

# Social Networking and Mid-Size Non-Profits: What's the Use?

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November, 2009

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The use of social networking and social media in the non-profit sector has exploded in the past few years, spurred by successful, widely profiled social media initiatives by organizations like Save Darfur and charity:water. The Obama campaign's effective use of social technologies for both fundraising and organizing was the icing on the cake. Can there be any doubt given these examples that social networking and social media are must have tools for non-profits?

Actually, yes.

In terms of fundraising and attracting volunteers, metrics that most non-profit boards and executive directors highly value, the available evidence suggests that social media is not very effective. To be fair, that evidence is limited. To date, there are only two surveys that we know of, one which we conducted, that have sought to quantify the impact of social technologies in terms familiar to executive directors and boards. In

both cases, the results show that social technologies are not delivering much in terms of fundraising or attracting volunteers. While advocates of social technologies rightly point out that these are not the only metrics by which social technologies should be judged, they are the metrics that the majority of respondents to our survey cited as driving their participation. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of respondents to our survey say they are going to increase their investment in the use of social networking.

The mismatch between perceptions, motivations, results and investment suggest a particular challenge for mid-size non-profits (which we define as organizations with revenue between \$1 and \$5 million annually). Larger organizations have the resources to experiment, take risks and wait for long-term investments to pay off. If an experiment doesn't yield immediate results, as for instance happened with Amnesty International's failed efforts to gain traction in 2008's "America's Giving Challenge"<sup>1</sup>, they can chalk it up to a learning experience and move on. Small non-profits, on the other hand, don't have much choice. They typically can't afford traditional channels of outreach, marketing and fundraising and so have no alternative but social media.

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Midsized non-profits are caught between a rock and a hard place. They lack the resources to commit to an unproven, and surprisingly expensive, strategy, but they fear being hopelessly "left behind." For them, and indeed anyone else in the non-profit space asking how to get value from social technologies, now is the time to take a

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deep breath and reconsider what social technologies can best be used for and what non-profit executives can reasonably expect from them.

## What Is Social Networking and Social Media?

Given the nascent state of the social networking and social media space, and its emerging vocabulary, it's worth establishing some definitions and parameters. For our purposes, social networking refers to the use of the internet to connect with and exchange information with like-minded people. Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn dominate the social networking space, but there are many players, some devoted specifically to non-profit, social enterprise, activist or donor audiences.

Social media, in turn, is closely related to but distinct from social networking. In contrast to traditional, one-way, mass audience, broadcast media, social media allows and encourages uncontrolled distribution, and makes it easy for consumers to react to or interact with each other. Social media includes blogs, YouTube, podcasts and the like. Twitter, the current "hot" social technology straddles the two categories operating somewhat like a blog (social media) and somewhat like a connector of like-minded people (social networking).

Within the non-profit world, blogging and Facebook have received the most attention (though Twitter is coming on strong), resulting in their explosive growth. When we launched our blog/journal in 2006, it took some time to monitor other non-profit and philanthropy-related blogs, but the task was not overwhelming. We would stumble across a new blog about once a week. Today, counting the number of non-profit blogs would be an exercise in futility. The blog aggregator Alltop now has nearly 140 blogs in their list of "top" blogs, and in the last year has added additional categories for Social Entrepreneurship, Fundraising, "Good", and Corporate Responsibility. A recent study published by the University of Massachusetts' Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research found that almost 80 percent of the 200 largest US-based charities were engaged in blogging of some kind.<sup>2</sup>

The popularity of Facebook for non-profits has been driven by the introduction of Causes, a Facebook initiative that allows users to advocate for and raise money for any non-profit. Various fundraising contests have used Facebook as a platform, such as the Case Foundation's "America's Giving Challenge." As of July, 2009, members of Facebook had given a total of \$10 million to 26,000 causes.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Barnes, Nora Ganim and Eric Mattson, "Still Setting the Pace in Social Media"; <http://www.umassd.edu/cmrr/studiesresearch/socialmediacharity.cfm>

3 Green, Joe "Causes Raises \$10,000,000!", Causes Press Release, July 10, 2009; <http://exchange.causes.com/2009/07/causes-raises-10000000/>

## The Numbers

Any casual surfer on Causes or in the non-profit blogosphere will certainly find plenty of evidence of non-profit participation in these outlets. But what results have they achieved from that participation?

To date we know of only two broad surveys of non-profit use of social technologies and their results. The Non-profit Social Network Survey (NSNS) was conducted in the spring of 2009 by the Non-profit Technology Network, Common Knowledge and The Port. We conducted the other study from July 2008 through March 2009. The NSNS focused on all types of and sizes of non-profits, while our survey focused specifically on mid-size non-profits (see the Methodology box for details on how we segmented non-profits and other methodology questions) and social networking.

