



Are You Reaping the True Rewards of Social Media?

A research study provides answers, insights, and solutions.

By Mark Hager & Rachel Nova

Nonprofits have some work to do if they're to maximize social media. The problem comes when our methods of doing business interfere with the potential for dialogue with stakeholders. We get in our own way. What can we do about it?

Nonprofits Love Social Media

Nonprofits have a natural affinity with social-media platforms, which are inexpensive and geared toward connecting with their publics.¹ Nonprofit Tech for Good (nptechforgood.com) estimates that 90% of NGOs worldwide used social media to engage supporters and donors in 2019. In the United States, their estimate is 97%. They claim that “history does not give enough credit to the role that NGOs played in the rise of social networks,” and we agree. Outside of our friends and hobbies, our main connections

to our neighborhoods and global concerns is through the social media of our favorite nonprofits.

There's Great Potential for Dialogue

Some people just lurk on social media, using it as a virtual newspaper. However, the great promise of social media lies in our ability to interact directly with others. Whether nonprofits are getting all they can out of social media is an open question, and one that management teams are regularly forced to confront.

Does dialogue with stakeholders matter? It might depend on the type and mission of the organization, but our world relies on nonprofits to foster civic engagement. If nonprofits aren't organized for engagement, they don't fulfill this essential human need. What's more, dialogue promotes connections that might result in long-term memberships, volunteer engagement, and donor relationships.

The evolution over the past two decades from static web pages (Web 1.0) to the potential for interaction in blog comments and social media (Web 2.0) is a historic event that we have experienced in real time. The internet has given nonprofits a great gift. Academic observers have

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called this “dialogic communication” or a “dialogic loop” that allows organizations and interested members of the public to interact. One-dimensional nonprofits just post content, but two-dimensional nonprofits use social media to actually interact with the public.

We’re Moving Slowly Toward This Potential

When Gregory Saxton and Chao Guo² studied community foundations in 2005, they found that very few had digital interaction options, but Web 2.0 was new back then. Even nowadays, however, observers lament that nonprofits are still using social media (like Facebook) in Web 1.0 form, just to post static material rather than interact. Circa 2017, Nadine van Wissen and Anke Wonneberger reviewed Facebook habits by 10 big name-brand nonprofits and found that only five of them could lay claim to anything like a dialogic loop.³ They concluded that nonprofits have “only marginally focused on applying stakeholder dialogue online.”

About this same time, Jimmy Young’s survey of human-service organizations revealed that only 60% could agree that social media provided an opportunity to interact with others.⁴ It seems that many, if not most, nonprofit organizations are stuck in the past, using the internet only as a virtual bulletin board.

Research Gives Clues into Social-Media Use

Maybe the pandemic kicked nonprofit organizations into a new gear? In the spring and summer of 2021, our research team put our fingers on the pulse of volunteer administration in the United States and Canada, where civic engagement was still disrupted by the pandemic.⁵ Shutdowns and major adjustments to volunteer programs had forced nonprofits to seek new ways to engage volunteers and other stakeholders remotely.

We invited all professionally certified volunteer leaders in the U.S. and Canada to hour-long focus groups, and 181 of them took us up on it. In 33 separate group conversations, we listened to and recorded stories about both desktop applications and communications technology that volunteer managers use to engage their volunteers. The promises and limitations of social media were on their mind, and we took special note of this as we transcribed and coded their narratives.

Some Organizations Are on the Cutting Edge

To be sure, some nonprofits took full advantage of the communication and dialogic potential of social media. One volunteer manager in a United Way spearheaded efforts to deliver food to people shut in their homes, and she credits the real-time advantages of Facebook: “We worked out a network of systems so that we can recruit volunteers through our office, and then move those volunteers out to deliver the food to people’s homes. We did that all through social media.”

A rep in a YMCA pointed specifically to the interaction value that their new virtual groups provided: “So many volunteers were feeling isolated,” she said. “That Facebook space actually provided the platform for people to connect and check in.” We loved hearing these stories of nonprofits who were using social media to its full potential, to promote interaction between program managers, volunteers, and those who engaged their services.

For Many, Dialogue Is a Bridge Too Far

Dialogue was the exception rather than the rule, however. We uncovered something we didn’t expect, namely the limitation that comes from separating social-media control from the people actually interacting with the public. A volunteer manager at a zoo explained, “We have a marketing team that does all of the social media. . . . I just feed them content, and then they’ll post it.”

This was a recurring theme, with division of duties leading to low potential for dialogue with stakeholders. That is, although posting often falls to the marketing team, they aren’t the ones prepared to interact with current and prospective donors and volunteers. They often lack the time or knowledge to answer any follow-up questions.

Institutional Control Is a Related Problem

Some volunteer managers were okay with this division of duties. Not everyone is itching to have the responsibility of posting to social media in their job description. Most, however, felt frustrated and confined by the barriers placed between them and the social-media channels. A Canadian human-service worker put a fine point on it: “I’ve worked for nonprofits for [many] years, and the one I’m working for right now is the first one that does not allow me to use our social-media channels for volunteer engagement, and it drives me up the wall. We don’t recognize or engage volunteers on any level of social media.”

Another volunteer director at a youth-services organization in New Hampshire was unhappy with her inability to communicate with her own volunteers. “There’s one person who’s in charge of media stuff and you don’t touch what

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they're doing," she said. "Constructive criticism is not welcome."

Bureaucracy Can Be a Challenge

Division of duties and institutional control are especially limiting in large organizations. Such bureaucracy poses a serious challenge for constructive social-media use.

