

Engaging – and Growing – Donors via Social Networks





Social Networks: Engaging – and Growing – Donors

Every fundraising professional is faced with the ongoing challenge of attracting new donors and engaging existing donors on the mission, work and relevance of their organization. The traditional approach of recruiting and moving donors along a spectrum of giving was revolutionized by online giving and is transforming again with social networking. Donors now enter the spectrum of giving at different points and give in a multitude of ways. To be successful, a fundraising professional has to “meet” the donor where they are and provide avenues for the information and engagement donors increasingly demand.

Social Networking: Why it Matters

Social networks herald a fundamental change in how organizations communicate. Gone are the days of controlled release of information, data, reports, responses. In ThePort Network and NTEN’s April 2010 Nonprofit Social Network Survey Report, 90% of 1,173 non-profit organizations had a public social network (Facebook, Twitter, etc.); 22% had a private social network. The average community size for public networks is 2,440; 3,520 for private (house) social networks. The opportunity to leverage both house (private) and public social networks for both donor recruitment and engagement is immense, and, given the dominance of social networks, necessary.

Challenges

With opportunity comes key questions, and for most organizations, challenges. Engagement means different things to different people. Know the what, how and who of engaging in social networks *before* you engage your donors. Here are some key challenges to consider:

- **Control vs. Controlling:** Whether it is a question of who “owns” the story or the donor, effective use of social networks necessitate that donor relationships be managed differently.
- **Veritas in the Virtual:** The virtual experience can be effective, only if it is authentic and compelling and allows donors to both *be* involved *and* get others involved.
- **Brand vs. Parity:** Using social networking because it is readily available does not make your organization unique and can undermine your brand promise; using social networking as a means to deliver new and additional programs and services allows organizations to truly differentiate themselves and is the key to success.



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- **Information Push vs. Donor Dialogue:** Social networks can be challenging because people communicate directly with the organization and with each other. Harnessing this communication exchange includes challenges, but becomes successful when the one way information push is transformed into a freeway of learning and exchange.

With over a decade of experience creating custom communities, ThePort Network knows the exact tools needed to create a successful social network that both supports an organization's mission and positions it for long term community growth. ThePort Networks flagship software, ThePort Social, and suite of applications are developed to target specific actions and deliver demonstrable results.

Getting Started

Think Differently

Development shops are typically organized by the campaigns an organization runs. One person heads up the Annual Fund, another focuses on Major Gifts and others manage other campaigns. Donors are then sorted into categories depending on the actual value that they hold or may hold to the organization. Their value is typically based on the actual and potential gift size in a single year. This short-term and short-sighted perspective on donors and prospective donors cripples an organization from developing a deeper rapport and building a richer relationship that would naturally yield donations.

This division makes sense from a development manager's inside perspective; but it doesn't translate to the outside world and certainly not to the donor or prospective donor. The big change that is occurring is shifting the focus on donors to center around how to create an experience so compelling that the donor offers to give and continues to do so in more predictable and frequent ways.

Donors don't think like fundraising professionals, they think like donors. Donors give because they want to, because they care and because they believe in the mission, work and impact of the organization. Donors don't categorize themselves and don't want to be categorized by their actual or potential gifts. Donors want to make a difference.

Imagine then a change in the way in which organizations communicate with donors. Imagine an approach that focuses on donor experience and translates to increased engagement, vibrant programs, more donors and greater support.

By moving from the one way street of outbound messaging and communication to the freeway of social networks, fundraising professionals can better meet the needs of donors for authentic experience and exchange. For the donor, connections and communication with program



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experts and recipients is real and meaningful. For the development professional, donor interests and needs are met, resulting in increased engagement and the opportunity for additional donors.

For Real

Donors want the real deal. Whether it is financials, program results or participant profiles, donors expect both impact and honesty. Social networking, particularly private (house) networks can support the level of program connection, information and transparency that donors want. By receiving real-time Tweets and streamed video about a program initiative, donors can see, and know, how their gift is making a difference.

Organizations that use social media effectively are transforming the actual way that they allow donors to connect with the programs, recipients and projects that they fund; truly allowing them to experience the reality of their gift.

Be the Bridge

Donor engagement is supported by increased experience. On average, households in which the respondent volunteered gave substantially more than those who did not: for giving households \$2,295 from volunteers, \$1,009 from non-volunteers (Independent Sector, Report on Volunteerism, 2001). A volunteer's experience translates directly into increased support; a donor's virtual experience can do the same. Fundraising professionals can serve as a bridge for donors learning and engagement.

Social networking provides an entirely new way for volunteers to give back by allowing individuals to give back in ways that fit their lifestyle and their personality types.

