



# Increase Donations in a Down Economy? With Social Media, Yes, You Can!



Use social media to build relationships and boost donations. Here's how.

By Bob Cramer

While many nonprofits are cutting costs and programs to wait out the economic downturn, others are stepping up their outreach efforts to encourage would-be donors and gain a competitive edge. These nonprofits are “socially enabling” their Web presence to increase traffic, encourage visitors to stay longer, and open a dialogue with and between supporters. Such two-way conversations strengthen relationships, engendering loyalty to programs and causes.

## Social communities help nonprofits connect and engage.

At a basic level, social enablement can mean adding “comment” capabilities to site content such as articles and blogs, letting readers share their thoughts. Other simple, effective social media features include forums and special interest groups where users can post information, opinions, or questions, and others can respond.

For instance, Sierra Club, the oldest and largest U.S. environmental organization, has created a social community called “Climate Crossroads” as an online destination for its members. The community features “action” groups that members can create and join around

You can adopt social media, best known for use on Web sites like MySpace and Facebook, to build communities around your mission.

such topics as global warming, animal rights, and recycling. A group can be based on geography, environmental causes, hobbies, or anything else members deem important. Within these groups, members meet (virtually) and share information, photos, and perspectives.

The ability to become part of an online community's discussion in this manner is truly transformative, taking supporters from passive to active participation. In lean times, building such levels of passion and activism can be the way to find dollars to fund your mission.

Because social communities are based on user-generated content, they also help solve the challenge of keeping Web sites fresh and dynamic so that people keep coming back. With social media features, active members continually add new information. Whether it's

postings in forums, comments to blogs, or uploaded photos and video, there's always something new for site visitors to view.

## Make the most of your social media investment.

In the current economy, many nonprofits are concerned about gaining a return on their investment in social media. Even when the right tools are in place, there can be a lack of understanding about how to use them to best meet organizational goals, such as retaining supporters and driving donations. Following are some tips for optimizing social media usage on your site:

**Intersperse click-and-donate buttons throughout your social community.** Fundraising links in highly trafficked areas of your social community can facilitate online donations. As an example, CARE, a leading humanitarian organization with the mission of fighting global poverty, places a “Donate Now” button on its main community page, just above its “Latest News” feeds, and just below a registration button for first-time visitors. Donating is automated, simple, and fast.

**Listen, learn, and adapt to members' interests and needs.** By monitoring member discussions in forums and groups within your

social community, you can see what your constituents are talking about and where their true passions lie. For example, an international nonprofit might see a large number of supporters engaging in forum discussions about Darfur or the Congo, or a nonprofit focused on a chronic disease might see discussions related to pending new healthcare legislation, alternative treatments, or clinical trials. Thus, they'll know to increase site content and programs focused on those areas. Keeping your finger on the pulse of what supporters care about most is key to retaining their interest and support.

**Use blogging in a variety of ways.** Most nonprofits understand the benefits of a regular blog authored by their director or other key personnel. But social communities can give members the ability to publish their own blogs to share their unique stories. Such testimonials prompt people's generosity as they learn about others' experiences firsthand. You can make member blogs "center stage" by placing them in prominently displayed blog rolls. For example, the Arthritis Foundation uses a robust blog roll to let members tell each other about their trials and triumphs related to the disease. Rheumatoid Arthritis and Surgery & Arthritis groups within the community feature member-written blog posts that are both emotional and inspiring.

**Identify leaders within your constituency.** Monitoring member discussions will help you identify your most active online members, whom you can enlist as fundraising evangelists and organizers. Once you pinpoint active participants, communicate with them frequently and express gratitude for their actions. Often, they'll be receptive to suggestions about topics they can raise within the community, as well as requests for helping launch fundraising drives within their own geographic locales.

**Consider sponsorships.** Although many nonprofits are leery about third-party advertising on their Web sites, social media present opportunities for carefully selected vendors to interact with members in controlled and appropriate ways. For instance, a sponsoring vendor might be allowed to publish a blog or Q & A column in its field of expertise or host a member forum on a relevant topic. As you seek to ride out the harsh economy, finding new and unconventional revenue streams can offset operational costs and supplement donations.

**Reach out to new donors to keep dollars flowing.** As baby boomers head into retirement, it's time to look toward the next generation. More than 76 million "millennials" – Americans born between 1978 and 2000 – will enter the workforce over the next decade. They grew up with the Internet and expect social community features on Web sites. If you develop social media strategies to reach them, you'll be giving them the tools they desire to become involved.

### Is now the right time?

You may have been planning to delay social media programs till the economy improves. But now is actually the right time to deliver these essential new outreach

programs. Building connections with supporters is especially important during a troubled economy, when many potential donors are feeling pressure to reduce their contributions. A strong social media program keeps supporters involved during a market downturn.

Because social media tools transform passive audiences into active members, they create stronger bonds that are less likely to be broken. In trying times, having a sense of community can be the incentive supporters need to keep giving despite their own personal stresses and hardships.

It's a reality that you must work harder today to get attention and support. Social media tools will give you the edge you need. ■

### Helpful Articles ([www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members))

**Using E-Mail & the Web to Acquire & Cultivate Donors** (Vol. 21, No. 1)

**Is It Time to Consider New Ways to Communicate?** (Vol. 25, No. 4)

**How to Make Social-Media Fundraising Work for You** (Vol. 27, No. 2)

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