1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Miller, David (2011) "Nonprofit Organizations and the Emerging Potential of Social Media and Internet Resources," *SPNHA Review*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 4.
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spnhareview/vol6/iss1/4

NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS AND THE EMERGING POTENTIAL OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND INTERNET RESOURCES

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The purpose of this paper is to examine how social media and Internet resources are helping nonprofit organizations (NPOs) work to achieve their mission. Throughout the paper, three environmental nonprofits—West Michigan Environmental Action Council, Energy Action Coalition, and Greenpeace—serve as a microcosm for how Social Media is currently being used by environmental NPOs. This paper is focused on several different types of social media sites, including social networking sites, blogging sites, and multimedia sites. Examples are given of how these sites have been successful, and how they have been less successful than originally hoped. The effectiveness and usefulness of Internet resources and mobile giving to NPOs is also analyzed. I identify the barriers to effectively using these tools, and the shortcomings and problems caused by utilizing social media. This study includes a survey of college-aged Americans, who share their experiences regarding the nonprofits they follow through Social Media. These surveys provided insight into what approaches NPOs are using, and how effective these approaches have been. Finally, I give recommendations on how these NPOs can more effectively use Social Media, and warn the reader against over-reliance on Internet tools.

Keywords: Social Media, Mobile Giving

Elevator Pitch
This study analyzes how NPOs are using Social Media sites, like Facebook and Twitter. I identify what they are doing right, and what they can do to improve. I also look at the usefulness of mobile giving. Citing relevant literature and a survey I conducted, I argue that the usage of these sites should supplement current practices, and should be used to educate those who are interested. Professionals should not look to Social Media to solve any fundraising deficiencies, should lower their expectations about what they offer, and use caution when engaging in Social Media activity.

Tweet
Study w survey looks @ NPOs Social Media sites and mobile giving. Sites should not replace fndrsng practices, can help educate public.

INTRODUCTION

According to Agichtein et al. (2008), social media sites are "user-generated content domains" that "include blogs and web forums, social bookmarking sites, photo and video sharing communities, as well as social networking platforms such as Facebook and MySpace, which offers a combination of all of these with an emphasis on the relationships among the users of the community" (pg. 1). These sites represent a new medium through which people and organizations interact with each other (for an overview and glossary of these tools, please refer to Appendix A). Millions of people of all demographics have caught on to the many ways that social media can be used, and its popularity is growing day by day. Facebook is the world's second most visited website, YouTube is the fourth most visited, Blogger sits at number seven, and Twitter comes in at number fourteen (Alexa, 2009). Only a few years ago, these websites

were used primarily for personal use—for friends to connect with each other and share their thoughts. That was until April of 2006, when Facebook opened up registration to businesses. Today, virtually every business—big, medium, or small—has a Facebook page, a video on YouTube, a company blog, and/or a Twitter account. In mid-2009, 2008 Republican Vice Presidential Candidate Sarah Palin was able to drastically alter the tone of the Health Care debate in Congress by arguing that efforts to reform the industry would include government "Death Panels" (Palin, 2009). In short, social media is a strong platform that allows anyone to effectively communicate a message to a worldwide audience.

Not everybody is using social media tools effectively or appropriately—if they should even be using them at all. Some professionals become intimidated by these tools and do not know how to effectively use them. Others get so excited about the opportunities afforded by social media that they register their Nonprofit Organization (NPO) for every single account they can find—even if having a Twitter account will not prove to be beneficial to the organization. Additionally, some organizations are not using social media to promote two-way dialogue, even though user interaction is an important characteristic of the medium.

This paper will describe the potential and shortcomings of these tools, and the barriers to using these tools will be addressed. The analyses are focused in the following areas: membership recruitment and retention, issue education/proselytizing, updating members on the organization's current activities, informing members of advocacy and volunteer activities, and donation solicitation. Recommendations for NPOs, and what they can do to maximize the potential of social media and Internet tools will be provided. To provide real-world context to the analyses, the social media usage of three environmental NPOs will be assessed. These NPOs are Greenpeace, Energy Action Coalition, and West Michigan Energy Action Council (for an overview of the agencies, see Appendix B).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the rather young nature of the subject, literature on the effectiveness of the Internet, online fundraising, email newsletters, and social networking websites is still relatively underdeveloped. Because technological innovation has been moving so quickly over the past five years, peer reviewed journal articles on the subjects can often be outdated even before they are published.

Prashant Bordia (1997) gives an earlier assessment regarding the differences between face-to-face communication and communication via computers. He begins his paper by describing some key differences between the two forms of communication, and offers ten propositions outlining these differences. In the conclusions of this study, he argues that computer-mediated communication has its benefits, but also its drawbacks. It makes a more even-leveled field for communication, yet it slows productivity and leaves more room for misinterpretation. Bordia's conclusions indicate that "groups in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) take longer than Face-to-Face (FTF) groups in completing an allotted task, and produce fewer remarks in a given time period…behavior in CMC is highly context dependent" (pp. 113-114). He also notes that computers allow for "greater equality of participation, relatively less intense normative pressures, and higher incidence of uninhibited behavior" (p. 114). In other words, the sense of relative anonymity allows for more ideas to flow without individuals feeling pressure from others.

