they seek to improve.

**Social media enables ordinary people to do extraordinary things.
It is time to harness this power for non-profit causes worldwide.**

