

Nonprofits and Social Media: Is there a Strategic Linkage?¹

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Paper presented at ARNOVA's 2011 annual conference, Toronto, Canada

Abstract

Today nonprofits are using an increasing array of social media, but how the use of these technologies connects to the organization's effectiveness has not been adequately studied. This paper delves into the connection between social media technologies and organizational effectiveness. Semi-structured interviews with nonprofit executive directors are used to develop a grounded view of how and why the organization uses social media, and how it relates to the organization's effectiveness. This research begins to map the reasons nonprofits engage social media, and if these technologies are strategically used to help the nonprofit meet its mission.

Introduction

The internet has brought about a communication revolution (Bimber, 2003). One front of this revolution is the use of social media to interact with stakeholders. This is especially pertinent for nonprofit organizations, as the role of stakeholders in the governing of these organizations evolves. It is argued that the "most fundamental change in the governance of nonprofit organizations will be the widening and deepening of the organizational electorate, a set of people who have the right to participate in strategic decisions" (Saxton, 2005: 35). As more people are utilizing social media to become engaged with nonprofits, prescriptive literature argues that these organizations should have a plan on how best to utilize social media and how to measure the impact social media have on the organizations' pursuit of their missions. Still, little is known about whether nonprofits strategically use social media, or the connection between the use of social media and a nonprofit's effectiveness. This paper begins to fill in this gap.

Social media are powerful tools that can be used by a nonprofit to engage in and build strong relationships with external stakeholders. Prior exploratory research identified the use of internet technologies as having an impact on the organization's effectiveness (Dumont, 2010). Still, organizational effectiveness is difficult to measure (Frumkin, 2002; Herman and Renz, 1999, 2004, 2008). Complicating the measurement of effectiveness are two other factors: the diversity and multitude of stakeholders nonprofits must account to (Brown and Moore, 2001; Ebrahim, 2010) and, related to the first, the multiple measures nonprofits must account for (Ebrahim, 2010). In other words, nonprofits not only need a plan that addresses who they need to communicate with, but also identifies the information that these stakeholders are seeking. Social media is used by nonprofits to promote transparency and

¹ This paper is an early draft based on preliminary data.

provide information to their “followers” (Waters, et al., 2009), but the connection between effectiveness and social media, and whether or not strategic planning has a role, has yet to be made.

Strategic planning provides nonprofits with a road map to accomplish their missions through careful analysis and the creation of programs and service goals they need to offer to meet their missions, as well as the tools that will be needed to accomplish these goals (Bryson, 2004). But whether nonprofits use strategic planning – or have any strategy – in relation to social media is not known. Moreover, the empirical evidence is lacking on whether there are indeed more benefits to be gained by a nonprofit for approaching social media with a clear strategy than utilizing social media without one; and if there is, what is the difference. Clearly, the reasons for strategically using social media, and how this use connects with an organization’s effectiveness, needs to be studied further.

Methodology

This paper relies on grounded theory to map why nonprofits use social media, if this use is strategic (as measured through its inclusion in the strategic or social media plan), and how it relates to the organization’s effectiveness, as perceived by the executive director. As such, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the nonprofit executives in Jacksonville, FL of nonprofits that have a vibrant online presence through Facebook and Twitter. To identify these nonprofits, a snowball sample was done in June 2011, that began with the Facebook and Twitter accounts of two prominent umbrella nonprofits in Duval County, the United Way of Northeast Florida and the Nonprofit Center (Dumont, 2011). The local nonprofits that each organization “liked” on their page was noted, and all of the local nonprofits that they “liked” were noted as well, until the identification of local nonprofits was exhausted. The same technique was done on Twitter using the accounts the organizations were following.

This process resulted in the identification of 348 unique organization and 464 accounts: 129 Twitter accounts and 335 Facebook pages. The posts and tweets over a three month period were then recorded. In addition, an e-survey, that was opened from August 30 through September 30, 2011, was sent to all organizations in the sample and had a 43% response rate. The social media usage of the organizations that completed the survey was then measured, and those organizations with the most tweets and posts in different service areas were identified. Two nonprofits in arts and culture, environment and animal welfare, human services, and societal benefit service areas were interviewed. Two prominent non 501(c)(3) nonprofit were interviewed as well. All interviews took place between October 13 and November 10, 2011.