One thing to keep in mind is the difference between "ends" and "means." Christopher J. Bosso (2005) argues that while the Internet opens up new opportunities to reach more people, it is merely a different set of means to reach pre-existing ends. He states:

> Perhaps nobody really knows how or how much the Internet will reshape issue advocacy, but few doubt that it already has. E-mail action alerts, list-servs, chat rooms, special-purpose websites, and even 'virtual' organizations are examples of the rapid and deep technological transformation of issue advocacy. None of these tactics is exactly new—in another age, the ladies of the various state Audubon Societies used letter-writing campaigns to similar effect—but they are now being pursued through a very different technological form. Although television and radio advertising, traditional direct mail, phone banks, and newspaper opinion pieces still occupy a place in the tactical toolbox, their use is increasingly secondary to Internet-based tactics (pp. 136-137).

What he is saying is that fundraising efforts, education, and environmental awareness are not new concepts. The only thing that is different in the 21st Century is the communication medium.

In his 1999 book, *Voices and Echoes for the Environment*, Ronald G. Shaiko outlined the three most common techniques used by environmental agencies to recruit and retain members: telemarketing, direct mail, and canvassing. Each of these techniques has its benefits and drawbacks. Though not addressed in the book, the idea of an environmentally-driven nonprofit organization using direct mail pieces seems a bit confusing. In fact, NPO use of direct mail has come under fire for its wastefulness and undesirability (Panepento, 2008). Furthermore, canvassing in rural areas requires the people canvassing to use a lot of gasoline—both inefficient and unsustainable at the same time.

It seems that Shaiko offers an optimistic outlook for the role of the Internet in mobilizing and educating those who are concerned with environmental policy. He observes, "The most recent attempts by organization leaders to inform and mobilize members and nonaffiliated citizen activists have involved the creation of websites on the Internet. In addition to individual websites, there are scores of information directories that lead Internet users to relevant information sources" (Shaiko, 1999, p. 171). What he is saying is that, because of the Internet, anybody can find any piece of information, and it can be available to anybody anywhere in the world at any time. This will prove to be crucial when educating the greater public.

On the other hand, Shaiko also sees the Internet as an organizational drawback. He notes:

> By logging on to my computer and gaining access to the worldwide web, I am able to visit the Environmental Defense Fund website without any additional cost. Once I am on the website, I have access not only to current and back issues of *EDF Letter* but also to a wide variety of interesting and useful information, including annual reports, staff biographies, and up-to-date policy information generated by EDF researchers and lobbyists. There is policy information in the website that I do not receive as a dues-paying member of the organization (pp. 172-173).

Throughout much of his book he examines the quality of publications by environmental organizations. The problem here is that once these publications go online, the environmental nonprofit organization will stop receiving revenue. For instance, the Sierra Club may cease to receive revenue from both dues-paying members and the general public, as their publication is

available for purchase at retail outlets. More damaging, this may also result in a reduction in membership. His line of thought is this: If I can now get the organization's publication for free, why would I pay a membership fee? This logic has its faults. First, it assumes that people only become members of an NPO to receive their newsletter or magazine. Second, it assumes that the members are not interested in giving to the organization on top of their membership dues. The main concern is this: because the publication is available online, that once-reliable source of revenue will no longer serve the same role. Instead, NPOs have to find new ways to raise revenue, and provide new incentives for new members to join, and for existing members to renew their membership.

Ten years later, it is looking more and more like at least two of the three methods discussed by Shaiko are outdated, and may eventually even become extinct. One author notes, "In fact, the low cost of [social media] tools gives nonprofit leaders an incentive—since they can reach out to potential donors and volunteers without having to pay for direct mailings, advertising, or phone calls" (Panepento, 2009). As more and more people opt out of paying for landlines, telemarketing will become increasingly inefficient. With more and more people paying their bills and connecting with family and friends via email, traditional mail will be reserved for junk mail, coupons, and the delivery of larger items. The one method that saw a rebirth in the past few years was canvassing. Hundreds of thousands of supporters for Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential Campaign took time out of their day to knock on doors and talk to potential voters about key issues, solicit campaign contributions, and convince them to get involved in the Get out the Vote effort. What remains to be seen is whether or not this is a one-time occurrence, or if it is the beginning of a new trend toward the use of canvassing as a means of mobilizing support.

According to Shaiko (1999), direct mailing sometimes required large up-front costs, such as purchasing envelopes, printing the necessary materials, hiring professionals to develop newsletters and printed materials, and the actual mailing (a reduced rate is available for all registered nonprofit organizations). However, nonprofit organizations can often cover the start-up costs with a 1-2% return rate on all direct mailings, making this mostly an effective method of recruiting and retaining members (p. 100).

It is just a matter of time before landline telephones—and, therefore, telemarketers—become obsolete. In an opinion article, marketing specialist Tim Beadle (2006) seems to think that—at least in the United Kingdom—telemarketing is headed toward irrelevancy and ineffectiveness. He points out, "40 per cent of all UK landlines are now signed up to the [do not call list]" (Beadle, 2006, p. 3). Due to the fact that phone users a) do not have to pay long distance charges while using a cell phone, b) can text message using a cell phone, and c) can carry their cell phone around with them, the future of landlines is starting to look bleak.

In *Hot, Flat, and Crowded* (2009), *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman argued that the Internet has made the world "flat." That is, "the technological revolution level[ed] the global economic playing field and enable[ed] so many more people around the world to compete, connect, and collaborate" (Friedman, 2009, p. 63). The Internet breaks down national and international barriers that kept smaller organizations from educating large groups of people about policy issues. According to Bordia (1997), "Computers and electronic networks have revolutionized communication. Without having to bother with stamps, envelopes, and the delay in postal mail, millions of people have interacted via email. All it takes is a PC, a modem, and some software and one can span not just city or national, but international boundaries" (p. 99). This extends beyond whom a nonprofit can reach, but also how they are reached, due to "friends" lists, contacts, and followers that are posted on users' Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn

profiles (Qualls, 2009). For instance, imagine a scenario where WMEAC is looking to educate more people about water pollution. They can then look for similar organizations on Facebook to connect with the people following them. The same rule applies with Twitter, where one user can see whom another user is following, and can then connect with those individuals by following them on Twitter.