A volunteer manager at an airport knew that she was fighting an uphill battle. "We use [social media] very little, and that is because I'm part of such a large organization. They really want to control all the branding and messaging that goes out."

The story was the same for a Canadian hospital worker, who said dialogue just wasn't possible because she prepared her social-media posts weeks in advance and had to get each one signed off by 20 people. A volunteer manager in a large library had already tried fighting that battle, and didn't recommend it. "You submit a marketing request, and then

you're going to get stuck in that bureaucracy. Then it's a month later, and it's kind of past the point that we really needed to target." So much for posts, let alone dialogue.

Dialogue is a casualty of this kind of institutional arrangement. An organizer of volunteers for a local government in Florida made this connection clear. "No one is allowed to use social media except for our communications department," she said. "They're not really monitoring it, so if somebody asked a question, it would probably just die."

A leader in an association felt that their use of social media lets down their members. "When people have customer-service questions, they're going to social media to get those answered," she said. "My organization does *not* want to use social media in that way. When we use social media for engagement it's always like pulling teeth."

True Interaction Is an Unfulfilled Promise

When nonprofits divide duties and bureaucratize social media, there is no exchange or dialogue. Social media's potential as a vehicle for interaction with stakeholders is lost, and these dynamic platforms are relegated to static web pages.

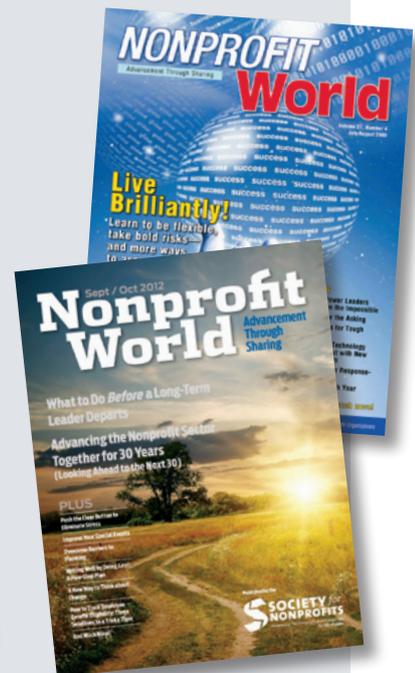
A hospice organizer in Canada felt she could overcome this problem if she were given appropriate levels of control. "I

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have a communications person and I send stuff to her if I want something on our page,” she explained. “There’s definitely a disconnect between the volunteers that I’m representing. . . . The information doesn’t always get conveyed exactly how or when I would have wanted it to. It would be different if I had control myself.”

Real-time interaction with volunteers and other stakeholders – the dialogic loop – is an unfilled promise of social media in the civic sphere. Volunteer managers can benefit from more control over social media. One benefit is real-time communication between volunteer programs and the public. Another benefit is more personal connection between volunteer programs and volunteers, or prospective volunteers.

How Can We Fix This Problem?

To fix this communication breakdown, nonprofits have to make two big adjustments:

First, they must be willing to cede control to sub-units.

As social-media use has become more common over the past decade, we have a sense that many management teams are willing to cede at least some control to line workers, but problems of distance and bureaucracy persist.

For organizations unwilling to cede control, top management teams should emphasize positive relationships and communication between departments with and without control over social media. This need is amplified in larger organizations, where rules and timelines are direct threats to the timeliness of posts and interactions. Leaders must minimize hoop jumping and flatten hierarchies.

Second, volunteer managers will need to buy into the great potential of social media as a two-way medium.

If they see it only as a way to post information, that’s all it will ever be. If they see it as a way to interact, then Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and other platforms will realize their potential as Web 2.0 and provide avenues for real-time connection with the community. But before volunteer managers can develop and refine their social media strategies, they need institutional support. 

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“Our world relies on nonprofits to foster civic engagement.”

Take Advantage of All the Internet Has to Offer

For ideas on using internet tools to best advantage, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

Engage Donors with Social Media (Vol. 33, No. 3)

Ignite Passion by Connecting Online (Vol. 34, No. 4)

Using Social Media to Advance Your Goals (Vol. 27, No. 1)

Top Can’t-Miss Resources for Nonprofits (Vol. 34, No. 3)

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

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

Create a Donation Page that Rocks (Vol. 33, No. 1)

Don’t Take Risks with Social Media (Vol. 29, No. 1)

Footnotes

- 1 “Social Media Use in 2021” by Brooke Auxier and Monica Anderson documents a Pew Research Center survey (pewresearch.org) showing that a majority of Americans use YouTube and Facebook, while the use of Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit, and TikTok is especially common among adults under 30.
- 2 “Accountability Online: Understanding the Web-Based Accountability Practices of Nonprofit Organizations” by Gregory D. Saxton and Chao Guo, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764009341086>
- 3 “Building Stakeholder Relations Online: How Nonprofit Organizations Use Dialogic and Relational Maintenance Strategies on Facebook” by Nadine van Wissen and Anke Wonneberger, dare.uva.nl
- 4 “Facebook, Twitter, and Blogs: The Adoption and Utilization of Social Media in Nonprofit Human Service Organizations” by Jimmy A Young, tandfonline.com
- 5 “Technology Evolution in Volunteer Administration (TEVA)” (cvacert.org/teva) describes research conducted at Arizona State University in collaboration with the Council for Certification in Volunteer Administration (cvacert.org). It was funded through a cooperative agreement with AmeriCorps.