All organizations that were interviewed noted on the survey that their social media was maintained by a full-time employee, but the percentage of time of the individual’s position dedicated to social media ranged from 0-10% (environment and animal welfare), to 51-75% (one non-501(c)(3)). Five nonprofits: two human service organization, two arts and culture organization, and one societal benefit organization had a full-time employee dedicating 11-25% of their time to social media. The remaining three, one non 501(c)(3) organization, one societal benefit organization, and one environment and animal welfare organization, had a full-time employee dedicating 26%-50% of their time to social media. All interviewees have actively engaged Facebook, four for one to two years, and six for more than 2 years. Twitter engagement varied from 6 months (3 organizations) to 1-2 years (5 organizations). Only two have been actively using Twitter for more than two years. This is laid out in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of Findings

	Budget	Time on FB	Time on TW	Use	Strategy	TW/FB linked	Comm Flow	Effect
A&C 1	\$1-\$2m	>2yrs	1-2yrs	inform	Attract business	no	2-way asymmetrical	Cost effective marketing; immediate
A&C 2	\$2-\$5m	1-2yrs	6mo-1yr	engage	Attract business; reach youth demographic	no	2-way symmetrical	Cost effective marketing; ; immediate; customer service
HS 1	\$2-\$5m	1-2yrs	6mo-1yr	inform	Attract business; reach youth demographic	no	2-way asymmetrical	Cost effective marketing; ; immediate; donations
HS 2	\$5-\$10m	>2yrs	>2yrs	engage	Attract business; monitor environment	no	2-way symmetrical	Cost effective marketing; ; immediate; advocacy; broadened governance
SB 1	\$500K-\$1m	1-2yrs	6mo-1yr	inform	Attract business; reach youth demographic	yes	2-way symmetrical	Cost effective marketing; immediate
SB 2	\$500K-\$1m	1-2yrs	1-2yrs	engage	Attract business; reach youth demographic	yes	2-way symmetrical	Cost effective marketing; branding; ; immediate
E/A 1	\$2-\$5m	>2yrs	1-2yrs	inform	Attract business/donations	yes	1-way symmetrical	Cost effective marketing;; immediate
E/A 2	\$10-\$20m	>2yrs	1-2yrs	inform	Attract business; reach youth demographic	no	2-way asymmetrical	Cost effective marketing; immediate
Non 501 (c) (3)1	\$500K-\$1m	>2yrs	>2yrs	inform	Attract business; draw people to area	no	2-way symmetrical	Cost effective marketing; immediate
Non 501(c) (3)2	\$500K-\$1m	>2yrs	1-2yrs	inform	Attract business; reach youth demographic; build community	no	2-way symmetrical	Cost effective marketing; immediate; intimate; Advocacy; branding

The executive director of each organization was interviewed.² In two instances, the executive director also had me interview the person in charge of social media, in two other cases, only the person in charge of social media was interviewed. and in two more, the person in charge of social media was present during the interview. Three interviews were conducted via the phone and all others were done in person. The interviews were semi-structured and framed around four concepts: purpose of social media use, social media's role in the organization's effectiveness, what is done with the feedback the organization receives through these mediums, and the role of social media on the organization's social return on investment (SROI). The first two concepts are the focus of this paper. Each interview was recorded and are in the process of being transcribed.

Findings

The discussion of findings proceeds in the following fashion. First, a better understanding of why these nonprofits are using social media is discussed. Then if its use is strategic, the processes behind the posts and tweets is delved into. Finally, whether the use of social media by these individual nonprofits is helping the organization to achieve its goals and mission is assessed. As noted above, all data discussed below is preliminary. These are the key broad themes that emerged in the interviews.

Use

When asked about why their organization originally chose to utilize social media, the answer for most was to push out information about their organization and its programs. This focus was also represented by where social media is housed in the organization. All the organizations have it housed in their marketing and communications department. For all but three organizations, the focus of social media use remained to inform people about what the organization is doing. For those three nonprofits, the original foray into the social media world was to engage their constituents. While a couple of other organizations did say engagement, all the other information from those interviewed was on using social media as a push medium: to get information out to the audience, not to specifically seek feedback and input from their fans and followers. Repeatedly, they noted social media's use to spread information, get information out, bring people to their events, and draw new clients to their organization.

Interestingly, one organization's executive director was at a conference when Facebook was opened for the general public. She tells the story this way.