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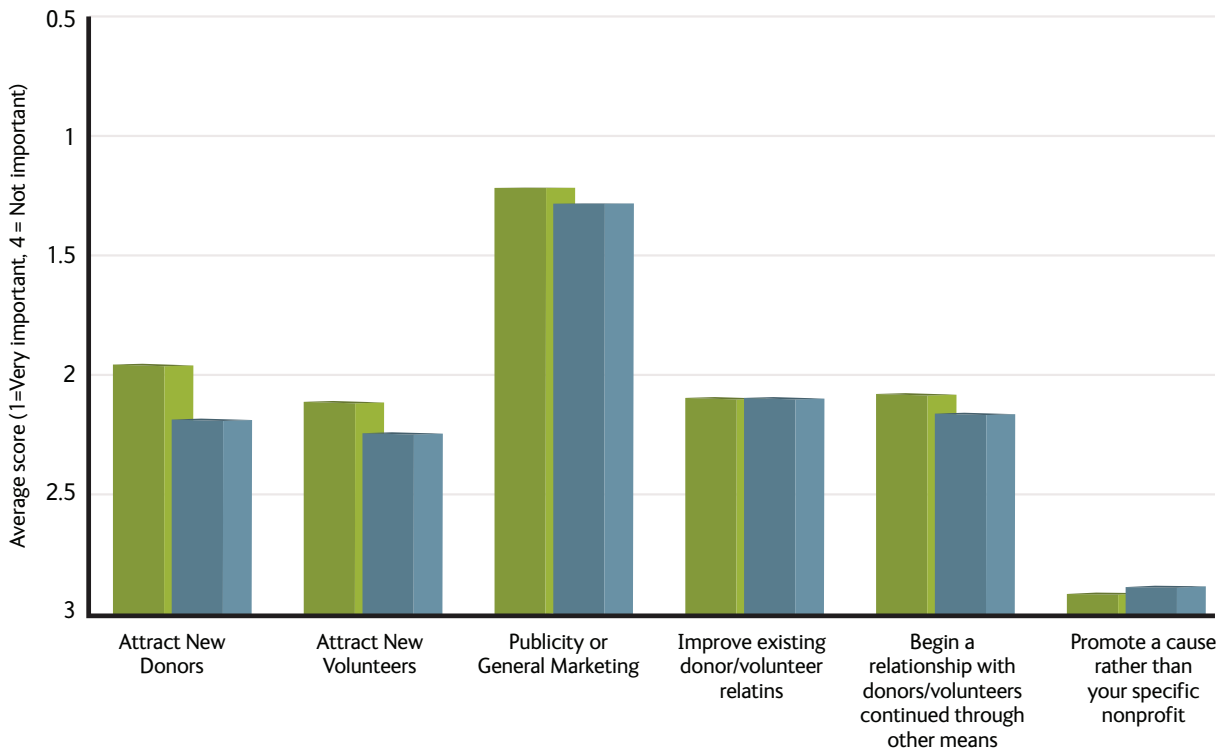
The results of the two surveys were broadly similar. The NSNS findings, in brief, are in Table One.

**TABLE ONE: SUMMARY RESULTS OF THE NSNS FINDINGS**

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| Participation:         | 86%  |
| Resources (Personnel): | 65.5% report allocating ¼ to ½ of FTE                          |
| Resources (Funds):     | 59.3% report “None”; 32.2% report “\$1 to \$10,000”            |
| Purpose:               | 80.5% report “Marketing”                                       |
| Fundraising Results:   | 61.1% report “Not Fundraising”; 37.8% report “\$0 to \$10,000” |

Our survey focused more specifically on mid-size non-profits. We did so by randomly (in the scientific sense) choosing Facebook Cause pages “owned” by a non-profit, evaluating whether they fit in the mid-size category, and then contacting them directly to ask them to fill out the survey. Then, with the kind assistance of Charity Navigator, we obtained a list of mid-size non-profits and reached out to a random sampling of that list. In all, about 1200 mid-size non-profits were invited to participate, and 256 responded to the survey. We asked them about their current participation in social networking and social media, motivations for pursuing social technologies, investment levels, results and future plans. Responses to questions focused on results can be seen in the charts below (additional data on these questions and other questions can be found in Appendix A)

**FIGURE 1: WHY DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION USE SOCIAL NETWORKING?**



**FIGURE 2: HOW MANY VOLUNTEERS HAS YOUR ORGANIZATION ATTRACTED?**

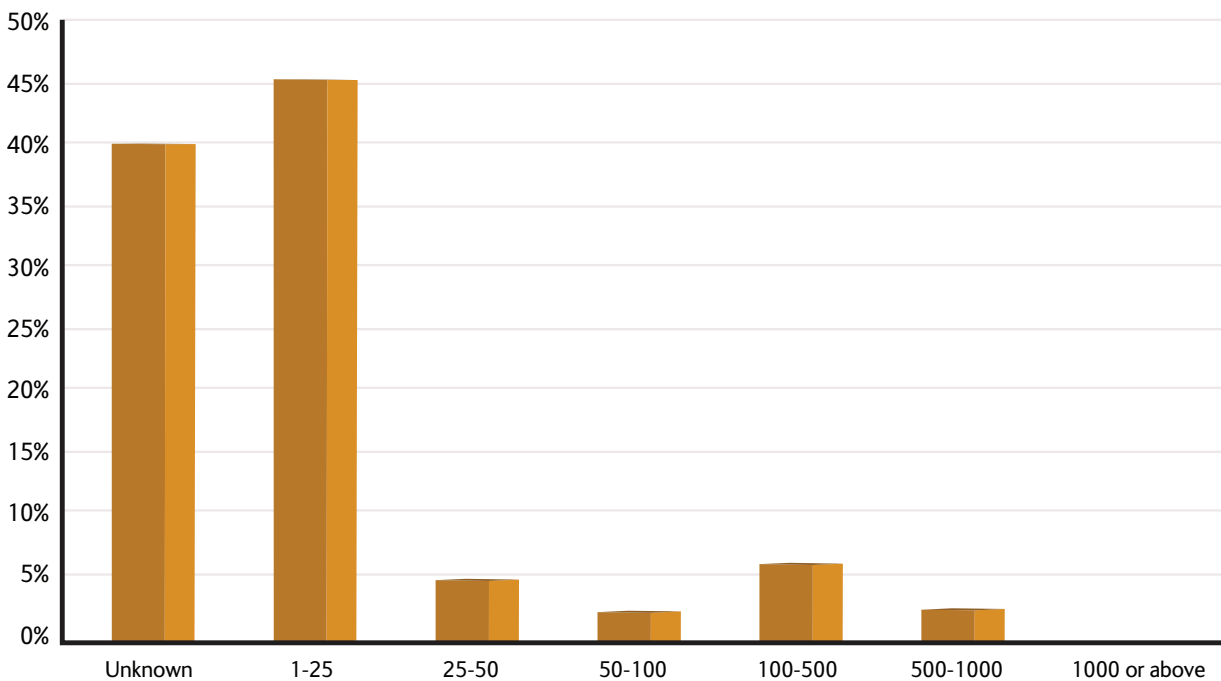


FIGURE 3: HOW MANY TOTAL DOLLARS HAS YOUR ORGANIZATION RAISED FROM DONORS THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKING?

