

# SOCIAL MEDIA

chapter

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**—Lee E. Miller, co-founder of 3 Step Networks**



# WHEN HAVING A FACEBOOK PAGE IS NOT ENOUGH: HOW SOCIAL NETWORKING CAN BE AN INFLUENCING TOOL

BY LEE E. MILLER

The Internet has created a huge new audience of potential members and donors for nonprofits to tap, with 1.67 billion people worldwide using the Internet including 74.1% of the United States population. Although social networking is but one of many ways to access that audience, it is easily the fastest-growing means of reaching those Internet users. Social networking has already surpassed the use of e-mails. According to a study by Nielsen Online, 66.8% of Internet users accessed “member communities” in 2009, compared to only 65.1% that used e-mail. In light of these trends, nonprofits cannot afford to ignore social media.

## TO EACH ACCORDING TO HIS OWN NEED

All social media is not the same, however. There are a myriad of available social networking tools, each with different uses and different audiences. As part of your social media strategy you can use Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn and/or you can create your own private branded social network, to name just a few possible choices. Each organization needs to determine which are appropriate for their social media strategy, assuming, of course, that they have one.

Using social media without a defined strategy can result in wasting time, money and resources and, if executed poorly, may even hurt the organization. A social media strategy starts with an understanding that social networking is merely one of many available influencing tools. Implementing sophisticated technology is no substitute for understanding how those various technologies can be used to garner support for your cause, increase membership, encourage volunteering and raise money. Simply setting up a Facebook group is no more a social media strategy than having a telephone is a communication strategy.

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## FACILITATE HUMAN CONNECTIONS

It is not just the interactive nature of social networking that makes it such a powerful tool but rather the ability to allow individuals to connect among themselves, as well as to the organization, in a way that facilitates the building of a sustainable community. Social media provides the opportunity for users to interact not only with the hosting organization but also with each other. It enables users to build relationships in a way that Web sites, e-mail and other internet technology do not.

The way the Internet was used before social networking was like a high-tech library. Users went there to get information. They chose from the books (Web sites) that were offered but they were not able to interact with the books they chose. Interaction was one way. The authors decided what was being offered. The viewers were passive recipients of that information.

## JOINING THE ONLINE IN-CROWD

Social networking, in contrast, can be looked at as an organization's online clubhouse. The clubhouse serves as the hub around which all activity occurs. The only way to access the other members and related social networking activities is through the organization's clubhouse. Because members have to enter through the clubhouse in order to connect with other members, each time they do the organization has an additional opportunity to connect with them. Social media is about creating and strengthening those connections. Any time individuals go onto the organizations network, an opportunity exists to present them with information about the organization and to encourage volunteering, donating money and participating in online and live activities. This

is only effective when organizations spend the time and effort necessary to build and maintain vibrant online clubhouses.

The impact of social networking for organizations is reduced when the organization is not the hub of the social network. Having a presence on mass social media platforms supported by advertising, like Facebook, offer nonprofits a chance to get their cause in front of large audiences and to create social networks at no, or with minimal, cost. This differs from having your own network because the platform's portal, not your organization's Web site, serves as the point of entry and center of activity.

Once your members register on that platform they can connect to your members without ever going through your group again. In addition, they can participate in other groups. For example, Facebook allows organizations to set up group and event pages that is ancillary to its primary purpose of allowing each user to bring together a group of their friends in a social network. Each individual brings together their own group of friends and each of those friends can chose to put together a different community of friends. In essence, Facebook is a series of overlapping communities each based on connections with a specific individual.

Choosing the right social media to use is a critical aspect of developing a social media strategy. Mass platform media such as Facebook and LinkedIn can create awareness of your cause or organization. Because they are free and they are supported by advertising mass platform networks like Facebook, they are designed to keep users on the site but not necessary engaged with your organization. In fact, with hundreds of thousands of groups and over 3 million events posted each month sending your members to Facebook is as likely to result in their developing a connection with other organizations as it is to strengthen their connection to yours. For many organizations the best use of mass platform networks is to draw in new members and small donations from non-members and then focusing their efforts on getting them more involved with the organization in other ways.

### CASE STUDY—CHARITY: WATER

One organization that has effectively harnessed social networking is charity: water ([www.charitywater.org](http://www.charitywater.org)), whose mission is to bring clean and safe drinking water to Third World. Since its inception, according to executive director Scott Harrison, it has raised \$15 to 17 million in support of its mission. They use Facebook to create awareness for their cause and their events. They use Twitter to get celebrities to endorse their cause and to promote events like Twestival which consisted of simultaneous live events in 202 cities around the world raising \$400,000 in one day. But the heart of their social media strategy has been

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#### How Your Nonprofit Can Leverage Social Media to the Maximum

**Select the right tools:** Create a presence on networks, which attract potential members and donors. If cause awareness is your primary goal, a broad social media strategy with a presence in as many places as you have the resources to support makes sense. Use your presence on those networks and social media tools like Twitter to drive members to your own network where members can get up to the minute information and connect with other members around the mission of the organization.

**Dedicate sufficient resources:** Developing online relationships takes time and effort. Make sure that what you do online creates the right impression. Social media should look professional, be easy to use and offer opportunities for members to connect with the organization and each other. Constantly update content using professional looking photos and copy that will get noticed along with video and graphics.

**Don't treat social networking as an IT function:** Success is all about messaging not technology. Unless you involve the key decision-makers responsible for developing the organization's strategic messaging, social media efforts are unlikely to produce results.

**Leverage active social media users:** Find out which of your existing members belong to other social networks. Send them an e-mail inviting them to join your network. There may also be groups on social networking sites supporting your organization or its cause. They may be enthusiastic supporters that would be willing to promote your organization and activities.

**Be willing to give up control:** Social networks are not subject to the same control as your Web site. The price of getting people involved and engaged is that you cannot control everything that is posted on the network.



to use all these activities to attract members to their own private network, [www.mycharitywater.org](http://www.mycharitywater.org). In just four months since its launch, this network has raised \$1.2 million.

It is not the technology that has made charity: water's social media strategy successful but rather the effective use of that technology. Sharing information with members and potential members through Twitter, and posting information on a group page on mass social networking sites like Facebook create awareness of the organization and its mission as well as interest in activities. However, this is simply another avenue to do what they were already doing and continue to do, via e-mail, newsletters, direct mail campaigns and posting information on their Web site. Social networking works when it enables nonprofits to replicate online, the sense of community around their mission that made them successful organizations before the advent of the Internet. **PRN**

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