On the dais with me was Sean Parker, Facebook's President at the time. The topic of the conference was about nonprofit community engagement. He asked the audience who among them were on Facebook. A couple raised their hands. Then he turned to me and asked if my organization was on Facebook. I said no we are not, but we will be next

² A total of ten interviews were done, but at the time of the writing five were transcribed. These findings are predominantly taken from the notes from the interviews, and some from the transcriptions, were available. None of the transcripts have been coded, so the data presented here is a narrative discussing the common themes taken from the interview notes.

week! And when I returned from the conference, I joined Facebook as an individual to get a feel for it, and then presented this new tool to my board and staff the following week. We have been engaged with Facebook ever since. [paraphrased]

Even though they were early adopters of social media, the organization is still learning how to best use the different mediums. The organization, for the first time, promoted one of its routine workshops via social media, and found numbers of attendees were much higher. In addition, there was a significant fee to register for this workshop, so they were also able to raise revenue through this medium. The director noted that it was very successful, so they will continue the practice.

One arts and culture nonprofit noted that her organization's foray into social media was to go beyond pushing out information to include engagement, not only with individuals, but with other nonprofits and private businesses in the area. However, this executive director has been with the organization for a couple years, and it was using social media before her arrival. So while the reasons behind the original decision may have been different, since she started working for the organization, her focus has been engagement. Indeed for most of the organizations, the decision to start using social media, and its continued use has been strategic, but to varying degrees.

Strategy

When asked whether they use social media strategically, all organizations noted they did. However, when probing what they meant by strategic, different patterns began to emerge. Three organizations noted that their constituents sought information through this medium, and they strategically post to these targeted audiences through these mediums. However, when looking deeper, half have their Facebook and Twitter accounts linked together, indicating that by "targeted", they are referring to those who use social media, not targeting the message to the different demographics on each medium. There were a couple exceptions, however. These two organizations targeted their Facebook posts and Twitter tweets to demographics, by age. As both noted, they do not link these two mediums together because they are different audiences, and they see the younger audience on Twitter.

An attempt to attract the youth demographic - ranging from teens to people in their forties, depending on the organization - was the most often noted strategic move: to use the mediums to attract a younger audience to the organization. The need to attract the younger audience for all these organizations was to start building relationships with this demographic, and over time to hopefully move them toward becoming visitors and donors, to members, then to large donors. This strategy was developed after finding that their current members/clients/visitors/donors were aging and they were having difficulty attracting a younger generation through traditional media, such as print advertisement, television, and radio. Still, how to move them along this continuum eludes all the organizations interviewed.

Two of the nonprofits noted two specifically different strategic uses for social media. The human service organization strategically uses social media to monitor the environment that impacts its clients and

then uses this information to adjust programs or form new ones, when needed. Social media is seen as an all-hours communication tool for members, and to use this tool to better assist these members on a variety of issues. A nice quote that aptly describes this organization's use of social is its use in the last strategic planning session.

At our strategic planning meeting last year, we had a board member, who is very connected with our members as well as some former members. As we were sitting around the table, discussing what we think is important for our organization to focus on in the future, this members was also tweeting during the conversation. I didn't know what to make of it, but while we were engaged in our SWOT analysis, she brought into the conversation what our members and former members were telling her via social media... I think that this tool has really allowed us to tune into our members, and the community as a whole, so we can better serve them. [paraphrased]

Indeed, this organization has integrated social media into its governing processes.

The other nonprofit that had a unique strategic use for social media is an arts and culture organization. In addition to using it to get the younger generation interested in the organization and hopefully transition them into members and large donors over time, the organization also takes a larger view of social media's roll, beyond the arts and culture sector of Jacksonville. The organization also seeks to engage the community where it is located, connecting with not only other nonprofits, but private and public organizations as well. Currently, social media is used to help promote other arts and culture organizations in the community. In addition, there are private organizations that promote the nonprofit on their social media accounts, drawing more people into not only their businesses, but portraying a vibrant community where people want to visit. The nonprofit is in the process of working with other organizations to not only promote each other, which is happening now, but to build an online community that is as vibrant as the off line community to draw people to that neighborhood in the city.

A similar focus is also taking place in another nonprofit that was interviewed, but that is the nonprofit's mission. It is a non-501(c)(3) that promotes other organizations in a section of the city. These organizations are members of the nonprofit, and it does not seek out donations. Unlike the arts and culture nonprofits, whose focus is interaction with a new demographic and building an online community to promote the offline community, the non-501(c)(3) nonprofit's goal is to use social media to promote the offline community, and drawing in a specific demographic was not mentioned. What was focused on was getting people to the area of town, to show them that there is a lot to do, and to correct any misperceptions of the area. In addition, the tools were used a lot for promoting other organizations' events as well as their own. Only recently have they started to use it for feedback. This organization also focuses on trying to get their fans and followers to share information about organizations in this neighborhood, be it through tweets, posts, pictures, or videos. They want fans and followers to post on

the nonprofit's page and to mention the organization in any tweets about events or organizations in this area.