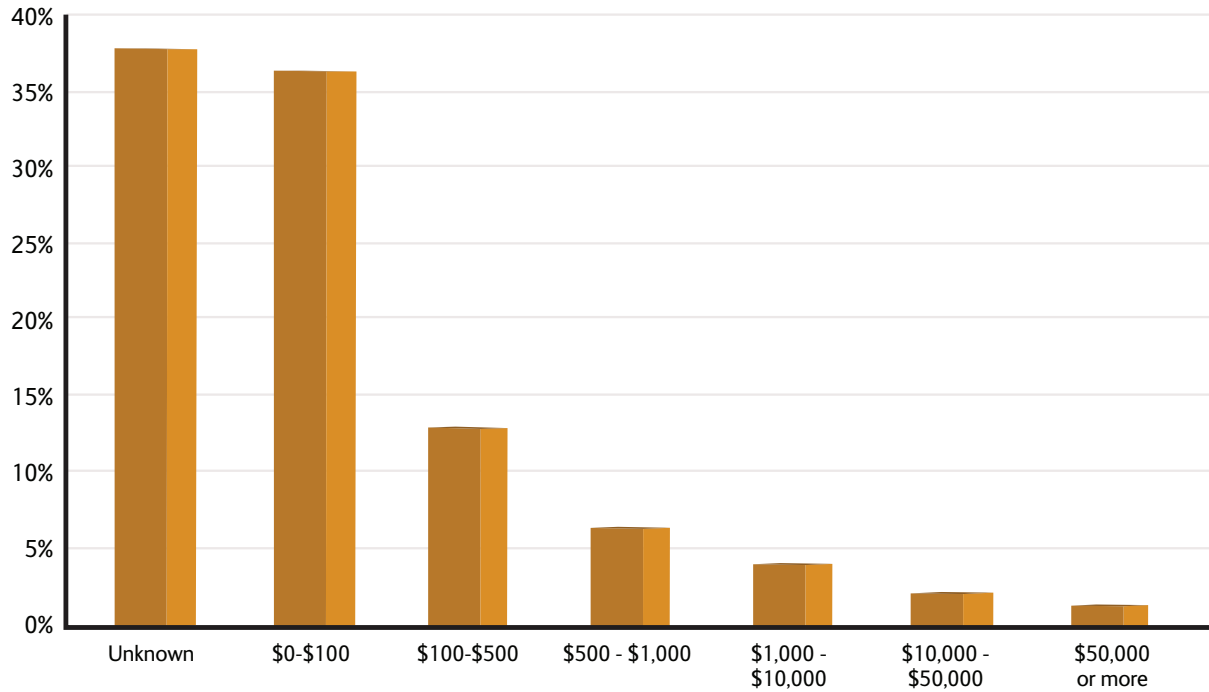
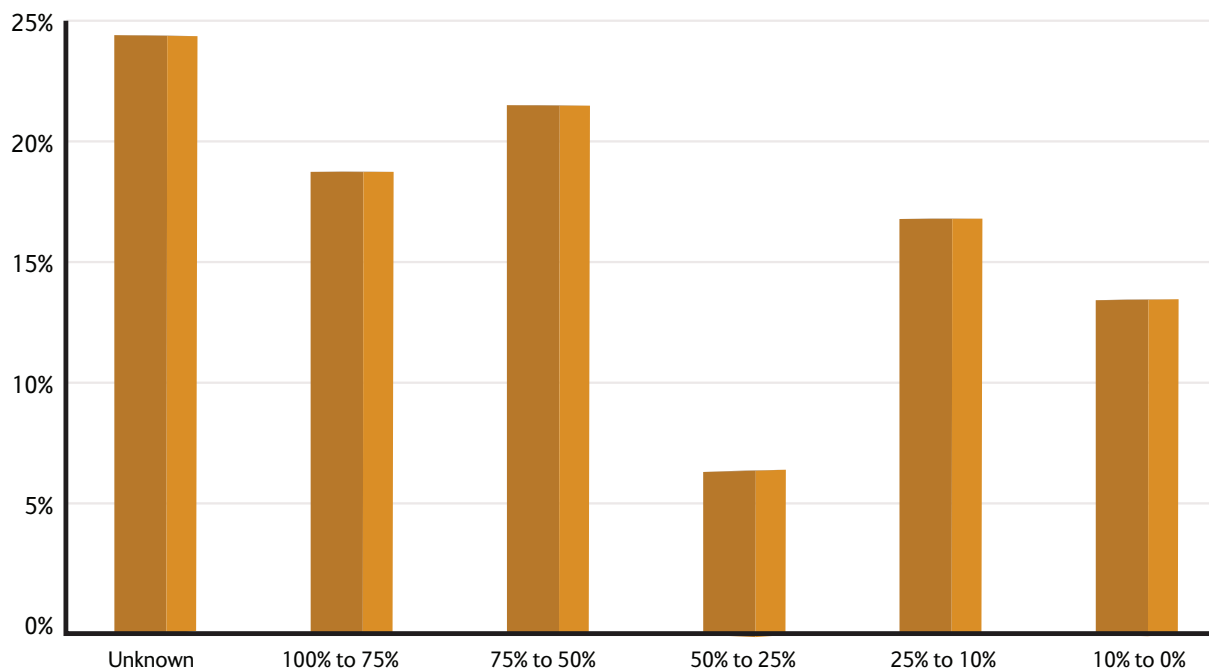


FIGURE 4: WHAT % OF PEOPLE WHO JOIN YOUR ORGANIZATION'S SOCIAL NETWORK HAVE SOME PRIOR CONNECTION TO YOU?