The Virtual Visit

All good development and marketing professionals use *stories* to deliver the *experience* of their organization's work. *That* is the purpose of story-telling. Typically disseminated via newsletters, annual reports, and events, social networks provide the actual experience, and the resulting story, in real-time and through applications that encourage sharing and dissemination. Social networks can literally be the next best thing to being there. (And without the extensive planning and expense an event or program visit necessitates.)

In addition to dynamic and interactive story-telling with donors and other stakeholders, the community becomes the real-time repository of an organizations experience and history. The exchanges are real, the process alive and ongoing.



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Planning for Success

There are key considerations for ensuring both a strong start and optimal use of a social network for donor engagement. The implementation of new ways of thinking and communicating – and new technology – present a set of challenges that can be mitigated through thoughtful planning. Remember too that social networking *is* a different way of engaging donors, and that authenticity, above all, is paramount. Communicate and test efforts to engage stakeholders early and inform the larger strategy.

- Create a plan and timeframe that identifies objectives, participants, social network applications and measurement tools.
- Identify program experts and a program opportunity that is compelling to who are able to Twitter real-time on-site and follow up with an end of day blog – including video and photos if appropriate – about the work or program presented.
- Modeling the intended medium while utilizing others, invite donors, and their networks, to participate. Using both public (e.g. Facebook) and private (house) networks, extend the invitation to your community – and their communities – to your event.
- Consider a number of methods of communication: Tweets, blogs, Q&A, video, etc. for one event.
- Deliver both concrete statements of impact as well as stories. Both matter and demonstrate difference.
- Be sure that efforts are timely and responsive. Always offer ways for donors to share what you send and spread the word virally.

Measuring Results

Perhaps one of the most salient features of house social networks is that the data and content collected is owned by the organization. The opportunity for utilizing data to effectively manage impact, growth and success is unlimited. For social network donor engagement efforts, the metrics of success should include:

- Know your baseline data. What do you currently measure? How many donors (users) did you start with? What are your current analytics numbers for your site?
- Consider what measurement tools you want to use. Some include:
 - Web & Blog Analytics
 - RSS Analytics
 - Link Trackers
 - Keyword Instances
 - Comment Tracking



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- Social Networking Browser
- Quantitative and Qualitative. Follow those who are commenting on the work you do, whether peers, competitors, partners or others.
- Track back. Follow the tracks back of those donors who were successfully and significantly engaged. What worked best?

The End is *The Beginning*

Social networks are transformative for all stakeholders in an organization. Social networks changes how people communicate individually and organizationally and by its very nature, is an iterative process. Building a social network can seem forbidding. Public or private network? Who wants it? Who needs it? How will people use the network? How will we know if we are successful? How will the organization change? Through a strategic process and the right vendor, questions are answered and the possibilities of an engaged social network for donors and all stakeholders becomes a thriving reality.



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What: **Identify what kinds of initiatives donors are interested in supporting.**

Looks Like: Utilize private network for promoting and matching program options for donor support and engagement with a community page Search function for existing and developing programs with current results and updates. Results include increased information on donor interests in program areas, insight in to relevance of marketing and results information.

What: **Rehabilitate reputation after C-level mismanagement of funds.**

Looks Like: Implement “open book” policy with a series of social network events and communications – blogs, text messages, that are responsive and sincere in nature. Results include internal cultural shift to increased transparency, documented effort and approach that addresses past problems, focus on immediate and clear communication of all information, not just bad news.

What: **Highlighting in-house expertise on heart disease.**

Looks Like: Webinar featuring world-class heart specialist addressing emerging technologies that will impact heart health and medicine. Results: Identify opportunities for following up with existing and new donor interest; increased insights in to donor interests; content creation and stronger communication between program and fundraising departments.

What: **Real-time progress of a house-renovation project.**

Looks Like: Program staff Twitter periodic updates on work complete. Additional Tweets could come from the clients served and other volunteer participants. Follow up with a blog posting of the house, the numbers of volunteers, days, and pounds of product necessary to create a home. Results include engagement in real-time programming, virally disseminated messaging via existing supporters, new content, strong and authentic storytelling from program staff and participants.

What: **Expand reach for a clothing drive.**

Looks Like: A donor uses Facebook to “flash mob” gently worn clothing over a three day period. Results include increased awareness of organizations and increased donations.

What: **Identify additional supporters and create participant groups for a healthy fitness campaign.**



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Looks Like: Utilize widget in private network that alerts participants to others who are looking for area partners in achieving shared fitness goals. Results include increased engagement of current participants, addition of new participants and new groups actively supporting mission.