



# It's All about the CONNECTION

Are you using the latest tools to connect with the people who matter most?



By Allison Fine

**T**he women of Kuwait won the right to vote last year by secretly using their BlackBerry's beneath their burqas to send e-mail messages to Kuwait's all-male legislature. Rock the Vote and Facebook have teamed up to enable young people to register to vote where they naturally congregate online. In myriad ways, in stealth or sunlight, activists are creatively using new digital media to connect with one another, influence their communities, and catalyze social-change efforts.

People's interactions through Web sites, cellphones, chat rooms, personal digital assistants, iPods, and other gadgets and gizmos have transformed society from the

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information age to the connected age. These digital tools, called social media, are important not for their wizardry but because they're inexpensive, easy to use, and allow individuals and small groups to bring about big changes. Connectedness doesn't come from technology but is facilitated and strengthened by it.

The greatest challenge for nonprofit leaders in the connected age is adopting a new mind-set for

social change. Power is shifting from institutions to individuals throughout society. We've seen what happens when people barter and sell goods without a middleperson on eBay, and when we can watch what we want, when we want, through YouTube. The same sorts of shifts are happening in the nonprofit world. Anyone can create and post a video of what they think their Congressional representatives do all day as part of the "Congress in :30 Secs" campaign organized by the Sunlight Foundation. Volunteers organized through online and on-land networks can pressure their elected representatives for stronger legislation to stop the genocide in Darfur as part of

the Genocide Intervention Network. Donors can pick a school and a specific project to support as part of the DonorsChoose Web site.

Successful connected-age organizations are those that facilitate broad networks of social activists, not necessarily organizations with the biggest membership lists or the most money in their coffers. These days, young people, in particular, aren't likely to join behemoth membership organizations. Instead, they go online to express their views and instantly connect with individuals and communities interested in their issues and concerns. They also self-organize for social action through their MySpace pages and address books. Young people aren't going to change; they're going to bring their passions and connectedness to their future organizational lives. Nonprofit organizations need to change to accommodate these young people's work ways and make the most of the connected age.

Too often, nonprofit groups fall into a power trap, where our actions and deeds suggest that donors who give the big money are more important than the social activists who do the work. In a connected world, power is defined entirely differently. It comes directly from an organization's supporters; the more numerous and more diffuse they are, the more power they generate. And these supporters, when they are invited to participate in all facets of an organization's work in meaningful ways, become a loyal network of donors as well. Perhaps more than anything else, a shift in control from a few leaders at the center out toward the many people at the edges who want to contribute meaningfully (but who are, for the most part, now locked out of the process) is the key to success in this new age.

Nonprofit organizations need to examine the way they're interacting with their volunteers, board members, clients, and donors to offer

## Take the Connected Quiz

How good is your organization at making valuable connections? To find out, answer these questions.

1. **Do other people and organizations trust you** and your organization? How do you know? How can you increase and strengthen that trust?

2. **Are you reaching out to new people** and organizations to learn with and from them? Do you approach networking as an opportunity to push out your "brand" or to strengthen a connection with others?

3. **Do you publicize the achievements** of your organization's clients and supporters? Do you make sure this publicity extends beyond your own organization to other communities?

4. **What information are you sharing** with the world? Are there other kinds of information you could share?

5. **Are your Web site and other communication vehicles inviting** to strangers? Can anyone looking at your information figure out who you are and which individuals are key?

6. **Do your materials** (your Web site, brochures, plans, proposals, reports) use words that people understand?

7. **How do you consider questions from outsiders** — as time-suckers that need to be answered, or as the beginning of a conversation?

8. **Do you ever introduce people** for no other reason than the fact that they should know one another? Does that include introducing collegial organizations to potential funders? What are you expecting in return for these introductions?

9. **Do your participants ever talk to one another** about your endeavor without your prompting?

10. **Can you help your volunteers** start their own conversations, have their own meetings, and develop strategies to support your efforts?

11. **Do you celebrate achievements** by other organizations in your network?

12. **Do your participants** (board members, volunteers, clients, collegial organizations) *watch* you make plans, or do they *help you* make plans? How invested are they in your organization's strategic planning?

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those kinds of experiences. The reality needs to match the perception that organizations truly want people to participate — not just to robotically join their campaign or give a donation, but to voice an opinion, ask a question, find a like-minded soul, and even do something heretical in activist circles in recent years: disagree.

We will be successful in this new era when we learn to use our leverage more and lift less, to listen better and act smarter, to share and participate, not control and command. If nonprofit groups with

the help of social media change their approach, they can create a vast power surge for social change. By not doing so, we risk becoming irrelevant and failing the people who count on us to make the world a better place. ■

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