Several authors feel that the results from the use of social media have been underwhelming. Helen Barrett (2009) argues that Twitter is not a particularly effective tool to solicit donations. However, this has not stopped efforts to attempt to solicit donations. Both Water Charity and the Bob Woodruff Foundation have started fundraising campaigns primarily using Twitter. However, Helen Barrett (2009) wrote, "Fundraising expert Howard Lake of UKFundraising.co.uk is skeptical [of the campaigns]. 'Twitter is not a tool for direct asks,' he says. 'It's better for talking to donors: they can, for example, ask questions, be publicly thanked and receive recognition.'" This should be a word of caution—nonprofit organizations should not expect to "Tweet," asking for donations, and expect all of their Twitter followers to immediately donate. This method of fundraising is of more novelty, and should not be a focus area.

As a result of their study of mid-sized NPOs (between $1 and $5 million in assets), Tim Ogden and Laura Starita (2009) argue, "the available evidence suggests that social media is not very effective." They found that, "most users of social networking have had to scale back their expectations" (2009). Other authors (Klein, 2007; Warwick, 2009) agree with this conclusion. In short, social media has not replaced traditional fundraising efforts.

There are, however, those who are more optimistic. A study titled Panepento (2009) reports on a study conducted by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research comparing the use of social media by NPOs and business for marketing purposes. The study concluded that NPOs have been faster to tap into the potential of social media than businesses. Another more optimistic article is Kathleen Driscoll's (2009) "Non-Profits Find New Friends in New Media." In the article, she illustrates how the American Red Cross's Greater Rochester Chapter and other nonprofits are using social media to reach new volunteers to further spread their message.

Richard Waters (2007) argued in "Nonprofit Organizations' Use of the Internet," that, even though online giving is currently relatively small compared with other fundraising means, he is predicting an "e-philanthropy revolution" in the near future (p. 60). Some of Mr. Waters' suggestions should be taken with caution, and his article shows its age. His article indicated that there were very few ways that NPOs could engage in two-way communication with members and followers. In theory, social media should have solved this problem. Furthermore, he suggests NPOs should be posting their 990 forms on their website, arguing, "these documents help state the organization's need and demonstrate accountability efforts" (p. 69). Now that GuideStar provides a collection of filed 990 forms, this may no longer be necessary.

Waters, Burnett, Lamm, and Lucas (2009) argue that nonprofit organizations are underutilizing their Facebook profiles. Their article draws from a study of 275 nonprofit organizations' Facebook pages, and how they are or are not being used. They point out, "The organizations in the sample did not provide many methods for their supporters to become more involved in the organization" (p. 105). They elaborate further, "The nonprofits in this sample provided links to external news stories; however, they failed to take advantage of other public relations opportunities. They rarely posted multimedia files, press releases, or summaries of their campaigns" (p. 105). Paolina Milana (2009) offered nine "Tips for Entering Your Nonprofit into the Social Media Environment." These nine tips serve as a good introduction to nonprofit

professionals who are relatively unfamiliar with social media. Pointers such as, "Realize that social media is not just a fad or something young kids play around with," (2009) and "Social media is a cost-effective means to promote and market your messages" (2009) are sound. However, these tips are not definitive, and should simply serve as an argument for why it is in the reader's interest that they engage their nonprofit in social media.

Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) argue the Internet is a way for activist organizations to pool resources together, creating a more coherent message on behalf of several organizations. They studied 100 environmental activist organizations, to determine how they are using the Internet as a collaboration tool. Even though this article came out before Social Networking sites, the authors raise several interesting points about engaging the public, two-way communication, and the importance of dialogue when trying to establish collaboration between two or more people or organizations. They describe some of the major struggles in managing activist organizations:

> Maintaining an activist organization is difficult because there are many different activist groups—large and small—working on similar issues and courting the same active publics. For instance, thousands of organizations advocate on behalf of endangered species, clean water, and better land use. One way that activist organizations can better serve their publics, extend their reach, and coordinate efforts with other like-minded groups, is through the Internet (p. 264).

This serves as a call to action for environmental advocacy groups to pool their resources together, instead of fighting over the same supporters. Through Internet usage, they believe that collaboration can be more easily achieved because it breaks down distance barriers and provides a "place" for the organizations and those who are interested to meet.

Several articles have been written on mobile giving, where "a donor gives to a nonprofit via [cellular phone] text [message]" (Verclas, 2008). These articles spend less time describing the successes of mobile giving (e.g. how many donations were received in the past year, how much money in donations was received, etc.), but more time describing the potential of mobile giving as a fundraising tool, its history, and where mobile giving is heading. There is, however, one exception—in one article, Jeff Slobotski and Michael Schrieber of United eWay (the United Way's technological arm) note that a 10-second advertisement during the 2008 Super Bowl "generated $10,000 in donations via text" (Verclas, 2008). The overall theme seems to imply that mobile giving serves to supplement other, more complex fundraising efforts, though not necessarily as a substitute for larger fundraising initiatives. The most recent example of the success of mobile giving is the US State Department's initiative to assist those affected by the Earthquake in Haiti. As of January 20, 2010, Americans had given $25 million to the effort by texting "90999" (Dowd, 2010). As of the time of this writing, mobile giving has not been proven to be a sustainable fundraising method.

