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Engaging stakeholders through social networking: How nonprofit organizations are using Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Since social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, began allowing organizations to create profiles and become active members, organizations have started incorporating these strategies into their public relations programming. For-profit organizations have used these sites to help launch products and strengthen their existing brands; however, little is known about how nonprofit organizations are taking advantage of the social networking popularity. Through a content analysis of 275 nonprofit organization profiles on Facebook, this study examines how these new social networking sites are being used by the organizations to advance their organization's mission and programs. Solely having a profile will not in itself increase awareness or trigger an influx of participation. Instead careful planning and research will greatly benefit nonprofits as they attempt to develop social networking relationships with their stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

With more than 68 million active users of Facebook.com, organizations are seeking to tap into the relationship development potential these sites offer. In April 2006, Facebook opened its registration process to organizations, and more than 4000 organizations joined within 2 weeks (Facebook, 2008). With an average of 250,000 people registering to use Facebook daily, organizations cannot ignore the social networking phenomenon. Public relations-oriented blogs and trade publications have promoted these sites as relationship building tools (e.g., Dugan, 2007; Social Networking, 2008), but little is known about how these organizations are using these sites to cultivate relationships with their publics.

Relationships are the foundation for social networking sites. Though no handbook currently exists to help an organization manage their social media presence, previous research on online relationship development offers insights into how social networking sights should be used to foster relationship growth. The purpose of this study is to examine how nonprofit organizations use Facebook to engage their stakeholders and foster relationship growth.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Social media and relationship cultivation

Tredinnick (2006) defined social networking sites as those sites driven by user-participation and user-generated content. Social media provide a variety of ways for users to become involved with organizations. Waters (2009) found that nonprofit organizations use social media to streamline their management functions, interact with volunteers and donors, and educate others about their programs and services. Through interactions with stakeholders on Facebook and other social media applications, organizations seek to develop relationships with important publics.

Kent and Taylor (1998) introduced the subject of online relationship development to public relations, and many have advocated for organizations to implement strategic virtual communication strategies to cultivate relationships with key stakeholders (e.g., Kelleher, 2006). Although studies have examined the impact of several virtual strategies, three strategies have routinely been found to be helpful in relationship cultivation.

The first of the three strategies involves disclosure. Following recent crises in the for-profit, nonprofit, and government sectors, the public has called for increased openness and transparency from organizations. Kelleher (2006) encouraged practitioners to use the Internet and social networking sites to advocate for their organizations and causes; however, the practitioners should be transparent in their online communication activities. For full disclosure, organizations must make sure to provide a detailed description of the organization and its history, use hyperlinks to connect to the organization's Web site, provide logos and visual cues to establish the connection, and list the individuals who are responsible for maintaining the social networking site profile (Berman, Abraham, Battino, Shipnuck, & Neus, 2007).

Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) stress that Web sites should be useful for the stakeholders. The usefulness of social networking site profiles often focuses on the information that is being distributed (Crespo, 2007). The most common forms of message dissemination include posting links to external news items about the organization or its causes; posting photographs, video, or audio files from the organization and its supporters; and using the message board or discussion wall to post-announcements and answer questions (Carrera et al., 2008). Including press releases and campaign summaries on their social networking sites should also be encouraged to maximize the impact of their presence on social networking sites.

Finally, interactivity plays an important role in developing relationships online with stakeholders. Jo and Kim (2003) found that interactivity was essential if organizations were to develop relationships with their stakeholders. Asking for e-mail addresses and ways to donate online can increase interactivity, but organizations should provide a calendar of events or listing volunteer opportunities to involve stakeholders offline as well. Given the discussion of these three strategies and their relevance to social networking sites, the first research question was created:

RQ1. How are nonprofit organizations incorporating relationship development strategies into their Facebook profiles?

The Association of Fundraising Professionals classifies the nonprofit sector into six subsectors: arts and humanities, education, healthcare, human services, public/society benefit, and religion. Using this classification system as strata, Waters (2007) found that education and healthcare nonprofits often use more interactive elements and are more skilled at communicating about organizational successes with their stakeholders. These differences caused the research team to create a second research question:

RQ2. Does nonprofit typology influence how organizations influence their Facebook presence?

3. Methodology

To determine how nonprofit organizations were using Facebook, a content analysis of 275 randomly sampled legally incorporated nonprofit organizations' profiles was conducted. The research team removed nearly one-fourth of the initial organizations chosen for the sample because they were classified as nonprofit even though they were student-run organizations rather than legally incorporated nonprofits. These organizations were replaced by legitimate nonprofits to maintain the sample size.