## Methodology

The survey targeted mid-size non-profits, defined as organizations with annual budgets of \$1 million to \$5 million. We solicited survey responses from two groups—mid-size organizations with a page on Facebook Causes and organizations in Charity Navigator’s database that fit our budget criteria. On Causes, we excluded organizations in the Religion or Political Campaign categories. From the remaining categories we selected a random (using a random number generator) sample of organizations with Causes pages and emailed the organization inviting them to participate in the survey. In total 339 organizations were invited to participate from Facebook Causes. Using Charity Navigator’s list we first excluded organizations in Charity Navigator’s Religion category. We then removed organizations which were local affiliates of larger national organizations (e.g. the American Cancer Society’s Pennsylvania affiliate). The remaining 1637 organizations received an email inviting them to participate in the survey. In total, 256 organizations answered at least part of the survey; 212 completed the survey.

*Respondents seemed to find social networking less useful than expected for all of the initial motivations.*

Appendix A includes detailed results for questions not fully covered in the main report.

## Results

In terms of resources allocated, 51 percent reported devoting one to five hours per week to social technologies. The majority of respondents indicated that marketing and fundraising staff participated in social networking efforts (60 percent), while just under 50 percent said that program staff participated as well.

The first thing that stands out from our results is the shift in motivation that took place between when an organization initiated use of social networking and when it answered the survey (on average respondents had been using social networking for about 12 months). Essentially, respondents seemed to find social networking less useful than expected for all of the initial motivations – such as attracting donors and attracting volunteers – with the exception of improving existing relationships. The most notable drop in motivation was in the perceived importance of social networking for attracting new donors, which fell by 12 percent. That drop is understandable considering that 74 percent reported either that they had raised less than \$100, or that they did not know whether they had raised anything.

Similarly, 85 percent reported either that they had attracted 25 or fewer volunteers, or that they did not know how many they had attracted. As for the use of social technologies to expand their base of support, the results were similarly disheartening. In total, 64 percent reported either that more than 50 percent of their “connections” already had a relationship with the organization, or that they didn’t know if their connections had a

previous relationship or not.

Despite such ambiguous results, 59 percent of those surveyed reported that the “effectiveness” of social networking was increasing, and 73 percent stated that they plan to increase their use of social technologies in the future.

These results hint that the typical quantitative goals that are meaningful to non-profit executives and boards are not currently being achieved through social networking. Since non-profits nonetheless intend to pursue social technology initiatives, these results also point to some important qualitative (or at least difficult to quantify) reasons that non-profits are committing aggressively to the use of social media. As we show in the following section, these qualitative reasons often make a great deal of intuitive sense, and by definition they are not subject to the same kind of scrutiny that quantitative measures receive. And yet there is still good reason to question them.

## Social Media Attraction: Assumptions and Misperceptions

It's easy to understand why social networking and social media have become so popular. First, it's where the people are. Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube, Wikipedia, Blogger, Flickr and WordPress are all among the top 20 most-visited websites in the United States and tend to have much longer “dwell” times than other popular sites.<sup>4</sup> Second, social media allow non-profits to self-publish and side-step the struggle to get attention through traditional media. A great deal of the appeal in self-publishing comes from the fact that social networking and social media are “free.” But there are also a number of other assumptions and expectations of social media that bear closer examination. Table Two shows an overview of myths and realities about the use of social networking and social media.

TABLE 2: MYTHS AND REALITIES

| Myth        | Reality   |
|-------------|---|
| “It's free” | It's only “free” to join; actually using the tools takes a lot of time and resources: \$11K+/annum for a “good” blog. |

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<sup>4</sup> According to Alexa, an internet site that tracks internet traffic. <http://www.alexa.com>



|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>“Everyone is doing it”</p>                                   | <p>Yes, but the more people use social technologies the harder and more expensive it is to rise above the noise.</p>  |
| <p>“It’s another channel to reach people”</p>                   | <p>It is another channel, but none of the older channels are truly going away. So you have to keep using all the old channels and the new channels too.</p>   |
| <p>“It’s the way to reach the next generation”</p>              | <p>Yes, but the benefits of reaching the next generation in this way and at this time are decidedly unclear.</p>  |
| <p>“You can build relationships with donors and volunteers”</p> | <p>Only if they can find you amidst the noise and you generate high enough quality to keep them coming back. Plus there’s no evidence yet that social networking creates lasting relationships.</p> |
| <p>“You can’t get left behind”</p>                              | <p>In the majority of technology revolutions there’s little downside for waiting for best practices to emerge.</p>  |

## It’s Free

Nothing, of course, is free. What most people mean when they say that social networking and social media is “free” is that the distribution costs are low-to-nonexistent compared to traditional alternatives like direct mail, newsletters, phone campaigns, fundraising professionals and PR. And there is no doubt that social technologies enable non-profits to do things they could never before have considered—reach out to a national audience, make video available to supporters at very low cost, get their message out regardless of whether it fits in the news-cycle, collaborate and learn from people they’ve never met. As with all industries, the ability to exchange information without physical distribution has dramatically lowered costs of all sorts of activities.