In regard to strategically using the feedback received through social media, with the exception of the two organizations just discussed - the arts and culture nonprofit and the human service nonprofit - other interviewees noted strategically using the feedback, not to enhance the governance of the organization, but to better formulate the messages sent out via social media. In other words, they are using a two-way asymmetric model of communication instead of two-way symmetrical model (Grunig and Hunt, 1984). Still it appears that there may be a process involved in the strategic use of social media, similar to the diffusion of innovation, but this analysis of the data is in the early stages. Five of the organizations interviewed noted they were in the early processes of integrating social media into their strategic planning or tactical plans for the next one to three years. Indeed, this study may be catching the beginning of a social media integration process.

Effectiveness

All organizations that were interviewed noted that there was a benefit derived from the use of social media. When specifically asked about social media's role in helping the organization be more effective in achieving its mission, all noted the cost effectiveness of online social media tools, especially in relation to print and television advertising. However, again, the focus was on advertising, not achieving the goals of the organization. While marketing has a role in each goal, social media is a tool that, if fully utilized, can go far beyond another marketing medium, as the arts and culture and human service nonprofit discussed in the previous section noted. Still, seven of the other nonprofits were all in the early stages of moving beyond its use as a push medium to better understand its full potential. One seemed content to continue to use it as an information provider, because as the executive director noted, most donations still come via traditional mail, so that is where its focus will remain.

Other areas where social media helped the organization to be more effective was its ability to help brand the organization online. More people are now aware not only of the organization and what it does, but they are also able to identify its logo. Consistency in branding across online mediums and connecting it with the offline organization was noted as important by one non-501(c)(3) nonprofit. Indeed, by informing the community more about what the organization does for the community, social media is placing the nonprofit in a favorable light in the community. When people think of the organization, they have a positive image. This image helps the organization to better serve its members.

One human service nonprofit noted the effectiveness of asking for donations via social media. While it was not always this way, she noted that once the relationships had been formed and strengthened over time, they are at the point now where if they need something, they can post it on Facebook and Twitter, and within hours, they will have more than enough of the asked for product. However, this has not been tried for monetary donations. She noted the key is that they had to first build the relationships,

and only after that, could they ask people for help. Their fans and followers feel as though they are part of the organization and can see the benefits the organization provides the community, and in turn, each fan or follower.

Another aspect of social media that all organizations said helped them to be more effective was the immediacy of the medium. Where, traditionally, it would take a lot of time to develop an email, reread and reword it, and then go through the database management system to send it out, social media can get information out quickly. As one societal benefit organization noted,

Social media is a lot faster than email. In addition to immediacy, I have to spend a lot of time on the wording in the emails, and making sure to target it. In addition, of course I have to ensure proper grammar usage and spelling. With social media, it's okay if you make some mistakes. People are much more forgiving with that. [paraphrased]

This immediacy is also helpful in regard to advocacy and getting fans and followers to support the nonprofit in policy matters.

Two nonprofits - one non-501(c)(3) organization and one human service organization - both gave examples of their use of social media to activate their followers and fans to stand with the organization on a public policy measure. For the non-501(c)(3) organization, there was a state ballot initiative they were not in favor of. The nonprofit decided that the measure would not benefit its members, and fought against passage. Similar nonprofit organizations across the state did the same, however, the organization in Duval County was the most active in the use of social media. While the executive director has no data to measure the impact of social media in regard to this initiative, he believes it made a very big difference. The ballot measure was defeated in most counties in the state, however, the margin of defeat was widest in Duval County. He attributes the larger margin of defeat, in part, to social media, and their being able to inform their members, followers, and fans of the organization's stance on the measure and why.

The human service nonprofit noted a time when it used social media to stop the move to cut all public funding for the organization in the state legislature.

Last year, the new legislature was seeking to cut all state funding to the organization. We learned of this development when the policy came out of committee and was going to the floor for a vote. We posted what was happening on our Facebook page and Twitter. Our fans and followers then sent it to their friends activating people who did not want to see the funding cut. Then we tweeted and posted that fans and followers should contact their state representatives and tell them to vote against that cut. Within two days, I was approached by one of the representatives and he let me know that they had gotten the message and that our supporters can stop calling him. They did not realize the scope of our supporters. We did not lose state funding, and I credit social media's ability to activate people to act on our behalf. [paraphrased]

Still, she notes that those who took action against the cut were not people who did not know about the organization, or just “liked” it because someone told them to. They had a relationship with the organization, either a current member, a former member, or had family members or friends who were current or former members. Just as they were able to acquire feedback from these relationships to help shape the organization’s priorities for the coming year, they were also able to activate them to act on behalf of the nonprofit.