Prior to coding, the research team reviewed trade publications and scholarly literature on how organizations used the Internet and social networking sites to advance their organizations. The researchers created a list of 30 items expected to be present. After reviewing 15 profiles during a training session, an additional 11 variables were identified and included in the codebook to evaluate how nonprofits used Facebook.

The profiles were evaluated for the presence of items representing organizational disclosure, information dissemination, and involvement. For disclosure, the research team determined whether the following items were present: a description of the organization's programs and services, an organizational history, the mission statement, the organization's Web site, the logo, and a listing of the administrators of the profile. Information dissemination was evaluated by determining whether links to news items, photographs, video and audio files, posted announcements, and links to press releases and campaign summaries were posted. Providing methods to contact, donate, and volunteer for the organization were examples of the items used to measure involvement along with the use of message boards, provision of an organizational calendar of events, and the presence of an e-commerce store.

Table 1
 Frequency of public relations strategies used by nonprofit organizations on Facebook^a.

	Total NPO sector	Arts and humanities	Education	Health	Human services	Public/society benefit	Religion
Disclosure							
Description	263 (12)	32 (2)	47 (3)	46 (1)	39 (0)	84 (5)	15 (1)
History	60 (215)	4 (30)	16 (34)	10 (37)	11 (28)	18 (71)	1 (15)
Mission statement	119 (156)	11 (23)	23 (27)	19 (28)	16 (23)	44 (45)	6 (10)
URL	224 (51)	27 (7)	43 (7)	41 (6)	28 (11)	74 (15)	11 (5)
Logo	194 (81)	28 (6)	33 (17)	31 (16)	26 (13)	68 (21)	8 (8)
Administrators listed	268 (7)	34 (0)	49 (1)	45 (2)	38 (1)	86 (3)	16 (0)
Information dissemination							
News links	149 (126)	14 (20)	25 (25)	27 (20)	24 (15)	49 (40)	10 (6)
Photo posted	154 (121)	21 (13)	27 (23)	21 (26)	22 (17)	52 (37)	11 (5)
Video files ^b	67 (208)	10 (24)	6 (44)	6 (41)	11 (28)	29 (60)	5 (11)
Audio files	4 (271)	1 (33)	0 (50)	1 (46)	1 (38)	1 (88)	0 (16)
Posted items	121 (154)	22 (12)	18 (32)	17 (30)	18 (21)	40 (49)	6 (10)
Discussion wall	204 (71)	27 (7)	37 (13)	35 (12)	24 (15)	68 (21)	13 (3)
Press releases	13 (262)	0 (34)	2 (48)	2 (45)	4 (35)	4 (85)	1 (15)
Campaign summaries	55 (220)	8 (26)	11 (39)	7 (40)	10 (29)	17 (72)	2 (14)
Involvement							
E-mail to organization	194 (81)	25 (9)	33 (17)	35 (12)	27 (12)	64 (25)	10 (6)
Phone number	26 (249)	1 (33)	3 (47)	5 (42)	2 (37)	13 (76)	2 (14)
Message board used ^b	120 (155)	18 (16)	20 (30)	14 (33)	13 (26)	47 (42)	8 (8)
Calendar of events	23 (252)	4 (30)	3 (47)	7 (40)	2 (37)	5 (84)	2 (14)
Volunteer opportunities	35 (240)	0 (34)	11 (39)	8 (39)	4 (35)	10 (79)	2 (14)
Donate ^c	35 (240)	0 (34)	11 (39)	12 (35)	5 (34)	6 (83)	1 (15)
Store	3 (272)	0 (34)	0 (50)	2 (45)	0 (39)	1 (88)	0 (16)

^a Frequencies are reported in the form Present (Not Present).

^b $p < .05$.

^c $p < .01$.

Additionally, information about the organization’s profile, such as the number of friends, the number of files (photographs, video, audio), and how often the discussion boards are used, were collected. The organization was also classified into one of the six nonprofit categories identified by the Association of Fundraising Professionals in their nonprofit sector classification system (arts/humanities, education, healthcare, human services, public/society benefit, religion).

After a training session, the research team coded 30 Facebook profiles (11% of the total sample). Inter-coder reliability varied from .91 to .95 for all variables using Scott’s π , which takes chance agreement into consideration.

