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Put Social Networking Sites to Work for Your Organization

If you're thinking that social media is just for teenagers, think again. More than half of those logging on to social media sites are in their mid-thirties or older.

Traditional media outlets such as newspapers, radio, and television, have long served the purpose of delivering one-way messages, like not-for-profit advertising. Social media, by contrast, uses Web-based platforms to not only deliver your message, but to allow the recipient to participate.

You'll find a number of technologies under the umbrella of social media, including e-mail, instant messaging, blogs and social networking Web sites. In fact, sites like Facebook and Twitter have now surpassed traditional search engines when it comes to reaching some segments of the public.

The end result? Social media is not only changing the way your supporters access news and information, but how they make donation decisions. If your organization has not yet embraced the power of social media, it might be time to take another look.

Social Networking Websites

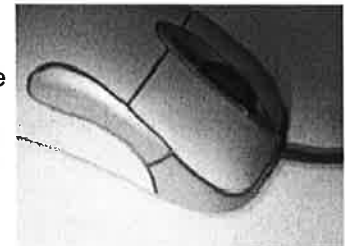
Separate from our professional lives, many of us have a profile on at least one social networking website. That's why many organizations, commercial and tax-exempt, are employing this innovative new marketing tool. Not-for-profit organizations are no exception.

Adopting these technologies, however, involves more than creating a profile or fan page for your organization. To really be effective, it requires a shift to a culture of transparency. And, it is this window into your agency that makes it more important than ever for your message to be consistent at every point of contact with current and prospective supporters.

How Social Media Puts You Out Front

Establishing a presence on social networking sites can give your agency a competitive edge in several ways, including:

- 1. Image Enhancement.** Profiles, fan pages and participation in groups all serve to build awareness about your organization's image. They also provide an opportunity to interact with current supporters as well as begin the relationship-building process with prospects.
- 2. Open Communication.** Social media, including social networking, is based on the principle of two-way communication. Your organization can benefit from both the positive experiences and negative feedback that customers voluntarily share. Not only can you address these customer concerns publicly, but you then have the chance to make any necessary improvements. You have the unique opportunity to make lemonade out of lemons.
- 3. Target Marketing.** Establishing a presence on social networking sites can help you identify, and subsequently target, potential supporters. While the need



for advertising through traditional media outlets may not be eliminated, the ability to target marketing communications reduces overall costs and provides a greater return on your marketing investment.

Tapping into social networking analysis tools may also assist with targeted marketing efforts. You may learn, for example, through online discussions that one service your agency provides is more likely to draw volunteers and supporters than other services you have been promoting.

For example, if your organization deals with rescue animals, perhaps your community is more responsive to advertising that features dogs rather than cats. You can get real mileage out of that information that will help to develop your marketing message. Just go easy on overt advertising on social networking sites, or your efforts could backfire.

Social Networking Best Practices

Whether you are new to social networking, or a seasoned veteran, it's important to:

Make a Commitment. Social networking, like most marketing tools, requires a commitment to time and possibly finances -- perhaps even cultural change within your organization -- in exchange for successful results.

Be Visible. Make sure that your image remains consistent between the various social networking sites. Develop a communications plan that keeps your agency visible, but that does not overwhelm your online following.

Listen First, Respond Second. Once your program is established, monitor the social buzz daily to keep a pulse on both current and potential supporters. Much like a dinner party, you must listen before you respond. Then, once you have a clear picture of what is being said online, you can determine a course of action.

Keep it Local. Supporters and prospective supporters alike may be more likely to donate to -- or volunteer for -- charitable organizations that are within driving distance. Keep this in mind as you develop and refine your social networking plan.

Make it Easy. Remember to make it simple for people to find you. Add social networking information to business cards as well as your agency's website.

If your organization hasn't yet gotten its feet wet in the world of social networking, it may be time to rethink your marketing strategy. Establishing a presence on social networking sites can be particularly effective when it comes to heightened public awareness for your agency and for identification and targeting of potential supporters. In addition, finding ways to tie social networking initiatives into community fundraising or resource raising efforts can create a win-win situation for everyone involved.

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