But in one of the most important areas of cost, social technologies don’t save anything: creativity. The cost of creativity comes in the form of time and talent. The time needed to use social technologies effectively is significant. For a brief while, many thought that “user-generated” content would be a cheap alternative to internally-developed content, but convincing users to generate content requires a lot of time in and of itself, and that content has to be reviewed and monitored for relevance and appropriateness.

For internally-generated content, the time cost is high. Writing a good blog or posting useful tweets that people actually read takes just as much time as creating a quality newsletter or direct mail appeal. In fact, it probably takes *more* time, because inherent to these new media are the ideas of interaction, immediacy and constant refresh. The most ambitious organizations in the newsletter days published once a month. The most popular blogs are posting multiple times a day. That means a huge daily time investment. And not just anyone can do it. Using social technologies well requires the dedication of smart, talented, engaged, and knowledgeable people with great communication skills—in other words, the same people who are most valuable in any other initiative or program.

Allan Benamer of socialmarkets and the Non-Profit Tech Blog estimates that with all costs included (including staff time), running a “good” blog that attracts a large and growing number of readers costs upward of \$10,000 for the first year.<sup>5</sup> In the for-profit world, knowledgeable experts put the price tag of a well-run, likely-to-succeed social media campaign at \$50,000 minimum.<sup>6</sup> While non-profits have the advantage of moral rather than monetary suasion, it's not likely that non-profit costs would be much less than half that figure. So much for free.

## Everyone Is Doing It

Using social technologies is beginning to feel like a prerequisite for being taken seriously—today's equivalent of a website. The argument goes that people expect any competent (and non-fraudulent) non-profit to have a blog, a Facebook page with lots of fans and a Twitterstream.

Far from providing an argument for joining the craze, the fact that everyone is doing it should be a powerful caution. The more participants there are in the free-for-all world of social media and social networking, the more it costs in terms of time, resources and expertise to be noticed and stand out in the crowd. Blogging and YouTube mean that everyone can be published or broadcast. But when everyone is publishing and broadcasting, no one is reading or watching. According to some estimates, 99 percent of blogs have essentially no readers<sup>7</sup>; as of 2007 the median video

*When everyone is publishing and broadcasting, no one is reading or watching.*

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5 Benamer, Allen, “Blogging Budget for Non-Profits,” Non-Profit Tech Blog, July 17 2009; <http://www.non-profittechblog.org/bloggin-budget-for-non-profits>

6 Ochman, B.L., “Debunking Six Social Media Myths,” Business Week, February 19, 2009; [http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/feb2009/tc20090218\\_335887.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/technology/content/feb2009/tc20090218_335887.htm)

7 Harkin, James, “Caught in the Net,” New Statesman, April 30 2009; <http://www.newstatesman.com/world-affairs/2009/05/online-information-feedback>

on YouTube had less than 100 views, and that seems to be plummeting<sup>8</sup>; as of mid-2009, 26,000 Causes have received at least one donation on Facebook, yet there are nearly 300,000 Causes.<sup>9</sup> Though most of these causes are not set up to raise money, a user still is going to be exposed to a huge number of Causes during their use of Facebook.

Perhaps the best metric to think about the noise factor in social media and social networking is to consider the abysmal advertising click-thru rates on social networking sites. The click-thru rate for a typical ad on Google is between 1 percent and 2 percent. The comparable click-thru rate on Facebook is .04

percent.<sup>10</sup> In short, only four out of ten-thousand viewers click on the average Facebook ad compared to the one-hundred out of ten-thousand that would click on a Google search ad. People are highly adept at filtering out what they consider to be irrelevant information. Users are not on social network sites for the ads. If a potential donor or volunteer is tuning out direct mail pieces or email campaigns, she can tune out social media and Facebook Causes.

*There is pressure to keep up not just with the Joneses but with Jetsons.*

## It's Another Channel to Reach People

Social technologies unquestionably provide another way, and often a better way, to reach people. Understandably, we all react more favorably to communication that allows us to interact and isn't just one-

*The social technology channel is not a replacement for other channels to your audience, it's an additional one.*

way. This is the *sine qua non* of social technologies—they enable a conversation with supporters, allies and other interested parties. There's no more common mistake cited by social technology experts than organizations failing to appreciate the back-and-forth nature of social technology-based communication.

But the social technology channel is not a replacement for other channels to your audience, it's an additional one. You can't stop using those other channels. They are good, and often better, than social technologies for certain purposes. Early evidence shows that average response rates to fundraising campaigns via direct mail still outperform email marketing and social media marketing. Unsurprisingly, the success rates of email marketing are declining.<sup>11</sup> This would be a boon to non-profits if the latter two could take the place of

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8 Robertson, Mark, "Average Number of YouTube Views in First Month" ReelSEO, February 8, 2008; <http://www.reelseo.com/average-number-youtube-views-month/>

9 Green, Joe "Causes Raises \$10,000,000!", Causes Press Release, July 10, 2009; <http://exchange.causes.com/2009/07/causes-raises-10000000>

10 Urstadt, Brian, "Social Networking Is Not a Business\*" Technology Review, July/August 2008; <http://www.technologyreview.com/business/20922/>

11 McLaughlin, Steve, "Is 99% Failure Acceptable" Connections, June 4, 2009, <http://forums.blackbaud.com/blogs/connections/archive/2009/06/04/is-99-failure-acceptable.aspx>

direct mail marketing, since the cost of direct mail continues to rise. But for most non-profits, the donors that contribute the largest sums belong to demographic categories that do not use social technologies. Just because a non-profit launches a blog and uses Facebook Causes doesn't mean that it can shut down its website, turn off email marketing campaigns, stop making personal phone calls or sell the photocopiers and stamping machines. For resource-constrained non-profits (which is to say, nearly all non-profits) jumping into the social technologies means diverting time and attention away from other channels. Time and attention are a zero-sum game when you can't entirely stop what you're already doing.

