



# Using Social Media to Advance Your Goals

**Social media tools provide a revolutionary way to engage supporters. Here's what you need to know.**

By Bob Cramer



Donors need to feel a connection to the causes they support. Successful nonprofits not only communicate regularly with their constituents – they also provide channels for interaction and dialogue. In today's media rich society, developing those channels can make the difference as to whether nonprofits thrive or barely survive.

The Internet provides powerful solutions for you to build relationships with supporters in innovative ways. Online communities with social networking opportunities lower barriers for participation, letting people interact from anywhere at any time.

Consider CARE ([www.care.org](http://www.care.org)), a nonprofit organization that empowers women worldwide to combat poverty and improve standards of living. CARE successfully uses a variety of social media tools to create a strong sense of community – based on participation rather than where members are located – and to encourage donations and advocacy. For example, through CARE's social media Web portal, people can post individual profiles, form specialized interest groups, participate in CARE's topical blogs, and network with other supporters. These elements help to unite people and build enthusiasm for CARE's programs and goals.

## **Moving Beyond "Read Only" Web Sites**

The relative affordability and inherent community-building elements of social media make them strong tools to improve communication with and between advocates and donors. Most nonprofits offer only static Web content that changes

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infrequently, discouraging repeat visits. Using social media, these sites can be vitalized into unique, active resources that keep supporters coming back and provide a keen competitive edge in fundraising and membership drives.

So what are social media tools, exactly? A social media program can consist of many elements – including message boards, blogs with reader comment options, photo- and video-sharing, and anything else that facilitates exchanging opinions, knowledge, and information online. It can also include Real Simple Syndication (RSS) technology that lets users tailor their own news feeds, so they receive only the articles and information relevant to them. (For more details, see "A Glossary of Common Social Media Tools" on page 21.)

Perhaps the most common examples of social media are MySpace, YouTube, and FaceBook, three of the most popular destinations on the Internet (and growing more popular each month, according to Nielsen/NetRatings). For many audiences, these Web sites have become a way to network, stay connected, and share opinions.

You can leverage the same concepts as these sites – and others like them – to develop bilateral communication channels that

support and further your goals. Integrating social networking tools opens a world of possibilities to supporters, creating an "online neighborhood" where they can interact without the heavy time commitment of a car or airplane ride. Contrast this to passive online environments, where supporters or prospective donors might visit once, read posted information, and never return.

## **Appealing to a Younger, Growing Supporter Base**

It's estimated that more than 76 million "millennials" (Americans born between 1978 and 2000) are ready to enter the workforce throughout the next decade. As baby boomers head closer to retirement, nonprofits are beginning to recognize the importance of this substantial next generation of prospective supporters.

Many millennials grew up with the Internet as a primary source of information and entertainment. To tap into this burgeoning supporter base, you need to start now to develop strategies that reach millennials through the Internet. By aligning social media tools such as blogs, podcasts, and article comment sections with your organization's objectives, you can give this rising new audience a familiar way to support your cause and become involved.

## **Fostering Donor Loyalty in Tough Economic Times**

Building connections with supporters is especially important during economic downturns, when many potential donors may feel pressures to cut back on their involvement and contributions. A

strong social media strategy can help to keep them actively involved, even during market slumps.

Because social media transform passive audiences into active members of an online community, they create strong bonds. Relationships built through social media can be between your organization and its advocates, or between the advocates themselves as they form friendships with one another and bond over similar interests or concerns.

Additionally, strong social media communications programs have the high potential of “going viral” as people send your message on to their networks, and those recipients do the same. Such positive word-of-mouth from active, energized members draws new life and dollars toward a common cause.

You may think it’s a good idea to delay social media initiatives until the economy improves. Just the opposite is true. In this tight domestic and global economy, it’s even more crucial to deliver new programs designed to rally supporters and keep their enthusiasm high.

### Developing a Social Media Strategy

Before you launch a social media program, there are a number of issues to consider. First, analyze the social media tools available and decide which are the best fit for the audience you’re trying to reach.

For instance, would your audience be comfortable downloading podcasts or setting up RSS feeds? Sharing photos and video? Or would message boards and blogs with comment options be better choices to minimize learning curves? Knowing your audience in terms of how often they’re online and what other sites they visit can help you to choose and implement the tools your supporters are most likely to use.

Social media tools also require a higher level of trust in your publics than other communication methods. At the same time, it’s important to retain some organizational control to ensure that postings and user-uploaded content remain appropriate and focus on your organization’s goals. Identifying forum moderators and establishing rules for posting are integral parts of the process.

Perhaps most of all, a successful social media strategy requires active participation from many constituents, as well as from your organization’s leaders. Before undertaking a social media strategy, make sure all employees support the idea and are willing to integrate social media functions into their work. Organizational buy-in is critical to adopting and sustaining social media for the long-term.

### Opening a New World

Compared to static Web sites, social media sites open a new world for constituents and donors – one in

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## A Glossary of Common Social Media Tools

**Blogs** are Web sites where entries are authored in chronological order but published in reverse chronological order. The ability for readers to leave comments is one of the key attributes of a blog. A **public or community blog** is a blog type that is characterized by the ability of all readers to author entries.

**Friending** is the process by which site members develop formal associations or “links” with other members with similar interests or concerns. Members can also “friend” specific forums or groups.

A **podcast** is a digital media file residing in a unique Web feed address that is distributed over the Internet via syndication feeds. It can be downloaded at the owner’s discretion and played back on portable players or PCs. People can “subscribe” to this feed by submitting the feed address to an aggregator like iTunes. When new content or “episodes” become available, they will be automatically downloaded to that user’s computer. The podcast owner can also offer direct download or streaming of the podcast.

**RSS** stands for “Real Simple Syndication” and is a Web feed format used to publish content such as blog entries, news articles, or podcasts. An RSS document is called a feed and contains either a summary of content from the associated Web site or the full text. RSS content can be read using software called a feed reader, news reader, or aggregator. Users subscribe to feeds by entering the feed’s link into the reader or by simply clicking an RSS icon in a browser which initiates the subscription process. The feed reader checks the user’s subscribed feeds regularly for new content, downloading any updates that it finds.

**Widgets** (also called badges) are small applications that provide functionality and content online and can be distributed through a vast number of Web sites. Widgets can be exported by consumers to their own blogs, Web pages, or profile pages on numerous social networks, including MySpace, Facebook, and Bebo.

which they can interact with others who share their interests. That interaction will help ensure a stronger commitment to your organization, boost enthusiasm, and help people make more informed decisions about where to spend their time and money. As you continue to face increasing competition for dollars and volunteers, social media platforms offer a powerful way to keep supporters engaged and involved. ■

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