

Before You Go Social

Sarah works at a nonprofit in Madison. Under pressure from management to engage the organization in social media, she quickly creates accounts with the major players: Twitter, Facebook and MySpace. Soon, she sees that her accounts are getting very little traction with users. Over time, the media outposts that she carefully put into place atrophy with inattention and fall into disuse.

Stories like Sarah's are increasingly commonplace. Nonprofits, in their rush to take part in Web 2.0, jump in too soon and with too little forethought. Don't make the same mistake. Nail the basics before committing to an array of social media that can confuse and detract from the core message of your nonprofit's outreach.



THREE THINGS THAT COME BEFORE SOCIAL MEDIA

1. Your Web site

A prime benefit of social media is the chance to drive users to your Web site. If your current site has the oomph of a wet mop, spend time refining its content before talking it up on Facebook and Twitter. Make sure that your site is easy to use and gives people a reason to come back.

Start here:

- *Analyze. Use analytics tools to analyze the number of visitors, pages viewed and navigation patterns on your current site. Online resource guides (e.g., Google Analytics) can show you how.*
- *Map your content. A well-planned information map that considers your audience is essential for your site.*
- *Link your brand. Select your colors, fonts and images to spark the desired intent in your visitors.*
- *Enlist your friends. We get it. You're too close to the project. So enlist your friends to take a spin through your site. Ask them: How does it look? Was it easy to navigate? What would they change?*

2. Your e-mail

What is the best way to communicate with your audience? Though it might come as a shock to the Millennial Generation, not everyone Twitters daily and posts their favorite tunes to MySpace. E-mail is still a supremely effective way to reach people connected with your nonprofit. Use it to establish a voice that carries throughout your strategy and creates a genuine connection with the intended community.

Start here:

- *Do your research. Web-based tools can help you send e-mail to your mailing list. Easy-to-use sites like Constant Contact and Vertical Response might make your life easier. Find out what works for you.*
- *Start small. Send brief "e-blasts" via e-mail that share a simple message with text and pictures.*
- *Send e-news. Connect with stakeholders through an imaginative, informative monthly newsletter. Surveys show that donors actually request newsletters to stay in the know. So, write it with their interests in mind.*

3. If you can swing it, blog it.

There is a reason this step comes third. Only when the first steps are successfully in place can you attempt to launch a blog without inviting ridicule. In a world that moves at Twitter speed, blogs offer an easily updated content management system. Staff can quickly make updates with almost no tech-savvy required, but you should plan to spend 6–8 hours/week on content management.

Start here:

- *Spend time reading blogs. Make a list of your likes and dislikes. What will work for you?*
- *Define your blog. Good blogs have a voice and a thread. Do you want to inform, entertain or advocate?*
- *Put together a solid framework. Include a rough content outline for the first three months. There's no need to follow it exactly, but having it will help in a pinch and keep you focused.*
- *Pin down responsibility. Is one person responsible for the blog? Is everyone expected to contribute? Be clear on expectations before anything goes up on the Web.*

A solid online presence is the platform from which social media outreach can grow and flourish. Start an online conversation, but make the first connection through your Web site and e-mail communications. Eventually, when you're ready, social media can distill the message and provoke thought and excitement.