The zero-sum equation applies to donors too. If non-profits have more channels through which they can reach people, then those people are reached more and more often. Over time, the effectiveness of any outreach decreases as the audience's willingness to be reached becomes exhausted. Rising above the ambient noise requires even greater quality, adding more pressure on time and resources.

## It's the Way to Reach the Next Generation

For younger demographics, there is virtually no point in using direct mail, or even email. Surveys of the under-25 set routinely show that this group has abandoned email in favor of social networking and text messaging. Non-profits targeting this audience simply have to use social technologies.

So there's no doubt about the *how* of reaching the next generation, but the *why* should still be an outstanding question for many. On the pro side, young people often have more disposable time to volunteer and advocate, which makes up for what they lack in disposable funds. Many believe as well that reaching these young people now can build their awareness of a cause or non-profit and solidify their loyalties, so that when they develop disposable incomes they will be willing to donate some of those funds to the non-profits they have known and loved for years.

The young certainly make great advocates, but the idea that engaging the young today cultivates future donors should leave you cold. Clear evidence on giving behavior shows that people give to causes with which they have a personal association or experience. It makes no difference, in short, if a person was a "friend" of an environmental cause when he was a teenager. If that same person has a relative with Multiple Sclerosis a decade later, it's MS that gets the money. It's only recently that the idea that "getting them young" is necessary has come into vogue. Historically, non-profits did just fine waiting to reach out to people with the means to be active donors and supporters.

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It should be noted as well that Americans are becoming substantially less brand loyal—recent estimates suggest that no more than three percent of consumers are truly brand loyal.<sup>12</sup> Other research in how donors give suggest that they prefer a portfolio approach—they tend to give to several charities doing largely the same thing (fundraising professionals have known this for years, which is why they buy and sell donor lists).<sup>13</sup>

Finally, consider the well-documented phenomenon of steadily growing distrust of the non-profit sector among Americans. Then think about the 24-year-old who is casually connected to your organization via Facebook or an RSS feed from your blog. That 24-year-old becomes somewhat more aware of your cause over the next fifteen years as he is exposed to countless fundraising appeals. It's just as plausible that such exposure would generate fatigue on the part of the once-24-year old, leading him away from you, as turn him into a loyal donor to you.

To boil it down, is there any other outreach channel that you would invest in if the experts told you it had a 15-year payback horizon?

## You Can Build Relationships with Donors and Volunteers

Social technologies are about building connections. Loose and informal networks are becoming increasingly influential in our world—just look at the open source movement. Being connected is obviously better than the alternative. Social technologies allow individuals and organizations to join and participate in these networks quite easily. The metrics so easily available via social technologies reinforce the positive feelings of being connected. “We have 3000 RSS subscribers!” “Fifteen thousand people have joined our Facebook Cause!” “We have 1000 followers on Twitter!”

But it is hard to determine the value of connections built via social technologies, or their durability. Though we don't know enough to say for sure, there is evidence to suggest that these numbers are akin to fool's gold. Psychologists and sociologists know that durable relationships are built on mutual commitments and sacrifices, not on information or casual connection. Using social technologies allows connections without commitments. Witness how quickly our vocabulary adapted to provide a distinction between a “friend friend” and a “Facebook friend.” Many societal commentators have noted the trend of cause as fad—it's very easy to join a Cause without making any real-world, tangible commitment. There's even a name for it already: “slacktivism.”<sup>14</sup>

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12 Ott, Adrian, “Is Customer Loyalty A Thing of the Past?” Exponential Revenue, 2009 <http://newroadstorevenue.com/2009/06/19/is-customer-loyalty-a-generational-term.aspx>

13 Null, Claire, “Warm Glow, Information and Inefficient Charitable Giving”; <http://www.cgdev.org/content/calendar/detail/1420915>

14 Hesse, Monica, “Facebook's Easy Virtue,” Washington Post, July 2 2009; <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/01/AR2009070103936.html>

In an experiment that probably hasn't received enough attention, a Danish social media consultant was able to draw 27,000 members to a transparently fake cause (in the comments of the Cause page it was explained that the cause was part of a study of social networking psychology). Follow up surveys revealed that 70 percent of the members believed the cause was real.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, another experiment by behavioral economists showed that events like Race for the Cure, which require participants to make a physical sacrifice via athletic exertion, is much more effective than alternatives at promoting a long-term durable relationship with a particular cause. In short, connections that are easily made are probably less likely to result in durable relationships. For instance, a 2009 study from Target Analytics (part of Blackbaud) found that online donors are less likely to donate again than direct mail donors.<sup>16</sup>

## You can't get left behind

Our culture has very effectively mythologized the "first mover" advantage. Essentially the idea is that when a new technology emerges those first to adopt it gain an insurmountable advantage over those who fail to see the new technology's potential. A huge portion of our society measures status by familiarity with and use of new technologies. As a result there is pressure to keep up not just with the Joneses but with Jetsons. After all, the early adopters are "cool" and command attention.

Many articles and books have tackled this issue of the "first mover" and "fast follower" in any technology craze. The summary version is that, as it pertains to a new technology, there is a predictable pattern: A few early movers and innovators succeed wildly, the rest plus most of the fast followers spend a lot of money without gaining much advantage, and the existing incumbents eventually adapt and resume a position of dominance.