4. Results

The sample of nonprofits in this study included 34 arts and humanities organizations, 50 educational organizations, 47 healthcare organizations, 39 human service organizations, 89 public/society benefit organizations, and 16 religious organizations. The sampled organizations have a mean of 193 supporters ($sd = 547.71$) though support varies from a high of 6062 members to a low of one.

The first research question sought to determine how the nonprofit organizations on Facebook implemented disclosure, information dissemination, and involvement into their social networking site profiles. As shown in Table 1, nonprofit organizations understood the importance of disclosure in their profiles. Nearly all of the organizations listed the administrators of their Facebook profiles (97%) and provided a description of the organization (96%). Only 81% of the organizations linked back to their Web site from their Facebook profile, and 71% used the organizational logo on Facebook. Fewer than half (43%) of organizations provided the mission statement of the organization, and less than one-quarter (22%) provided a history of the organization.

Nonprofit organizations did not use Facebook to distribute organizational news. The most often used message dissemination strategy was to use the discussion boards on Facebook (74%). Of the remaining seven items measuring dissemination, only two – posting photographs (56%) and providing links to external news stories (54%) – were used by more than half of the sample. Though 44% of the organizations posted news announcements on their Facebook profiles, very few took advantage of the multimedia capabilities of the Internet. Nearly one-quarter (24%) uploaded video files to their profiles, and only 1% uploaded mp3, .wav, or other types of audio files. Organizations failed to publicize their public relations efforts—only 20% provided summaries of their campaigns and 5% posted organizational press releases to their profiles.

To better understand the message dissemination strategies, means were calculated to determine how often these strategies were used by the nonprofit organizations. Organizations provided more photographs ($m = 24.07$, $sd = 48.89$) than any other strategy, but they also had multiple discussion board topics ($m = 4.32$, $sd = 9.16$), posted announcements ($m = 4.27$, $sd = 7.52$), videos ($m = 3.41$, $sd = 20.64$), and audio files ($m = 1.25$, $sd = 0.5$). Examining the discussion boards, it is important to

note that of the 204 organizations that use this strategy, more than one-third (36%) did not use the discussion board within the past month.

The organizations in the sample did not providing many methods for their supporters to become more involved in the organization. The most common strategy used to involve the supporters was providing e-mail addresses to organizational representatives (71%). Of the 194 organizations that provided an e-mail address, 37% provided the address of a named organizational representative while the remaining 63% provided a generic e-mail address, such as webmaster@nonprofit.org. Less than half of the organizations in the sample implemented the additional strategies that were examined, including using the message boards (44%), providing an outlet to make charitable donations (13%), listing current volunteer opportunities (13%), providing an organizational phone number (9%), providing a calendar of events (8%), and providing an e-commerce store on their profile (1%).

The second research question used the Chi-square statistical test to determine if any of the six nonprofit subsectors incorporated any of the specific strategies more often than the others. Of the 21 specific activities evaluated, only three were found to be statistically significant. Message boards, though only used by 43% of the organizations overall, were used in greater proportions by arts/humanities (53%), public/society benefit (53%), and religious (50%) organizations ($\chi^2 = 10.12$, $df = 5$, $p = .049$). Similar results were found for video files, which were used by only one-quarter of the organizations. Roughly 33% of public/society benefit, 29% of arts/humanities, and 28% of human services organizations incorporated this strategy into their Facebook presences ($\chi^2 = 12.03$, $df = 5$, $p = .034$). Finally, fundraising on Facebook was used by 22% of educational organizations and 26% of healthcare organizations even though only 13% of the entire sample included this strategy ($\chi^2 = 19.24$, $df = 5$, $p = .002$). The fundraising result was hardly surprising given that education and healthcare have the most sophisticated fundraising programs of all nonprofits. It is not hard to understand why they have embraced fundraising on social networking sites more than the other subsectors because of their advanced fundraising knowledge.

5. Discussion

By analyzing the content of nonprofit organizations' Facebook profiles, this study found that nonprofits have not incorporated the vast majority of the Facebook applications available to them into their social networking presence. Examining 275 nonprofit organization profiles for incorporation of disclosure, information dissemination, and involvement revealed that disclosure was the most often used strategy. Though components of dissemination and involvement were used differently by the nonprofit subsectors, overall they were largely ignored by the organizations.

