

Partnership *in Practice*

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At a recent meeting of the American Society of Association Executive's Key Philanthropic Organizations Committee (KPOC), I joined other nonprofit CEOs in a discussion on the costs and benefits of social networking. Like most organizations, PPP has explored its options for providing social media applications like blogging, member profile pages, wikis, and more. We have groups on Facebook and LinkedIn, and our old-fashioned e-mail listserv, GIFT-PL, is going strong after 15 years, with more than 800 subscribers. However, we're just starting to take the plunge into this technology, and the discussion recorded here will identify some of our concerns.

As the discussion continued, it occurred to me that there are some similarities between social media tools and charitable gift planning. In both cases, managers want to know what the return on their investment of resources will be, and in both cases, that's hard to quantify. The KPOC CEOs talked about "return on engagement" and building relationships, especially with the next generation of constituents. Those goals are also high on a gift planner's list of priorities, even though they don't immediately translate into dollars raised.

According to the Pew Internet and American Life Project, 70% of Americans between ages 50 and 64, and 38% of Americans age 65 and older use the Internet. So perhaps social media isn't as "next generation" as we may think. This is a frontier that we're all exploring. I share this CEO perspective in a spirit of solidarity with everyone who can see both the costs and the benefits.

Jennifer Blenkle: At ASAE, we continually get questions about how best to use social networking strategies, particularly for fundraising. Everyone wants to know, what are nonprofits really using? What's your experience?

Anthony Edmondson: I find that our staff spends a disappointing amount of time on social networking. Our members are flooding the staff with requests for information or contact, and we've set rules about how much time can be spent in that arena. It's a nightmare!

Georgette Lehmuth: We find that social media expands our networking capacity. It really helps with member-to-member connection on a national level. Of course, my younger staff would live there and never get anything else done. We can see that the next generation of fundraisers will expect to do business

in this arena, and we need to be there to find the next generation of donors. But I'd say that this investment hasn't yet begun to pay off in terms of contributions.

Patricia Aiken-O'Neill: I'm ambivalent about social networking. We use it, but it just seems to add more noise, and messages tend to get lost. We're trying to keep up! Of course, we're concerned with privacy issues, and with negotiating the interests of different generations who need to hear from us.

Nancy Green: Social media has a lot of buzz, but it's not the answer to the majority of our organizational challenges. We have to prioritize, and right now social media is just a small component.

Myrl Weinberg: I agree. We need to use all the tools at our disposal, but we must be strategic. For us, we focus on how we can have a social media presence as

an organization, not as individuals. We use it to gather grassroots support for our programs and campaigns.

Edward Able: It seems to me that there's a lot of confusion and organizations have a hard time focusing in this area. Everyone wants to use technology, but that doesn't necessarily mean social media, which will consume resources at a very challenging time. In the nonprofit sector, economic recovery will lag behind recovery in other sectors, so we are forced to have different priorities. Organizations can't invest too much in tools that may actually decrease staff productivity.

Terry Cross: On the brighter side, I'd say we're successfully using social media to build connections with a younger donor base. It helps us to talk to our constituents quickly, and to gather their input and data about them. We'll soon begin a social media campaign to gather data from our younger friends.

THJ: We've seen two challenges to implementing a private social media platform in a smaller organization. The "out of the box" technology at our price point doesn't have the administrative flexibility we need (although it's sometimes promised by the vendors). And second, when you're pursuing a private network instead of using one of the public platforms, like Facebook or LinkedIn, the drain on staff and volunteer resources starts even before the system is implemented. As others have said, in the scheme of priorities, social networking can't detract from other things we're working on.

Doug Franklin: It seems we're all circling around two key challenges—a lack of focus in the use of social media technology, and a sense of disappointment about the amount of resources required to do a good job in this area.

Wells Jones: It's especially frustrating, since social networking is so hot in the world at large. Even our dogs are tweeting! There's been a huge increase in the number of applications that are available, but the challenge is capacity-building in the current economic climate. Funders and sponsors are beginning to ask how many social media followers we have—it's beginning to be an evaluation metric. And it certainly makes those who participate feel more connected to the organization.

THJ: As is always the case, there are trade-offs, and we need to believe that our investments have the best possible return for our members. It's difficult when "fans" are an evaluation metric that hasn't yet shown a real ROI in increased dollars, donors, or members.

Mark Ginsberg: For us, the return is in terms of connection, not fundraising success. Facebook is huge for us, since many of our constituents are young. The people who connect with us in this way expect an immediate response to their questions, and if we don't provide it, then there's a failed expectation. Preventing that failure consumes two full-time staff. Unfortunately, the staff who work in this area are not content specialists, they're social media experts. So, how can we elevate the conversations that take place in this sphere? It's linked us in places that we didn't even know we could—or should—have linkage!

Charles Gould: So much of what we do is at risk today. Our funding from both the federal and local governments has been hit hard. Social media has a lot of possibilities, but we have to go through a period of experimentation. We have to find a way to build relevancy with a new generation. We're really looking for that—relevancy—and not necessarily fundraising success. Our traditional donor isn't looking to social media, but we have to move into that parallel universe where it's part of the environment for younger people.

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John Graham: At ASAE we view social media through two lenses. First, we are expected to lead in the association field, so we have to be seen engaging with new technology. But second, we need to use that technology to further our own purposes. We know that people don't support anything we do unless they feel engaged with the organization, so our focus is "return on engagement." How do we monitor and capitalize on our encounters with members in the social media space? How do we take advantage of the viral aspect of this type of communication?

The conversation continues: One of the best community-building features of social media technology is the ability to start a public conversation about issues that are important to the group. PPP has just launched the Partnership Perspectives blog, in the About the Partnership section of our web site at www.pppnet.org. I invite all PPP members—and those in the broader philanthropic planning community—to respond to the ethics cases posted there.

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