NGO**Tips**
A Legacy of Strong NGOs and Networks

Using Social Media to Enhance NGO Impact

Q. What is Social Media?

A. Social media is online content created by people using highly accessible and scalable publishing technologies—also commonly referred to as *Web 2.0* technologies. It is a fusion of sociology and technology, transforming monologues (one way communication) into dialogues (two way communication) that democratizes information, transforming people from content readers into publishers.[1] By shifting the way people discover, read, collaborate and publish news and information, social media technologies are reducing barriers and allowing people to connect in the online world to form relationships for personal, political and business use. This definition, a product of online collaboration, was created in Wikipedia—the free online encyclopedia that is itself a powerful example of social media in action.

The table below describes a range of other social media technologies and what they contribute:

Social media is the democratization of information, transforming people from content readers into publishers.

Social Media / Web 2.0: A Range of Technologies[2]			
Technologies	**Description**	**Primary Contribution**	**Examples**
Wikis, commenting, shared workspaces	Facilitates co-creation of content across large, distributed set of participants.	Broad collaboration	Wikipedia, Wikispaces
Blogs, micro-blogs, podcasts, photo- and video-sharing	Offers individuals a way to communicate / share information with a broad set of other individuals	Broad communication	Blogger, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube
Prediction markets, information markets, polling	Harnesses the collective power of the community and derives a collectively derived answer.	Collective estimation	Inkling, Intrade
Social bookmarking, tagging, ratings, Really Simple Syndication (RSS)[3]	Adds additional information to primary content to prioritize information or make it more valuable.	Metadata creation	Delicious, Digg, Google Reader, Newsgator
Social networking, network mapping	Leverages connections between people to enhance participation, collaboration and offer new applications. An online social network brings people together and enables them to find others who share common interests and/or activities.	Community and Social Graphing	Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Ning

Why Does Social Media Matter?

Fundamentally, social media is about *participation* and connecting people to one another. In the nonprofit sector, relationships have always been the key currency. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) depend on their relationships with members, donors and stakeholders for volunteer labor, financial support and advocacy muscle.

Social media offers development practitioners and NGOs a chance to move away from "push" (one-way) communications and move toward a type of communication in which they can interact with, listen to and engage constituents. It enables them to network with colleagues and stakeholders and deepen these relationships. It further facilitates collaboration in the office and in the field. Because NGO success is so deeply dependent on cultivating strong relationships, many are investing in social media and online communities as a way to heighten and harness loyalty and passion.

Social media matters because it:

- Helps people find you, connect to your message and differentiate you from the crowd;
- Shows the human face of your organization and encourages personal connections in the often impersonal world of international development contracts and deliverables;
- Enables you to track issues, public opinion and news, and respond rapidly;
- Provides low-cost, on-demand learning opportunities which enable you to support peer-to-peer knowledge exchange and learning around your core issues; and
- Brings you in contact with new donors. In 2007, total online giving in the U.S. reached over US$10 billion—a 52% increase over 2006.[4]

What Are Some Guiding Principles for Success?

Nonprofits were some of the first to experiment with social media—in large part due to their experience as member-driven organizations. From the lessons learned over the last few years, principles of good practice are emerging to help others. When considering social media techniques and tools, use the following principles to guide you:

- *People*: Think about the people behind the issue. Understand who we use social media with and for, considering their needs. Are the tools appropriate to meet these needs?
- *Access*: Remember issues of access, connectivity and language. Who does and does not have access to social media? Who can or cannot read or listen to the information shared using social media?
- *Participation*: Support participation and consider motivations. Think about who can and cannot participate and why. Explore ways to facilitate participation.
- *Content*: Consider issues of content (style, media and type). What information is being shared, with whom and for what purposes?
- *Clarity*: What is the purpose? What is the reason to be involved?
- *Options*: Give people lots of ways to contribute and be involved. The easier it is for them to get involved, the greater the likelihood that they will.
- *Humanize*: Who are the people behind the issue?
- *Recognize*: Attention and recognition are huge motivators and rewards.
- *Niches*: Service the small, intense areas of interest and passion. Broad and big are not always as successful.
- *Visualize*: Photos appeal more than text, especially for digital natives. Video stories are especially powerful.

Be open, honest and authentic in everything you say and do. You cannot spin the truth with social media.

- *Localize*: Localization makes things much more relevant. People pay attention and act on what is relevant to their lives.
- *Push*: Go beyond your own Web site, blog or URL. Getting out of your own house and into new neighborhoods will help you make new connections.
- *Measure*: Measure what matters. Start with the goal not with the available web analytics.[5]

What Are Some Common Pitfalls to Avoid?