METHODOLOGY

I conducted a nine-question survey among 622 people. The survey sample consisted largely of people between the ages of 18 and 30, many of whom have completed some level of college. 107 people completed and submitted the survey (a 17.2% response rate), with 105 usable responses. This survey allowed me to analyze the respondents' attitudes towards nonprofit organizations and gauge their interest in environmental issues and policy. It also illustrated the frequency and

effectiveness with which nonprofit organizations use social media to inform followers of advocacy opportunities, recruit volunteers, solicit donations, and educate followers.

To assess how they are currently using Internet resources, time was spent looking at the organizations' websites to ensure that people can donate through their webpage. Observations regarding the content of their website will provide the basis for feedback and recommendations for areas in need of improvement. All of the aforementioned organizations have Facebook pages and Twitter accounts. The research also includes an interview with a staff member at WMEAC regarding the ways in which they use social media. These answers provide context for the effective uses of social media among NPOs.

Finally, I attended a presentation at Grand Valley State University's Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy, entitled "Social Media Basics: How to Optimize the Internet for Your Nonprofit" on December 1, 2009. The purpose of this presentation was to equip nonprofit professionals with the tools to begin utilizing social media resources for their nonprofit organization. Resources such as Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, Twitter, and Digg were discussed. However, this was not a comprehensive conference on the most effective methods of using these tools. It served to provide those who are relatively unfamiliar with social media with an introduction to how and why they are used, and what their most appropriate uses are.

SURVEY RESULTS (see: Appendix C for complete results)

There is good news for environmentalists and NPOs. Over 93% of the survey's respondents indicated that they hold at least some interest in environmental issues. While I was not able to pinpoint specific issues, this means that almost everybody who answered the survey holds some interest in some area of environmental policy (water/air pollution, land conservation, etc.). More than 36% of all of the respondents indicated that they follow an NPO through social media. Due to the limited nature of the survey, I was not able to determine what type of NPOs the respondents followed.

There is also good news for smaller, grassroots organizations. Even though NPOs that cover a national scope tend to be the most commonly followed by respondents, over 50% of the respondents who do follow NPOs through social media reported that they follow a local or municipal NPO. This should be important for Directors and CEOs of grassroots NPOs to note, because all of the same social media tools that are available to larger NPOs are also available to smaller NPOs. 24% of those who were solicited for donations gave—much higher than the average response rate of 0.5 to 2.5% for acquisition direct mailings, or even the 6 to 12% average for re-solicitation (Barnes, 1995). This means that social media should not be perceived as a substitute for traditional fundraising and development methods. It is important to note that the people who are most likely to donate through social media are between the ages of 30 and 49 (Qualls, 2009), a group of people largely absent from my survey sample.

Finally, the survey revealed some of the untapped potential of social media. 58% of those who were asked to volunteer did so, but one out of three respondents was not asked to volunteer via social media within the past six months. On top of this, 65% of respondents indicated that there is room for improvement in the educational material provided through social media. Through this, it can be concluded that social media can be effectively used as a tool to recruit volunteers, and people who follow NPOs through social media are interested in the news, issues, and current policy related to the NPOs mission.

DISCUSSION

Barriers to Effective Use of Social Media and Internet Tools

Lack of Time to Update the Social Media Sites

   Several of the workshop attendees asked questions such as, "We barely have time to train volunteers. How will we have the time to constantly update our Facebook page?" "How do I go to the board and explain to them that this is a priority, when we have so many other issues to tackle?" "Our organization is small, and our hands are full. How do we fit this in to our schedule?" (Qualls, 2009). Waters, et al. (2009) acknowledge, "Most nonprofits lack the resources or time to provide constant attention to a Facebook page. Creating a profile and then abandoning it will create only minimal exposure for the organization, and it could turn off potential supporters if they witness inactivity on the site" (p. 105). They agree with the suggestions of Mrs. Qualls at the Johnson Center—have college interns and volunteers responsible for updating these sites.

   WMEAC supports all of the above assessments. When asked about the barriers to effectively utilizing social media (WMEAC staff, personal communication, December 9, 2009), they responded:

> Limited staff time to keep up with it and learn how to use it. We are all very busy. We could actually use full time social media help; thinking of creating a volunteer internship, as we cannot afford another staff person. We have had interns and volunteers research them and create user manuals for us. So far, we have very limited time to even look at these manuals. The economy is a factor; more staff would free up staff time so we could all get up to speed.

People with Limited/No Internet Access

   Though Internet use has grown dramatically over the past ten years, over 25% of the North American population still does not use the Internet regularly (Internet World Stats, 2009). In fact, most of the world lacks Internet access. Over-reliance on the Internet could lead to the neglect of more traditional forms of communication and fundraising, which would raise a couple of problems. First, this would limit interactions with the elderly, low-income citizens, and those who live in rural areas. Many of these people rely on Internet access at their local libraries—all of which have set hours of operation. Second, communication would cease in the event of a down server or website maintenance.

Dissemination of False Information

   From the Miliana article: "Winston Churchill once said, 'A lie can make it half way around the world before the truth has time to put its boots on'" (Milana, 2009). Due to the relative "newness" of newsletters and social networking, it is still easy for many people to get confused by false headlines, claims, and statistics. Furthermore, because literally anybody with Internet access can start their own blog, it is now easier for people to disseminate these claims than at any time in the past. The popularity of Wikipedia has turned online encyclopedias into accepted sources of information. The highly educated should, however, know better than this. The real

challenge will be showing the computer-illiterate and younger people that not everything that is found on the Internet is true. Danielle Abramson, an AmeriCorps participant, stated, "Because the whole point of social media is audience participation, you don't have control over what the audience is saying" (Driscoll, 2009, p. 22). In short, what makes social media so endearing—the ability for anybody to contribute and participate—is also one of its biggest drawbacks.