Discussion

The preliminary analysis from the interviews finds that while nonprofits in Jacksonville are using social media tools, specifically Facebook and Twitter, they differ on its use in regard to strategy, target, and effectiveness. All noted that they want to move in the direction of using social media strategically, and three were in the process of aligning its use with their strategic plan. A couple noted that they were thinking about hiring a contractor to better use social media, but none have done so yet. Table 1 identifies the type of organization with the findings from each category.

While all organizations noted the use of social media as a marketing tool, a few are in the process of moving beyond that by moving to using it more as a transformational tool to tighten the fabric of community. This is an area that is ripe for a longitudinal study. First, whether or not the networks involved come together to form this online community will be interesting. In addition, if it does form, and becomes successful, how do they measure the success, what were the variables involved in getting it to succeed, and whether it will be able to adapt to changes in online technologies, are future areas of study. Currently, there are connections between nonprofits in the county, inasmuch as they will retweet each others’ tweets and promote each other, but the benefits derived from this reciprocity are still not understood.

A key benefit for the organizations that use social media as an additional tool for governance, was its ability to build and strengthen relationships. Only one relationship existed where the organization was successful in asking its fans and followers to act to benefit the organization. However, how to progress relationships from fans and followers to paying members and clients, or to donors, is still elusive. Part of this may be because none of the organizations interviewed could say with any certainty why their fans or followers were fans or followers of the organization. Beyond the basic analytics tools, they knew little about these virtual members and supporters. This lack of information increases the difficulty in formulating relationships, especially over a mass communication tool. In regard to Facebook, all posts are fed into fan’s news feeds, unless they have “hidden” the organization. Unless the organization is specifically responding to fans’ posts or comments, or if a fan is tagged in the post, all posts go to all fans. This is a difficult tool to target the message in order to build a personal relationship. Twitter, on the other hand, can be more direct, but not much more. Again, tweets go out to all followers, not a specific segment. However, with the release of Google+, this gap may be filled. By having the ability to create

circles of targeted audiences, the organization would be better able to target messages to a specific audience to begin to build a more personal relationship. It remains to be seen how Facebook and Twitter will continue to adjust their platforms to compete with the new kid on the virtual block.

Another area for future research is the role of leadership in social media adoption. All of the organizations, save one, noted that the executive directors were interested in learning about how social media could help the organization achieve its mission. The one exception does not see it as a particularly important or useful tool, at least how it is used now, other than it being just another vehicle to get information out to people. The executive director's ability to decide how to use social media, as well what information will be posted, may be critical. A deeper analysis of the role of the leader in social media utilization, while going beyond the data gathered for this project, is an area ripe for analysis.

Finally, connected to the role of the leader, is the ability to look beyond how social media is being used today to its role in the future. To put it in layman's terms: some of the organizations really "get it" and can see the potential of full utilization of social media in benefiting their organization, some are not there yet, and at least one did not demonstrate an understanding of social media's potential, beyond informing people who follow, or are fans of, the organization. However, the person in charge of social media knows it can do a lot more, but does not have the time to learn more about its potential. These two aspects - the ability for the leader to see social media's potential - and the amount of resources dedicated to its use, are interrelated. If social media is seen as important for the organization, more resources are dedicated to its use. Still, until a return on the investment on the use of social media can be measured, it may seem counterproductive for organizations, especially smaller organizations with very tight budgets, to invest resources in a tool where there is not an immediate financial return. As noted in the effectiveness of the use of social media, its main role is in relationship building, and until those relationships are formed and nurtured, the tool itself has not been seen to bring in monetary resources. What is also needed is an understanding of the development of these online relationships, their stages, and a better understanding of how to develop and nurture them, and for how long the nurturing process takes until the mutually beneficial relationship moves from physiological to the physical, either in terms of volunteering or donating. Like the move of nonprofits to better understand how to best utilize social media tools, so too is the empirical analysis of these relationships.

Conclusion

The findings of this paper lay down a framework from which future studies connecting strategic planning and social media with an organization's effectiveness can be built. Just as there is no one standardized way to view organizational effectiveness, there is also no standardized measurement of how social media tools are helping nonprofits be more effective. The common thread running through the interviews was that it is helpful, at the very least in getting information out to fans and followers. On the other end of the spectrum, it was found to be effective at acting as a vehicle to get more voices at the table

to help shape a nonprofit's goals. The spectrum is broad, and the ability to understand the different stages of the spectrum are just beginning. Understanding these stages will allow for better strategic usage of the mediums.

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