- *Taking a tool-centric approach.* It is really tempting to build something just because you have access to exciting tools and the hope that people will find it useful. But building a Web site is not the same as building community. Listen to the people in your target audience to understand their core concerns and capabilities, because it is not about the tools—it is about the people the tools bring together.
- *Failing to plan for ongoing engagement.* Too often people do not think about what their efforts are going to look like down the road. They are viewed as things versus processes. Organizations must plan for how relationships with stakeholders will change and develop a strategy before thinking about tools. Do not assume that staff will know how to encourage the type of participation that will produce meaningful change, and do not expect immediate results. It takes time to build trust and make connections with stakeholders.
- *Doing it for the sake of doing it.* With the increased popularity of social media tools, it is important not to get sidetracked by the hype, where excitement about tools drives their usage, rather than what people can do

with them. Organizations need to ask if certain social media tools really make sense for their programs and stakeholders. Will people truly want to engage? Determine what the organization seeks to accomplish—for example, raising membership involvement or increasing donations—and utilize appropriate social media techniques to achieve these goals.

- *Talking in marketing speak.* Be open, honest and authentic in everything you say and do. You cannot spin the truth with social media.
- *Failing to measure.* There is always the need to accurately define what success looks like, determine the best way to measure that success, and align those measures to your goals. Monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness and appropriateness of social media tools are fundamental. Carefully consider who can or cannot participate, who will benefit and how to clearly measure that benefit.

How Can I Get Started?

Listen—Set up Google alerts, search Technorati to find five blogs on your topic of interest or search Delicious to see how people are tagging relevant content.

Research—Spend 30 minutes a week reading your favorite blogs and exploring social media sites and resources such as those recommended below.

Leverage existing tools—Create your own professional profile on LinkedIn; create a Fan page for your organization or cause on Facebook; organize photos from your last event and upload them Flickr, then ask constituents to upload photos to a *stream* you started.

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What Resources Are Available to Learn More?

There is a burgeoning collection of resources available on the topic of social media, with a good number focusing specifically on their strategic application by the nonprofit community. Some recommended resources include:

- *Social Media in Plain English*. Three-minute video by Commoncraft that provides a simple, metaphor-rich, visual introduction to social media. Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpIOClX1jPE&feature=fvw. Accessed October 2011.
- *Working Wikily*. Web site, managed by the Monitor Institute, provides a wealth of resources and commentary focused on social media, nonprofits, networks and social change. Available at www.workingwikily.net. Accessed October 2011.
- *Learning 2.0.* Listed at the site are 23 Things (or small exercises) that you can do on the Web to explore and expand your knowledge of the Internet and Web 2.0. Available at http://plcmcl2-things.blogspot.com/. Accessed October 2011.
- *Change at Hand: Web 2.0 for Development*. The International Institute for Environment and Development. June 2009. Publication, available as a free download, provides valuable case studies from a development context and a *Tips for Trainers* section with short introductions to the primary Web 2.0 tools. Available at http://www.iied.org/pubs/display.php?o=14563IIED. Accessed October 2011.
- Social Media Tools Blog Series. ICT-KM program of CGIAR. Link to mini-tutorials on top ten social media tools for international development. Available at http://ictkm.wordpress.com/2009/07/02/and-then-there-were-ten/. Accessed October 2011.
- Web 2.0 for Development Gateway. Good source for links to articles, events and Web sites. Available at www.web2fordev.net. Accessed October 2011.
- Beth's Blog: How Nonprofits Can Use Social Media. Blog provides a space to capture and share ideas as well as experiment with and exchange links and resources about the adoption challenges, strategy and ROI of nonprofits and social media. Available at http://www.bethkanter.org. Accessed October 2011.
- Guru Online. Web site contains series of 15 short, high-quality video interviews with social media expert, Eun Semple, as he comments on social media and working in a wired world. Available at http://www.guruonline.tv/business-social-media. Accessed October 2011.

References

[1] Definition from Wikipedia—the free, online encyclopedia that anyone can edit. www.wikipedia.org.

[2] Adapted from *Six Ways to Make Web 2.0 Work*, McKinsey Quarterly, February 2009.

[3] Really Simple Syndication.

[4] Convio The Wired Wealthy. March 2008.

[5] Adapted from a presentation of Beeline Labs www.beelinelabs.com.