This will likely be a problem area for years to come. In *Damned Lies and Statistics*, Joel Best (2001) describes that if a false number is repeated enough times by enough people, third party consumers will accept that figure as true and authoritative, even though the (untrue) number's origins may be lost or forgotten (p. 32). Due to the ease with which anybody can post anything on their own blog or Facebook page, outrageous or flat-out untrue claims may be disseminated at any moment's notice. This will certainly make issue education more difficult. Future research will have to be conducted to determine whether or not people become more pessimistic or skeptical about information they receive, and whether or not that was caused by false information disseminated throughout the Internet.

The Generation Gap

Just as the Greatest Generation never had much use for compact disc players, it seems that mastery of the Internet is contingent on one's age. Most Millennials (those born between 1980 and 1995) barely remember a time before the Internet was prevalent in daily life (Safer, 2007). However, to most Baby Boomers, learning to effectively use the Internet is learning a brand new skill. People in this age group and older may never "master" the Internet the way that Generation-Xers and Millennials will. One issue here is that older members of an NPO may be used to sending in their membership dues, receiving publications, and receiving updates via traditional mail. It would be unwise to alienate these donors, specifically in times of economic recession. There is a positive correlation between age and the amount in charitable donations that one makes (Havens et al., 2006, p. 550), which means that it would be wise not to shun the needs of this part of the donor base. The good news is that Americans age 55 and older make up the fastest-growing group of new social media users, which means that this age group is growing increasingly comfortable with this means of communication (Qualls, 2009).

The "Personal Touch"

Internet communication cannot substitute for one-on-one interaction. In fact, social media represents the "middle area" between direct mail communication and face-to-face communication (Qualls, 2009). Despite the potential that opened with wide-spread Internet dissemination and the new social media phenomenon, this is certainly true. This is something that Millennials and beyond will have to keep in mind. Being able to communicate using computers is convenient, and will become even more familiar as the years pass. However, it will never serve as a substitute for the relationship building that can result from interacting with another person face-to-face. This will especially prove to be the case regarding donor relationships in the coming years. One author notes, "Despite these increases, online giving is still relatively small, with only a handful of organizations raising more than 10 percent of their total revenue through the Internet" (Waters, 2007, p. 60). Nonprofit organizations may be able to solicit $5 and $10 donations using a PayPal account or through mobile giving. However, bequests, corporate giving, and endowments will require more than sending out an email that asks if the donor is interested in giving a large donation. Longer-term, larger donations always take more effort and relationship building.

AREAS WHERE SOCIAL MEDIA SHOULD BE USED EFFECTIVELY

Canvassing, direct mailing, and telemarketing were not simply used for recruiting and retaining members. These techniques were also used to inform and educate members about policy issues, provide updates on what the organization is doing, inform members of advocacy opportunities, and for soliciting donations. Social media and various Internet resources give nonprofit organizations of all types the potential to expand in all of these domains. I will address each of these areas one at a time.

Inform and Educate Members on Policy Issues

Maintaining an updated website is essential in order to keep the organization relevant (Qualls, 2009). An organization's website should be a place where visitors can easily find basic information about the agency's mission, activities, contact information, and history. Even the smallest of nonprofit organizations should be able to accomplish this. WMEAC has fewer than ten full-time staff, yet their website is still easy to navigate, has relevant information on the agency on their front page, and provides links to their Facebook page and for potential donors. Fortunately, NPOs can use free resources such as WordPress to build their own website for little or no cost.

One main concern is the website's design. Many organizations get bogged down in trying to design the flashiest, fanciest, most attractive website possible. What is ultimately most important about any website is two-fold: the website is easy to navigate (everything is easy to read, the layout is not confusing, and the visitor is able to find information with ease), and maintaining a professional appearance, though not necessarily over-elaborate (Qualls, 2009). For instance, simply look at Google, the world's most visited webpage. It has a professional appearance that is simple, easy to use, and easy to navigate.

Due to the mix of imagery and sounds inherent in the medium, YouTube is a perfect place for an environmental nonprofit organization to engage in informing and educating the general public. Organizations are permitted to post their commercials/advertisements on YouTube, which are available for anybody to search for and find. Furthermore, features on YouTube allow the user to post (or "embed") the video onto a blog or a website. On top of this, video footage of the agency's activities can be posted for others to see—as definitive proof that the organization is actually doing what they say they are doing. What makes this medium even more appealing to nonprofits is the relatively low expectations that YouTube viewers have regarding the quality of the videos posted (Qualls, 2009). WMEAC need not have Martin Scorsese direct an elaborate video on the dangers of water pollution in the Grand River. Simple slide shows are perfectly acceptable in order for the nonprofit organization to get their message across.

Updating Members on the Organization's Activities

There is a new tool for performing an old ritual. President Obama gives weekly addresses, which are then available on his YouTube channel. Anybody can then go to YouTube and look up any of his addresses from weeks past, and/or follow them as they are released. This is similar to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's "Fireside Chats" from the 1930s. This may be more appropriate for larger environmental NPOs, such as Greenpeace. With the work of a translator,

these videos can then be posted in different languages, reaching potentially billions of people across all seven continents.

Twitter is an effective tool in the area of updating followers on organizational activities. Staff members at WMEAC, Energy Action Coalition, and Greenpeace have all sent tweets while at events, providing information on what their agencies are doing *while they are actually doing them*. On top of this, shortened URL websites like bit.ly allow the person using Twitter to post a link, providing background information or news articles related to the event, or pictures from the event through Flickr. Even better, Flickr allows attendees to post pictures of the event to the organization's photo ablum. Traditional blogs can be utilized after the completion of the event. Greenpeace allows "guest bloggers," so that multiple people can write on their website regarding current policy, issues, or agency activities.

