



Using Web 2.0 Technologies to Connect with New Supporters

In many ways, it's never been easier to connect people with your cause. Here's what you need to know.

By Allison Fine

Can social networks and virtual communities revolutionize the way people give their time, talent, and treasure? An answer to that question must begin with an understanding of the millennials, a new generation who came of age at the turn of the century.

Millennials are passionate about social causes, brimming with new approaches, eager to effect change, and equipped with the digital tools and people power to make it happen. They're "social citizens," representing an era of citizen participation that combines idealism and digital fluency.

Living Immersed in Technology

Digital connectedness is as natural to young people's way of being as telephones were to their parents. Beyond using social media to connect with others and share information, they're prolific content creators. The lines between real and virtual lives are blurred in this new mode called "immersive living." It's second-nature for them to use online organizing tools to mount protests about issues they care about.

Interconnecting All the Time

Online social networks are the superglue of millennial activism. These networks, popping up across all segments of society, geography, and ideologies, divide into two types. There are general social networking sites, such as Facebook

and MySpace, where participants use their everyday networks to share information about causes in the same way they share information about their love lives. And there are social networking sites exclusively focused on activism, such as Change.org and Razoo.

Virtual worlds offer compelling tools for creating an experience around your organization or issue.

When the "Causes" application was posted on Facebook, more than 30,000 causes were created on the site in just six months, supporting over 12,000 existing nonprofit organizations. On such social networking sites, users are drawn to the cause first, then the organization. Joe Green, CEO of Causes on Facebook, notes, "There could be 1,000 causes aiming to help SaveDarfur.org with lots of different leaders and networks and lots of people reaching out in many ways."

Living the Cause Lifestyle

It would be challenging to find one millennial who hasn't been exposed to causes early and often in schools, congregations, stores, and through mass media. Cause-related activities have swirled around millennials their entire lives, and the impact shows.

In the 1990s, service-learning requirements became the norm

in 83% of public high schools and 77% of middle schools. Obligatory volunteering could have backfired and created a resentful group of young people. Instead, millennials' lives are infused with giving, volunteering, and eventually taking up careers dedicated to causes. They're a generation defined by the fervent belief they can change the world one donation, one voluntary activity, or one purchase at a time. They're less interested in and adept at interacting with government agencies and shaping public policy, and more interested in hands-on ways of improving people's lives domestically and internationally.

Millennials raise awareness and money for nonprofits, bring causes to their corporate workplaces, start socially responsible businesses, eat sustainable foods, and buy green products. And they do all of these things by embracing the overarching capitalist system—not rejecting it as many of their parents did in the 1960s and 1970s.

Overall, young people today have the incentives, the capabilities, and the models in place to be involved. In many ways, it has never been easier.

Being Mobile and Connected

Millennials are using all the digital tools at their fingertips to share pictures, feelings, and information about their causes with their social networks. Mobile phones have become the go-to device of youth connectedness and activism. Young people from Korea to the Philippines to the United States have been using text messages to increase the youth vote. A dedi-



cated Web site, MobileActive.org, has even emerged to chronicle this type of usage. This is a grassroots movement more easily conceived and carried out than any letter-writing campaign, and driven by an authentic desire to participate.

Mobile phones aren't the beginning and end of connectivity, however. Millennials use the full contingent of social media tools in support of their beliefs. They use blogs and videos on YouTube to share information about their causes, and they raise money for nonprofits through Web sites such as DoSomething.org.

Blending Worlds—and Financial Models

Millennials are merging the lines between for-profit and nonprofit structures and concepts. Social activism has become the new marketplace, where goods and services are exchanged not just for money but also for good social outcomes.

Millennials have voracious consumer habits but they're more than purchasers of goods. They're shapers of corporate behavior. They're drawn to brands with strong socially responsible cultures and expect businesses to take direct, concrete actions to address social ills. According to a study by Cone, Inc., that examined youth trends, an overwhelming 74% indicated that they're more likely to pay attention to a company's overall messages when they see that the company has a deep commitment to a cause.

Unbound by real life's limitations, you can educate, involve, and connect young people in ways not previously possible.

As a result, philanthropy has become faster, flatter, more creative, and democratic. Millennials give small amounts online to schools in low-income neighborhoods; at the supermarket to help feed victims of natural disasters; and to political candidates through their Web sites. How, why, and how much to give is being redefined day by day, cause to cause by millennials.

Seeing with Moral Clarity

Millennials gravitate toward causes with moral clarity. For example, the situation in the Middle East isn't easily grasped. The genocide in Darfur, conversely,

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What's in Web 2.0

Blogs (short for Web logs) are online journals hosted on a Web site and often distributed to other sites or readers using RSS.

Collective intelligence refers to any system that taps the expertise of a group rather than an individual to make decisions. Technologies that contribute to collective intelligence include collaborative publishing and common databases for sharing knowledge.

Friending is the act of making friends on a social network.

Mash-ups are aggregations of content from different online sources to create a new service. An example would be a program that pulls apartment listings from one site and displays them on a Google map to show where the apartments are located.

Microbloggers write just a sentence or fragment at a time, and their postings are less formal and more frequent than those of bloggers. Young people use microblogging sites like Twitter and Jaiku to write one- or two-sentence updates about what they're doing at that precise moment.

