

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

---

Faculty Publications, College of Journalism & Mass  
Communications

Journalism and Mass Communications, College of

---

Winter 2014

# Empowered and engaged: Exploring social media best practices for nonprofits

Tessa Warner

*University of Nebraska Foundation*

Alexis Abel

*Nebraska Wesleyan University*

Frauke Hachtmann

*University of Nebraska-Lincoln, fhachtmann1@unl.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/journalismfacpub>



Part of the [Business Administration, Management, and Operations Commons](#), [Business and Corporate Communications Commons](#), [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](#), [Nonprofit Administration and Management Commons](#), [Organizational Communication Commons](#), [Public Relations and Advertising Commons](#), and the [Social Media Commons](#)

---

Warner, Tessa; Abel, Alexis; and Hachtmann, Frauke, "Empowered and engaged: Exploring social media best practices for nonprofits" (2014). *Faculty Publications, College of Journalism & Mass Communications*. 83.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/journalismfacpub/83>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journalism and Mass Communications, College of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications, College of Journalism & Mass Communications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

---

# Research paper

## Empowered and engaged: Exploring social media best practices for nonprofits

Received (in revised form): 2nd December, 2013



### Tessa Warner

is a Director of Research at the University of Nebraska Foundation, where she specialises in alumni engagement metrics, social media, and market and prospect research. Tessa holds a BJ in news-editorial and an MA in journalism. She is a member of the Association of Professional Researchers for Advancement.



### Alexis Abel

is a public relations counsel at Swanson Russell and an adjunct professor of public relations at Nebraska Wesleyan University. She holds a BJ in journalism and an MA in integrated media communications. She is a member of the Public Relations Society of America, American Marketing Association and Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communications.



### Frauke Hachtmann\*

is an associate professor in the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She holds a PhD in educational studies, an MBA with an emphasis in international business, and MA in journalism and a BJ in advertising. She is a member of the Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communications, the American Academy of Advertising, and Public Relations Society of America. Frauke is an editorial board member of the *Journal of Advertising Education* and the *Asian Communication Journal*.

\*College of Journalism and Mass Communications, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 130 Andersen Hall, Lincoln, NE 68588-0443, USA  
E-mail: fhachtmann@unl.edu

**Abstract** Although nonprofits see value and potential in social media, many have not yet mastered social media and harnessed their full potential. This phenomenological study sought to identify the best social media strategies and tactics for effectively engaging existing and potential donors, volunteers and stakeholders, according to social media nonprofit professionals. Six themes emerged: listening to the audience; engaging instead of fundraising; sharing relevant, valuable and actionable content; being honest, accessible and responsive; using social media as part of a multi-channel strategy; and that measuring is mandatory.

KEYWORDS: nonprofit organisations, fundraising, engagement, measurement, eWOM

## INTRODUCTION

The introduction of social media has ushered in a new era of relationship building for organisations. For nonprofit organisations, relationship building is essential for developing supporters into lifelong donors of time and money. This makes their presence on social media a natural fit. However, nonprofits must be strategic about their social media presence in order to capitalise fully on the opportunities presented by social media.

According to the Pew Research Center, 66 per cent of online adults use social media channels, such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.<sup>1</sup> Because the majority of adults visit social media sites regularly, nonprofits recognise that they need a presence there. The 'Nonprofit social network benchmark report' of 2011 found that 89 per cent of nonprofits have a presence on Facebook, with an average community size of 6,376 members; 57 per cent of nonprofits use Twitter, with an average of 1,822 followers; and 30 per cent of nonprofits use LinkedIn, with an average community size of 1,196 members. Nonprofits are also using YouTube (47 per cent), Flickr (19 per cent), Foursquare (4 per cent), and others.<sup>2</sup>

Not only are nonprofit organisations present on social media, many of them have used social media channels to raise money and connect with supporters. Forty-six per cent of nonprofits using social media raised between US\$1 and US\$10,000 in 2011, and 0.4 per cent of organisations raised US\$100,000 or more.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the 27 nonprofits that raised more than US\$100,000 (called 'master social fundraisers') were organisations of varying sizes, so this trend was not limited to organisations with large budgets. Thirty per cent of the group had annual budgets of less than US\$5m. On average, the master social fundraisers had approximately 100,000 followers through Facebook.<sup>2</sup>