When writing newsletters, it is important to remember to keep readers up-to-date on what the organization a) did since the last newsletter, and b) is planning to do in the near future. Even harder is keeping readers interested and wanting to see the next newsletter. Storytelling is an effective way to keep subscribers interested—each week or month (depending on the frequency of the newsletter), it would be useful to provide a short bit of information on environmental law, corporate greening practices, or policy history. Many people who write newsletters fall into the trap of simply repeating what is already available on the agency's website—which means that the newsletter is of little interest or use to those who receive it. Unfortunately, none of the NPOs engage in story telling. That being said, the newsletters that are offered by the organizations examined here contain very good information, often beyond what is available on their respective websites. Greenpeace's newsletters give various updates on environmental policy at the national level, Energy Action Coalition's newsletters take on a "call to action" motif, and WMEAC's newsletters give updates on environmental issues at the state and local levels.

While occasionally repetitive, Energy Action Coalition's frequent newsletters keep members updated on new initiatives being tackled in the Power Shift '09 campaign. In fact, through the distribution of the e-newsletter alone, Energy Action Coalition was able to garner over 50,000 signatures on a petition, urging President Obama to attend the Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen towards the end of 2009. This would have been much more difficult—and far less sustainable—had Energy Action Coalition volunteers had to mail out petitions to be returned to their office, or if they had to canvass, going door-to-door asking people if they would sign the petition.

WMEAC currently offers an e-newsletter to the general public, and they offer a traditional quarterly hard-copy newsletter to their members. The e-newsletters typically focus on local and state environmental news and initiatives, as well as updates on the agency itself. The newsletters often provide links to articles from other sources, giving subscribers plenty of information to read. These newsletters also provide links to their Facebook and Twitter pages, as well as information on how to donate to or get involved with the agency. These newsletters should serve as a model for other agencies to follow. Greenpeace offers an emailing list that is open to anybody with Internet access. In fact, a banner that says "Sign up for e-mail alerts" is located close to the top of their homepage. The main purposes of their e-newsletter are to inform members of their current activities, updates regarding environmental policy, and to make recipients aware of any environmental advocacy opportunities that may be available.

Inform Followers of Advocacy/Volunteer Opportunities

For the Power Shift 2009 campaign, Energy Action Coalition, an alliance of organizations aiming to support youth and student clean energy movement in America, sends weekly e-mail updates and announcements to all of the people on their mailing list. These emails inform the members of upcoming advocacy opportunities including petitions, marches, featuring speakers at events, and encouraging members to write to their congressperson. In fact, Energy Action Coalition has had great success doing this, organizing events across state boundaries

Facebook allows organizations and members to create "events," to which NPOs can then invite the general public. Or, they can notify their members through personal messages that they are looking for volunteers to work at an event. Because Facebook encourages reaching out to new people and makes it far easier to find people who may be interested in an NPO's cause, "I couldn't find anybody interested in our mission/organization" should no longer be an acceptable reason for having a shortage of volunteers. This is a key area where NPOs need to improve their practices. As mentioned earlier, Facebook has not been used to its full potential to recruit new members and volunteers (Waters et al., 2009, p. 105).

"We need volunteers for Saturday's event. Contact Mike Jones if you want to be involved" is only 86 characters long, and therefore would fit into a Tweet. To maximize the effect of this Tweet, it should be sent twice in the same day, due to the vast number of Tweets that Twitter users see in one day (Qualls, 2009). The previously mentioned YouTube Channel can be used to inform both followers and casual viewers of upcoming events, advocacy opportunities, and opportunities to volunteer.

Soliciting Donations

A nonprofit organization should have a "donation" link on their website that is easy to find. Fortunately, all three of the NPOs have done this. Waters illustrates the importance of this: "By making a permanent hyperlink to the online giving section, donors are more likely to give than if they had to seek out the area where they can contribute to the organization" (Waters, 2007, p. 64). This donation link should include information on how people can donate to the organization—through PayPal, stopping by the organization's main office, or by filling out a form and mailing a check. Larger nonprofit organizations have been on the cutting edge of this. They not only include information on how to donate, but how to write in bequests and planned giving—including a legal dictionary, if one wanted to write a bequest.[1]

Annual campaigns, such as those held by United Way chapters, will consistently remain a staple in the nonprofit fundraising world. However, the Internet now permits nonprofit organizations to fundraise in ways that are less intrusive than telemarketing and direct mailing. Facebook has been used as a fundraising tool in the form of "Causes" applications. Through this, users can advertise their favorite charities, through which other users are able to donate directly to the nonprofit organization through a Paypal account. According to Qualls (2009), the effectiveness of these applications is still being debated. However, the United Way did have some minor success through a fundraising campaign driven by Facebook boxes and applications.

According to the Mobile Giving Insider website, "Mobile giving is a charitable donation process where an individual can make a contribution to a non-profit organization via text message. The donation shows up at the end of the month as an addition to their phone bill"

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[1] To see an example of this, visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art's "Planned Giving" site:
http://www.metmuseum.org/ways_to_give/plannedgiving/bequests

(Mobile Giving Insider, 2009). One of the leading forces in mobile giving is the Mobile Giving Foundation, which was founded in 2006. This breakthrough will allow people to donate to philanthropic organizations, which can be advertised during major sporting events (e.g. the 2010 Winter Olympics, the World Series, the Super Bowl, etc.). One notable success was the 2010 Haiti campaign that was mentioned earlier. One of the latest breakthroughs in mobile giving has been the development of an iPhone application, which would allow the user to donate to the charity of their choice. The CharityCall application, announced on October 6, 2009, "provides donors with a quick, easy, convenient, and transparent way to give on their own terms with donations of $25, $50, $75 or more by first selecting from a displayed list of charities or causes" (Global Impact, 2009).