These findings parallel earlier studies on how public relations practitioners viewed the Internet and its impact on relationship building. Hill and White (2000) found that even though practitioners recognized the value of the Internet for helping improve an organization's competitiveness and image, they were skeptical about its ability to advance the organization. The current results seem to reflect this belief. Nonprofit organizations recognized the rapid expansion of the social networking phenomenon, and they wanted to be on Facebook. However, they were not taking advantage of all the options the site had to offer their relationship cultivation efforts.

Results indicate that the nonprofits on Facebook wanted to be open and transparent by disclosing who maintained the site and what they sought to accomplish. However, they failed to take advantage of the interactive nature of social networking. They rarely provide information in forms other than external links to news stories, photographs, and discussion board posts, and they only attempted to get interested parties involved by providing them with a contact e-mail address to obtain more information.

Since social networking on Facebook is a new phenomenon for organizations, few handbooks exist to guide nonprofits on how to use the sites. Instead, they are learning through active participation on the site—an overwhelming task for organizations without a solid understanding of the site. But, nonprofits must begin to understand how to use social networking sites as their membership numbers continue to expand.

The nonprofits in this sample provided links to external news stories; however, they failed to take advantage of other public relations opportunities. They rarely posted multimedia files, press releases, or summaries of their campaigns. These items are helpful in detailing the organization's successes to those highly involved in social networking who expect advanced organizational profiles. Nonprofits can use the videos and photographs taken by their volunteers if the organizations lack the equipment and resources, but they must start making the relationship development efforts by getting them involved in organizational activities and asking for social networking assistance.

Several applications have been created by Facebook and outside programmers that are designed to help organizations with their fundraising and relationship cultivation efforts. The most popular fundraising application is Causes, the 18th most popular application on Facebook, allows individuals to donate to a registered organization and recruit others to support the cause (Facebook Fundraising, 2007). Other applications, such as Justgiving, ChipIn, and SponsorMe, all allow individuals to make donations to nonprofits on Facebook and give organizations the opportunity to send informational messages to their supporters. Whether providing a listing of events to become involved with or methods to contribute and volunteer, organizations must strive to make their sites more interactive.

Most nonprofits lack the resources or time to provide constant attention to a Facebook page. Creating a profile and then abandoning it will create only minimal exposure for the organization, and it could turn off potential supporters if they witness inactivity on the site. Therefore, many nonprofits are turning to the heaviest users of social networking sites for assistance. College interns and volunteers are often in charge of managing nonprofits' Facebook presence because they

have knowledge on appropriate uses of the site and are often already personally invested into social networking (Westcott, 2007).

Social networking sites can be an effective way to reach stakeholder groups if organizations understand how their stakeholders use the sites. Results from this study show that nonprofits are beginning to experiment with different Facebook offerings. As social networking sites become more ingrained in daily life, they will soon see a more diverse audience in terms of age, culture and socio-economic status. Then, nonprofits will need to begin using more social networking applications social networking to meet the growing needs and expectations of their stakeholders.

6. Conclusion

Christ (2005) predicted that social networking sites would force public relations practitioners to rethink how they approach relationship development with their stakeholders. Practitioners have been exploring the interactive elements of social networking and experiencing benefits for their organizations. This study found that although nonprofits are open and transparent with their Facebook profiles, they are not using the sites to their full potential to inform others and get them involved with organizational activities.

Though the findings indicate that nonprofits need to do more to enhance their information dissemination and involvement strategies, it should be noted that only 275 nonprofits were examined. The sample also consisted primarily of organizations in the United States, so nonprofit organizations may use social networking sites differently in other countries. Additionally, this study only examined Facebook. It did not examine other popular social networking sites, such as MySpace, Bebo, Hi5, or Friendster.

Finally, the most important limitation that this study faced was in assessing the effectiveness of Facebook as a relationship building tool. Public relations scholarship has discussed relationship development on traditional Web sites and blogs, but little research has been published on social networking sites. Therefore, the concepts measured in this study were largely generated from trade publications and practitioner-oriented blogs rather than theoretical constructs though they represent strategies discussed in previous research (Kent & Taylor, 1998).

These limitations do not undermine the importance of the research, but they give ideas for future research. Existing scales from relationship management strategies and the dialogic loop should be modified to be applied to social networking sites. Longitudinal studies could offer insights into how organizations change their social networking strategies over time, and case studies should be conducted to help offer insights for other organizations based on efforts that have both succeeded and failed.

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