Eighty-two per cent of organisations

noted that they found social media to be 'very valuable' or 'somewhat valuable', which indicates that nonprofits consider social media to be an important component of their outreach efforts. However, 35 per cent of nonprofits reported raising less than US\$1,000, and less than 1 per cent had raised more than US\$100,000 in 2011.<sup>2</sup> These statistics indicate that although nonprofits see value and potential in social media, many have not yet mastered social media and harnessed their full potential. This exploratory study sought to identify the best social media strategies and tactics for effectively engaging existing and potential donors, volunteers and stakeholders, according to social media nonprofit professionals.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND eWOM

Li and Bernoff recognised the shift of power from companies to customers in their award-winning book 'Groundswell', theorising that social networks empower customers to connect and draw power from each other.<sup>3</sup> As many companies and organisations are trying to determine how to use the groundswell to their advantage, the authors argue that simply relinquishing control to customers is not enough. In fact, companies and organisations should identify 'groundswell objectives'<sup>4</sup> that can result in measurable progress toward strategic business goals. Social media can be used to expand the role of customers, which in turn can 'generate research insights, extend the reach of marketing, energise sales efforts, cut support costs and stoke the innovation process'.

The 'groundswell' concept has also been explored in the academic literature as the electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) phenomenon, which can be defined as 'any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is

made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet'.<sup>5</sup> Social media offer many channels through which to spread eWOM, including blogs (eg Wordpress and Tumblr), social networking websites (Facebook and Google+), websites for sharing creative works (eg Flickr) and microblogging websites (eg Twitter). It is no surprise, then, that with an increase of social media use by customers, organisations are starting to recognize the power of the groundswell and are purposefully using eWOM to engage their audiences.

By examining opinion seeking, opinion giving, and opinion passing, which had previously been attributed to offline WOM marketing, tie strength, trust and interpersonal influence also appear to be important precursors.<sup>5</sup> Tie strength, which is the potency of a bond between members of a network, was shown to have a positive impact on consumers' intention to pass on information in social media. The intensity of strength of the relationships, however, was not a factor as social media enabled consumers to have a large number of acquaintances (ie weak ties) in their social networks. Trust was another important factor that influenced eWOM behaviour. The higher the level of trust among consumers in a social network, the more likely they were to engage in opinion seeking, opinion giving and opinion passing behaviours. Finally, interpersonal influence was also significantly associated with a positive increase in eWOM behaviour in social media, as consumers were more likely to acquire the brands and products used by their close friends.<sup>5</sup> The same study noted that in social media, a person could have multiple roles, including as opinion provider, seeker and transmitter. Therefore, an important tactic was the identification and recruitment of social influencers to disseminate positive eWOM about selected brands.<sup>5</sup>

## SOCIAL MEDIA USE BY NONPROFITS

Many nonprofits are aware of the power of social media and have not only created a brand presence there, but are using resources to communicate with supporters through social media channels. One survey of social media users found 36 per cent of the respondents were following a nonprofit organisation through social media, and 24 per cent of those individuals had given if they were solicited through social media. Additionally, 58 per cent of people who were asked to volunteer through social media did so, but just one in three respondents had been asked to volunteer through social media within the previous six months.<sup>6</sup>

While these findings indicate that social media should not be ignored as a useful tool for nonprofits, other findings show that nonprofits are not always giving people what they are looking for through social media. Sixty-five per cent of respondents indicated that nonprofits were falling short of providing the necessary educational materials through social media.<sup>6</sup> In addition, most nonprofits are not using all the tools available to them. For example, just over half of nonprofits were driving people to their website by linking to stories, and only 24 per cent of nonprofits in the study were incorporating videos. Additionally, less than half of nonprofits (44 per cent) were posting news announcements on their Facebook page, while only 36 per cent of nonprofits utilising the Facebook discussion board had posted within the past month.<sup>7</sup> Nonprofits also often fail to provide followers with information that could increase volunteerism or donations. Seventy-one per cent of nonprofits provided e-mail addresses for organisational representatives, but just 13 per cent provided a place that followers could go to donate to the organisation. Additionally, only 13 per cent had a list of current volunteer opportunities, while less

than 10 per cent provided a phone number or posted a calendar of events to their Facebook page.<sup>7</sup>