This pattern suggests that there is little to be lost by staying in the mainstream and waiting for best practices to emerge. Consider the history of e-commerce. For several years in the late 90's vast amounts of money were being spent to gain a first mover advantage in e-commerce. Many web-only newcomers were predicting the end of the traditional methods of retailing. Yet today there are only two e-commerce companies in the Top 10 in revenue that were innovators or first movers: Amazon and Newegg. The other eight are companies that were already large players before e-commerce (e.g., Sears, Best Buy), most of which were criticized for moving too slowly on the web.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, those who spent a lot of money so they wouldn't get left behind didn't have much to show for it, while companies that waited for best practices to emerge and costs to come down didn't lose much

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<sup>15</sup> Colding-Jorgensen, Anders, personal communication with author.

<sup>16</sup> Blackbaud Press Release "Target Analytics Report Finds Online Giving Growing, Integrated Marketing Key to Retention"

<sup>17</sup>Data from Internet Retailer, an e-commerce consulting company.

by waiting. There's no reason to believe that organizations that wait, watch and learn from early experiments (and it is still early and we are still experimenting) with social technologies will pay a high cost for being judicious.

It's worth noting that in any of these technology-driven change cycles there are some big wins, but those wins are usually driven by novelty. Thus the much-publicized success of Save Darfur and charity:water in social technologies is real. But the rush to attempt to replicate their success destroys the novelty of the approach and makes it hard even for the organizations that were initially successful to replicate that success. Another factor that seems to be at play is that brand-new or very small organizations seem to account for a disproportionate number of the success stories in social technologies. For instance a majority of the winners of America's Giving Challenge in both 2008 and 2009 were very young, very small organizations. While it remains to be explained why this is the case, perhaps a factor is these organizations are perceived to be more "authentic" (a buzzword of this space) in their use of social technologies.

## To Be Social or Not to be Social

None of this means that social technologies are worthless. It only shows that there is nothing inherent in social technologies that make them "effective"—it's all in what you expect them to accomplish and how well you use them. When thinking about social technologies and their usefulness to your organization some decidedly old-school thinking may be the best guide. In 1965 Bruce Tuckman created a model of how effective groups are created. Tuckman had four stages to his model:

- Forming: like-minded people come together based on mutual interest into a loose group
- Storming: the members of the loose group experiment and test ideas about what they will do and how
- Norming: effective groups then move on to create norms of expected behavior and commitment
- Performing: the most effective groups channel these norms into sustained action.

To date social technologies have majored on forming; the best users of social technologies have helped groups move to storming. But change measured outside of social networks and virtual worlds only happens once norming and performing begin. That is when network members migrate from having an awareness of your organization to taking some kind of tangible, real action, whether that action comes in the form of advocacy, donating, volunteering, or any other act that is meaningful beyond the realm of social networking and social media.

If the ultimate goal is norming and performing, what should non-profit executives do when considering

how to allocate resources between various channels of education, outreach, volunteer recruitment and fundraising? Here are five steps to making sure you are using your resources well:

### 1. If you haven't started using social technologies, don't...

Too many non-profits are following the herd into social technologies without a clear idea of what they are trying to accomplish or whether social technologies are the best way to meet those goals. So if you haven't started using social technologies extensively, don't start...*until* you know what you're trying to accomplish, and you have a good reason to believe that social technologies are the best path to get there. The data thus far show that if you're trying to raise funds, using social technologies is like playing the lottery. To paraphrase from an E-Trade slogan, "Someone is going to win, just not you."

*"Someone is going to win, just not you."*

Where social technologies have made the most impact thus far is in low commitment, fast response campaigns, such as signing petitions or organizing semi-spontaneous protests (one example of this includes a multi-city protest against FARC, the Colombian rebel/terrorist group). Another possible high-impact area is in long-term (two, three, four years) *informal* network building. If you can't immediately see the benefits to your organization's mission of those goals, stay on the sidelines, watch and learn.

### 2. If you have started, rethink and refocus

Given the resource constraints that everyone is facing today, don't ignore your existing social technology use as you strategically review how to allocate staff and volunteer time and resources. Remember that aside from cash outlays, there is an opportunity cost to everything that your people are doing. For us, perhaps the most shocking finding of our survey was that so many respondents answered "Unknown" on some of the basic metrics that corresponded to their stated intentions for using social technologies. Of course, one of the reasons for this is that Causes actively prevents non-profits from finding out much about those who join; understandably Facebook wants to continue to "own" the users and their time.

So the first step is to start developing useful metrics for your use of social technologies. On their blogs, Beth Kanter, Allison Fine and Lucy Bernholz have been writing for some time about good metrics to measure engagement and relationships. Don't commit more resources to social technologies until you've got some metrics that are relevant to your goals.

### 3. Use social networking as the start, not the end

Many commentators have pointed out that social networking platforms like Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn are built for the individuals using them, not non-profits hoping to use them. There are real, substantial limits to what information you can gather and how directly you can communicate via these social networks. That in



turn limits the possibility of developing anything more than a superficial relationship with people via a social networking platform. You might think of such social networking platforms as billboards. They can be used to raise some awareness, but ideally you want to get the people who see the billboard to make themselves known to you directly. In other words, make sure that your social networking efforts include ways to connect with people you “meet” there via other, more personal, means. The goal is to integrate people you’ve connected with via social technologies into your existing mechanisms for tracking contacts and donors. Ultimately this will make it much easier to assess the impact of your use of social technologies versus other channels of outreach and engagement.

#### **4. Invest in social technologies that can be measured**

Moving people from semi-anonymous engagement via social technologies that are hard to measure to a more personal relationship means that you need somewhere for those people to go to engage. Therefore, when allocating resources, err on the side of social technologies that can provide useful measures. In this way, Twitter is often better than Facebook, because you can more easily see who is following you and track mentions, retweets and conversations. A blog that encourages and generates comments, forwards and emails is in turn better than Twitter. Social technology gurus often speak about the importance of engagement, and rail against those who mistake social technologies for just another form of one-way, broadcast communication. Social technologies that make it easier to measure engagement are more worthy of your investment than those that don’t.