Peer-to-peer fundraising is a way for donors to create their own Web pages to ask their friends to support a cause.

Peer-to-peer networking (sometimes called P2P) is a technique for sharing files (music, videos, or text) over the Internet or within a set of users. Unlike the traditional method of storing a file on one machine (which can become a bottleneck if many people try to access it at once), P2P distributes files across many machines, often those of the users themselves.

Podcasts are audio or video recordings—a multimedia form of a blog or other content. They are often distributed through an aggregator, such as iTunes.

RSS (Really Simple Syndication) allows people to subscribe to online distributions of news, blogs, podcasts, or other information.

Social networking occurs when members of a specific site share information about their skills, talents, knowledge, and preferences with each other. Examples of social networks include Facebook and LinkedIn.

Web services are software systems that make it easier for systems to communicate with one another automatically in order to pass information or conduct transactions. For example, a retailer and a supplier might automatically update each other's inventory systems.

Widgets (also known as gadgets, badges, or modules) are mini-Web-pages placed within other Web pages. Your organization can create a fundraising widget and ask supporters to place it on their blogs, Web sites, and social networking pages to help raise funds and promote your cause.

Wikis, such as Wikipedia, are systems for collaborative publishing, in which many authors contribute to an online document.

—from The McKinsey Quarterly, www.mckinseyquarterly.com
and Mobilizing Generation 2.0 (www.mobilizingyouth.org)

A New World of Possibilities

Consider these ideas to engage young people, raise funds, forge new connections, and create change beyond virtual borders.

- **Monitor the blogosphere** for postings on your organization and your cause. Think of the blogosphere as a giant free focus group. Google will do a blog search and e-mail results to you on a daily basis.
- **Recruit supporters and raise funds** through social networks such as Facebook and Razoo. Visit some social networks, and use their built-in search tools to find people who list interests aligned with your organization.
- **Consider using a charity badge** (or widget)—one of the most powerful ways to disseminate your message across the Internet—to advertise your organization, send text messages, and accept donations.
- **Identify bloggers** who share your organization's positions, and get to know them. Supply them with content for their posts. Build relationships with bloggers, who will then help you promote your stories.
- **Use video-sharing, photo-sharing, and other me-**

dia-sharing sites (such as YouTube and Flickr) to report on your organization's plans and activities. Create mini-media-channels to attract and inform supporters and document your organization's work.

- **Ask your supporters to take an online survey** about their use of social networks. Web sites like SurveyMonkey.com make it easy to administer this type of poll.
- **Tactics that work in the real world** work just as well, if not even better, in virtual worlds. You can conduct outreach events, create immersive educational experiences, sell virtual objects for charity, conduct pledge drives, and organize meetups—a term that refers to a group of people who meet online and then coordinate a face-to-face meeting. Virtual worlds offer compelling tools for creating an experience around your organization or issue. Unbound by real life's limitations, you can educate, involve, and connect young people in ways not previously possible.

—from *Mobilizing Generation 2.0* (Jossey-Bass, www.josseybass.com, www.mobilizingyouth.org)



Exploring the 2.0 World

For more 2.0 perspectives, take a look at these *Nonprofit World* pieces, available at www.snpo.org/members:

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

A Charity Badge to Raise Dough? (Vol. 27, No. 3)

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

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

Increase Donations in a Down Economy? With Social Media, Yes, You Can! (Vol. 27, No. 3)

is crystal clear; people are being slaughtered solely because of their ethnicity, and something needs to be done to stop it now. Organizations most attractive to young people are those that create crisp, concise messages and make explicit connections between donations and the concrete differences that will result in someone's life.

So What Does It All Mean?

What does all the clicking, blogging, and “friending” add up to in the end? Ivan Boothe describes the new model of change this way, “If you just need bodies on a rally, names on a petition, or donations in your coffers, mobilizing through traditional means will work great. But if you need an active, educated, and effective movement, organizing through social webs has the potential to create much more lasting change.”

Millennials value peer relationships over institutional loyalty. Young people will engage enthusiastically in a campaign about which they feel passionate, but their support is likely to vanish once that campaign ends. Institutions will need to look, feel, and actually be quite different to engage them. Millennials can be instrumental in questioning and assessing when

and why institutions are needed to address causes, and when a protest campaign or a blog will do.

People like Ben Rattray of Chang.org, Ivan Boothe and Mark Hannis of GI-Net, Matt and Jessica Flannery of Kiva, and Joe Green and Mark Zuckerberg at Facebook are using social media to improve the world, and in the process are changing the very definition of change itself. The next step is to focus on ways to motivate larger circles of young people beyond their normal networks. And it must be done in a meaningful way, so that we can define or at least measure the successful change that is generated. ■

Allison Fine is a senior fellow on the Democracy Team at Demos: A Network for Ideas & Action in New York City, where she researches and writes about the future of social change and civic engagement in the digital age. She authored the book Momentum: Igniting Social Change in the Connected Age (Jossey-Bass, www.josseybass.com) and the paper Social Citizens-BETA (the Case Foundation, www.casefoundation.org), from which this article is adapted. Visit www.SocialCitizens.org to learn more about the Case Foundation's conversation with millennials.