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

The biggest difference between the 1999 forms of communication and those in 2009 is the ability for members and organizations to interact more easily. It is surprising how little progress has been made in this area. While Facebook pages allow followers to post comments relating to an organization's wall post, it is difficult to determine whether or not this input has any impact on how the organization operates. From the outside, this interaction seems to take on a more symbolic role than actively encouraging members to play an active role in the organization's daily life. Greenpeace allows different people to post on their blog, and anybody is allowed to comment on the posts. Yet, this does not provide an expansive forum for members and followers to express their opinions and thoughts. An exemplary model of using the interactivity allowed by social media to its fullest potential is found in West Michigan. Grand Valley State University allows students to post pictures of the university, sports, and events to its Flickr account, which are then shared on the university's homepage.

All of the NPOs that I examined need to be more proactive in recruiting Facebook supporters and Twitter followers. If these NPOs want to remain connected to their younger followers, they need to do a better job of informing them of volunteer opportunities. Most of the survey respondents who were asked to volunteer did so. When asked about the importance of recruiting young people to their organization, staff at WMEAC (personal communication, December 9, 2009) replied, "Very important! This is a group where we want to build membership." While utilizing social media does not mean that an organization will immediately attract younger members (Qualls, 2009), it is becoming an increasingly effective way of reaching this age group.

There is room for improvement in how much information the NPOs are distributing through social media. According to the survey, people who follow NPOs are reading all of the materials that are provided, yet still do not feel completely educated on important policy issues. To do this, Greenpeace should increase the frequency with which they send their newsletters. Energy Action Coalition should include information regarding climate change and energy policy in their emails. WMEAC's newsletter provides a wealth of information relevant to their mission, and subscribers receive a newsletter with enough frequency (roughly once a week) that each letter contains information that is current and informative. However, WMEAC could do more to inform subscribers about environmental news at the national level—something that is largely absent from their newsletters.

Because they are a larger organization and have the capacity to do so, Greenpeace should further engage in mobile giving and use it as a fundraising tool. Staff at WMEAC (personal communication, December 9, 2009) called the results of their social media fundraising efforts

"lousy," but insist that they are working on improving those results. Truth be told, some social media and Internet tools are more effective fundraising tools than others. However, the major barrier to effectively soliciting donations through the Internet is proper and formal training in fundraising. If nonprofit professionals wish to get the most out of the Internet's fundraising potential, they need to learn to be effective fundraisers—with or without the Internet.

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research

Utilizing available Internet tools is quickly becoming necessary for an NPO's survival. Social media is a new and emerging concept, and is proving to be an effective and inexpensive way to communicate with people all over the world. In this paper, I pinpointed the importance of maintaining a professional and user-friendly website. The benefits and drawbacks of using social media were identified, as well as their limitations. The social media sites examined included Social Networking sites (Facebook), Micro-Blogging sites (Twitter), and Multi-Media sites (YouTube). It is important for an e-newsletter to be an extension of what is on the organization's website. It should not simply regurgitate what is already available via the organization's homepage. One should note that, while social media presents great potential for communication, the agency's homepage should be their base (Qualls, 2009). This is where all information relevant to the organization should be found. Finally, I also described new trends in fundraising and their benefits and drawbacks, including mobile giving.

Social media is undoubtedly changing the way that NPOs communicate with members and followers. However, it is important to note that social media and new technologies are simply the means to achieving the ends that nonprofit organizations have been working towards for decades. One should not get the two confused—creating a Facebook page is not a goal, but a means to reach other goals. Finally, one should not get too excited about the opportunities offered by social media. It will never be an acceptable substitute for face-to-face interaction, and only so much can be done (in terms of fundraising, relationship building, and building a sense of community for the NPO) through online communication. Further research will be required as technology progresses, and as new sites become popular.

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APPENDIX A – OVERVIEW OF THE TOOLS DISCUSSED/GLOSSARY

Bit.ly: A website used to shorten website addresses. Typically used so that lengthy addresses can fit in a "tweet".

Blogger: A website where people can share their thoughts in the form of an open letter (or a "blog entry").

E-newsletter: A newsletter sent via email.

Facebook: A social networking website open to anybody with an Internet connection and an email address. "Millions of people use Facebook everyday to keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos, and learn more about the people they meet" (Facebook Info, 2009).

iPhone Application: Downloadable computer software that helps the user perform a specific task, or visit a particular organization's website.

LinkedIn: A social networking website directed towards working professionals. "LinkedIn is an interconnected network of experienced professionals from around the world, representing 170 industries and 200 countries. You can find, be introduced to, and collaborate with qualified professionals that you need to work with to accomplish your goals" (About Us, LinkedIn, 2009).

Mobile Giving: Donating to a registered charity through one's cell phone. This can be done via text messaging or through an iPhone Application. The donation amount is then added to the user's cell phone bill.

Text Messaging: Sending written messages via cell phones.

Twitter: A miniblogging website, where people share their thoughts in 140 characters or less (otherwise known as a "tweet").

Wikipedia: An interactive encyclopedia, where anybody can create an entry, or contribute to an existing entry.

WordPress: A blogging site that allows users to design their own webpage for free.