#### **5. Demand Sacrifice**

Engagement is only useful if it’s a precursor to meaningful action. If you’ve personally been on Facebook for more than a few months you will have seen plenty of your friends join a cause and send you the boilerplate invitation to join with them. We bet you weren’t very inspired or motivated. In fact, you probably have already learned, like millions of other Facebook users, to either tune these invitations out or just accept without paying any attention. A recent survey by the consulting firm Cone found that three-quarters of social media consumers said that while social media had raised their awareness of many causes it didn’t motivate them to do anything.<sup>18</sup> That’s not the type of relationship that’s going to pay off in any form.

As nice as it is to have lots of subscribers, friends and followers, the only people that matter to the success of your organization are those that are willing to *do* something. If your goal is to build relationships with new contacts or deepen relationships with existing ones, then your chances of success are greater if you can get these contacts to make a sacrifice. That sacrifice doesn’t have to be big and it doesn’t have to involve money,

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18 “2009 Consumer New Media Study”, Cone, Inc.; <http://www.coneinc.com/news/request.php?id=2602>

but it does need to be a sacrifice—more than just clicking or a passive appeal to their friends. Sacrifices can include everything from staking their reputation to yours by making a personal appeal to their friends, to making a donation, to showing up for an event, to making—and showing up—for a volunteer commitment. In short, make sure your use of social technologies is built upon regular invitations or opportunities for your social connections to make a sacrifice and take meaningful action.

Overall, the best advice regarding social technologies isn't the commonly heard "get started and experiment." Using social technologies badly or for the wrong goals is guaranteed to waste resources, and just might do damage to your organization's reputation in the social world and elsewhere. Neither is it OK to simply dismiss social technologies and ignore them. The best strategy, particularly for mid-size non-profits is to wait, watch and learn what's working—and that does require engaging as a participant. Only once you have clear and appropriate goals for social technology should you venture all the way into the pool.

## About Philanthropy Action

Philanthropy Action is an online journal for donors. We believe that the philanthropy sector needs more information and intelligent discussion from the donor perspective. It is no easier now than it was two decades ago for donors to determine where best to invest the money they give – in the hundreds, thousands or millions – to truly help alleviate the burden of poverty. Our vision is for philanthropy to evolve into a sector that is more thoughtful and effective. We want to see money move to places where it does the most good and away from where it does the least. Our goal is for Philanthropy Action to be part of the information infrastructure required for the evolution of philanthropy from good intentions to great effectiveness.

<http://www.philanthropyaction.com>

## About Sona Partners

Sona Partners is a thought leadership communications firm. Sona helps aspiring thought leaders in the fields of business, philanthropy, international affairs, financial services and technology package their intellectual capital in ways that appeal to appropriate, targeted audiences. We leverage and enhance existing communications channels and tools, and our expertise with both traditional and new media helps thought-leading people and ideas gain traction.

<http://www.sonapartners.com>

## Appendix A: Complete Results

Below are results for questions not fully discussed in the report.

*When did your organization begin using online social networking?*

2005 or earlier: 7.1%      2006: 18.3%      2007: 42.1%      2008: 32.5%

*Why did your organization decide to begin using online social networking (scale of 1-4)?*

|  | Very Important |              |       | Not Important |
|--|----------------|--------------|-------|---------------|
| Attract New Donors                                     | <b>40.5%</b>   | 29.8%        | 24%   | 5.8%          |
| Attract New Volunteers                                 | <b>33.1%</b>   | 32.2%        | 22.9% | 11.9%         |
| Publicity or General Marketing                         | <b>74.4%</b>   | 24%          | 1%    | 1%            |
| Improve existing donor/volunteer relationships         | <b>34.2%</b>   | 31.6%        | 23.1% | 11.1%         |
| Start a new relationship continued through other means | 32.2%          | <b>37.3%</b> | 19.5% | 11%           |
| Promote a cause rather than your organization          | 13.7%          | 20.5%        | 26.5% | <b>39.3%</b>  |

*How does your organization currently use online social networking?*

|  | Very Important |              |              | Not Important |
|--|----------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| Attract New Donors                                     | 29.1%          | <b>34.2%</b> | 26.5%        | 10.3%         |
| Attract New Volunteers                                 | 26.7%          | <b>33.6%</b> | 23.3%        | 16.4%         |
| Publicity or General Marketing                         | <b>71.4%</b>   | 23.5%        | 4.2%         | 1%            |
| Improve existing donor/volunteer relationships         | <b>32.5%</b>   | 31.6%        | 28.9%        | 7%            |
| Start a new relationship continued through other means | 29.6%          | 30.4%        | <b>31.3%</b> | 8.7%          |
| Promote a cause rather than your organization          | 18.3%          | 19.1%        | 20.9%        | <b>41.7%</b>  |

*How much time (per week) is spent maintaining or using online social networks?*

Less than an hour: 38.4%    1-5 hours: 51.2%    5-10 hours: 7.2%    More than 10 hours: 3.2%

*Does your organization consider investment (time and otherwise) in social networking to be:*

Fundraising costs: 22.9%    Program costs: 41.5%    Other overhead cost: 35.6%

*Who maintains your organization's online social network presence?*

Executives: 11.6%    Marketing/Fundraising staff: 59.5%    Program staff: 45.5%    Volunteers: 25.6%

*Has the effectiveness of online social networking changed over time?*

Increased: 59.3%    Decreased: 3.3%    Stayed the same: 37.4%

*Does your organization plan or hope to expand its online social networking in the future?*

Yes: 73%    Maybe: 22.2%    No: 4.8%