Tech Tips to Punch Up Your Communications

Put tech tools to work with these pointers.

By Nancy Schwartz

There's a disconnect in the nonprofit world. I read countless articles about technology and its powerful applications for the nonprofit sector, but seldom is there coverage of the critical interface between technology and communications strategies. That's a serious gap.

What's happened is that many of us shy away from technology. By leaving tech decisions to the IT department rather than schooling ourselves on these opportunities, we limit the impact of our communications strategies.

My advice to you is to learn what tech tools can strengthen your nonprofit's communications strategies and what choices you have. If you have an IT consultant or team, ask them to dig into the details. But get to know the basics yourself. That way you'll make sure you get the right tool, and you'll get the most out of it.

I interviewed nonprofit technology expert and author Michael Stein for his take on tech tips to strengthen your web and e-mail communications impact. Michael, who has worked with Children Now, Groundspring, and eOrganization.com, shared some great ideas:

Improve the ways in which you gather personal information and e-mail addresses from stakeholders.

Tip: Don't ask only for e-mail addresses when you ask your audiences to subscribe to your e-news. Gather name, street address, zip code, how they heard about you. Take it one step further to do some quick surveying on issues.

Tip: Think more like a business in terms of figuring out the sources of these leads. You want more of them.

Tip: Ask for an e-mail address when your web users request a PDF download.

Benefit: You'll learn more about how various outreach techniques are working (or not) to validate marketing expenses and impact.

Publish your e-newsletter in both HTML and plain text.

Insight: HTML format makes it much easier for readers to act. Studies show that HTML format performs much better in terms of click-throughs, forward to friend, etc.

Benefit: You'll have better engagement with audiences by giving them a choice of format and the opportunity to take action with a click.

Caution: Don't forgo your text version. Many readers still prefer text.

Dive into blog publishing.

Definition: A blog (an abbreviation of weblog) is a website that serves as an online journal, updated very frequently with commentary on one or more topics. Bloggers provide links to related information, with commentary. Because of their low barrier to entry (blogs are easy and cheap to implement), blogs are proliferating in the nonprofit sector.

Insight: The "blogosphere" is becoming huge, with content feeds (RSS readers deliver blog content to interested audiences) growing at a rapid pace. Blogs are a great way to disseminate content in a timely way.

Benefit: Some high-impact ways to put your blog to use for your organization include:

- Serialize content, such as daily reports from an oceanographer on an expedition or an advocacy campaign hard at work.
- Build community by providing a venue for many voices (staff, experts, board members, and so on).
- Critique events or news items in your issue areas, as they occur.
- Reinforce content disseminated via other communications vehicles – broadcast, print, or online.
- Provide personal perspectives, which help your audiences get to know your organization's staff members. Focus on the people in your organization to strengthen relationships with your audiences.

Use application service providers (ASPs) to streamline your online operations.

Insight: There are now automated systems that you don't have to maintain (they live in a server, which you access via the web). They can help you with operations, website content management, online donation processing, e-mail messaging, and online event registration. Consider moving these processes online and off your desktop computer.

> **" Find an intern or volunteer to beat the bushes. "**

Benefit: Easier software interfaces. Faster learning curve. Sometimes your software cost will be higher, but your total cost of operation (since you'll save hours in set up and maintenance) will be lower.

Example: Take a look at Citysoft, an ASP targeted to nonprofits, associations, educational institutions, and other socially-responsible organizations. Citysoft offers a menu of tech tools, including e-mail marketing, web content development software, and donor and event management. Depending on the modules you select, your organization can send e-mail newsletters to constituents and track the results, create online communities for audience use, provide event registration, and much more.

Develop a web search optimization agenda to improve search engine positioning.

Tip: The best way to improve search engine positioning is to get links to your site placed at other websites where your audiences already are.

Tip: Once you've identified key sites you'd like to be linked from (start with a list of the top 20), start calling or e-mailing. A great way to do this is to find an intern or volunteer to beat the bushes. Link placement isn't skilled work (after you identify the key sites) but it is extremely labor intensive.

Benefit: Improved positioning in search engine results.

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