YouTube: A website where anybody can upload their own video for others to watch. Also, users can watch, rate, and comment videos that others have uploaded.

APPENDIX B: OVERVIEW OF THE AGENCIES

Greenpeace is a 501(c)(4), international environmental advocacy group. They describe themselves as "the leading independent campaigning organization that uses peaceful direct action and creative communication to expose global environmental problems and to promote solutions that are essential to a green and peaceful future" (Greenpeace-About Us, 2009). The organization was established in 1971 as a grassroots organization, seeking to educate citizens about the dangers of nuclear testing. For more than 30 years, Greenpeace has advocated for environmental protection and conservation, animal rights, climate change, and against nuclear power and testing. This is done "through research, advocacy, and lobbying" (Greenpeace-About Us, 2009).
Website Address: http://www.greenpeace.org/
Facebook Page: http://www.facebook.com/greenpeace.international
Twitter Account: http://twitter.com/greenpeace

West Michigan Environmental Action Council was founded in 1968, and "has served as West Michigan's leading voice for environmental protection" ever since (WMEAC-Who We Are, 2009). Most of their activities are directed towards raising environmental awareness in West Michigan through issue education and advocacy. According to their website, they seek to "[empower] West Michigan's citizens, businesses, institutions and organizations with the tools they need to become better stewards of our environment" (WMEAC-Who We Are, 2009). They have frequently been featured in the Grand Rapids Press, often as the leading environmental authority in Grand Rapids.
Website Address: http://www.wmeac.org/
Facebook Page: http://www.facebook.com/pages/West-Michigan-Environmental-Action-Council/27412782330
Twitter Account: http://twitter.com/wmeac

Energy Action Coalition, "founded in June 2004…unites a diversity of organizations in an alliance that supports and strengthens the student and youth clean and just energy movement in North America" (EAC-About, 2009). This alliance is a grassroots movement, consisting of organizations from the United States and Canada. It consists of college students and youths who advocate for steps to be taken, at several levels of government, to address climate change and to advocate for clean energy policy.
Website Address: http://www.energyactioncoalition.org/
Facebook Page: http://www.facebook.com/pages/Energy-Action-Coalition/12155623289?filter=2
Twitter Account: http://twitter.com/energyaction

APPENDIX C – SURVEY QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

1. Please rate your interest in environmental issues and environmental policy
   a. Very Interested – 35 (33%)
   b. Somewhat Interested – 63 (60%)
   c. Not Interested – 7 (7%)
2. Do you follow one or more nonprofit organizations (NPOs) through social media?

       a. Yes (proceed to questions 3 through 8—do not answer question 9) – 38 (36%)

       b. No (skip to question 9) – 67 (64%)

3. Were you, in any way, connected with the NPO(s) before you followed them through social media?

       a. Yes – 23 (52%)

       b. No – 21 (48%)

4. Please describe the geographic scope of the NPO(s) you follow through social media (you may choose more than one)

       a. Local/Municipal – 22 (55%)

       b. State – 21 (52.5%)

       c. Interstate/Regional – 9 (22.5%)

       d. National – 25 (62.5%)

       e. International – 18 (45%)

5. Have you been informed of advocacy opportunities - through social media - in the past six months?

       a. Yes, and I participated – 14 (33%)

       b. Yes, but I did not participate – 21 (49%)

       c. No – 8 (19%)

6. Have you been solicited for donations by the NPO - through social media - in the past six months?

       a. Yes, and I donated – 7 (16%)

       b. Yes, but I did not donate – 22 (51%)

       c. No – 14 (33%)

7. Have the NPOs contacted you to perform volunteer work - through social media - in the past six months?

       a. Yes, and I volunteered – 14 (33%)

       b. Yes, but I did not volunteer – 10 (23%)

       c. No – 19 (44%)

8. Please indicate how informed the NPO(s) keep you on issues relevant to their mission through social media

       a. Very informed – 15 (35%)

       b. Provide some information, but not enough – 22 (51%)

       c. Do not keep me informed – 6 (14%)

9. Why don't you follow an NPO using social media

       a. I am connected to them through traditional means (direct mail, phone, etc.) – 4 (6%)

       b. I did not know where to find the NPO's web resources – 8 (12%)

       c. The NPOs that I support do not utilize Social Media – 4 (6%)

       d. I have limited Internet access/lack of knowledge about how to use Social Media – 6 (9%)

       e. Lack of interest in NPOs – 35 (51%)

       f. Other – 12 (17%)

Survey links: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/2ZT5WNP and
http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/NJ22C3X

Student Profile: David Miller

David is a 2010 graduate of Grand Valley State University's Master of Public Administration program, with an emphasis in Nonprofit Management & Leadership through the School of Public, Nonprofit, and Health Administration. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in History from GVSU in December 2007. Upon completing his undergraduate education and several internships, David decided that he wanted to pursue a career in nonprofit management. He ultimately chose the MPA program because he saw that the graduate program is designed to provide an educational background broad enough to equip students with the tools to play any role in a public or nonprofit agency, yet the professors make sure to address issues and trends specific to these institutions. Though he thoroughly enjoyed the entire MPA curriculum, his favorite courses in the program were PA 660 (Nonprofit Sector: History and Ethics), PA 662 (Nonprofit Resource and Financial Management), and PA 680 (Environmental Policy).

Most recently, David has done volunteer work with Kids' Food Basket and Degage Ministries, both of which are located in Grand Rapids. These rewarding opportunities provide him with an opportunity to give back to the community and to further understand altruism in West Michigan. In September 2011, David will be getting married to his fiancé, Kiersten, "to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for helping me to choose this paper for review by the department."