Nonprofits are also attempting to measure the results of their social media efforts. Seventy-three per cent testified that measurement is a priority, with 58 per cent of respondents indicating that they measure the soft benefits (eg increased awareness, education, non-financial supporter participation) of social media, and 9 per cent measuring hard return on investment (eg revenue received from donors, sponsors, advertisers, etc).<sup>2</sup> Additionally, 73 per cent prioritise site visitor volume as a measurement, with registered members and customer feedback reported as a priority by 57 per cent and 52 per cent respectively. This emphasis on measuring success indicates that nonprofits must be strategic about the tactics they are employing to meet their goals.

The American Red Cross is one nonprofit organisation that currently has a strong social media presence, and is a key example of how nonprofits can use social media effectively to spread their message beyond the social media channels. The Red Cross provides two-way communication opportunities through social media. With audiences that include the media, volunteers, young adults and the community, the American Red Cross and its chapters disseminate information regarding disaster response and volunteer opportunities, and works to build a relationship with its audience. As an indication of success, news media that follow the American Red Cross have contacted the organisation for stories as a result of the organisation's social media efforts.<sup>8</sup>

There is clear evidence that some people understand how social media can be used to boost volunteerism and donations for nonprofits. But because there are a limited number of academic articles explaining how nonprofits can

successfully use social media, it is difficult to extend the research to examine these strategies and tactics further. To help find trends and commonly used best practices, this study will seek to understand the following research question: according to nonprofit social media professionals, what are the best social media strategies and tactics?

## METHOD

A qualitative, phenomenological approach was taken for this study, because the goal was to examine the experiences of a few individuals, and then analyse and interpret their experiences to better understand them.<sup>9</sup> In total, 11 people were interviewed for this study. The average duration of the interviews was 42 minutes, with the longest interview lasting 67 minutes and the shortest lasting 26 minutes. The researchers followed a discussion guide that included open-ended questions to allow freedom of response by the study participants. After recording and transcribing the interviews verbatim, the transcripts were analysed using open coding and the codes were then collapsed into themes. Thick, rich verbatim detail of the participants' accounts was used to illustrate the meaning of the themes.<sup>9</sup> To ensure validity, all interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and reviewed by all researchers. Several sources of data were used to build a coherent justification for themes, including interview data and extensive notes. To help achieve coder reliability, data was coded by the primary researchers who conducted the in-depth interviews. In cases of coding conflict, disagreements were resolved by the researcher who had conducted the interview. This helped to ensure that study themes and findings were accurately identified and categorised.

Study participants were chosen through purposive sampling.<sup>10</sup> All of the study

participants were considered social media experts who have demonstrated experience in managing and implementing campaigns for highly successful nonprofit organisations. Three of the interviewees were men and eight were women. They included communicators from both small and large nonprofit organisations and independent social media consultants from all across the USA. The participants had between two and seven years of experience in developing social media strategies for in-house or external clients.

The dialogic theory of public relations provided a guide for the analysis of interview transcriptions and extraction of themes.<sup>11</sup> The theory explains how dialogue can be used as a means for practising ethical public relations, and as a relationship-building tool for organisations. Mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk and commitment are all tenets of the dialogic orientation.

The responses were analysed using framework analysis. This type of analysis uses a thematic approach to develop themes from the research questions and the narratives of research participants. The five stages of framework analysis include familiarisation with raw data, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting and interpretation.<sup>12</sup>

## FINDINGS

The primary channels participants discussed included Facebook and Twitter. YouTube, LinkedIn and Google+ were also mentioned, but their role was positioned as complementary to Facebook and Twitter as other channels in a multi-channel social media strategy. Despite the fact that many of the participants noted how difficult it is to keep up with social media trends, and that each nonprofit should employ social media differently, six themes emerged from the

interviews with the participants, including the following:

- listening to the audience;
- engaging instead of fundraising;
- sharing relevant, valuable and actionable content;
- being honest, accessible and responsive;
- using social media as only one part of a multi-channel strategy; and
- that measuring is mandatory.

## LISTENING TO THE AUDIENCE

Many of the participants expressed that in order to be most effective, nonprofits need to listen to their supporters through social media. Listening to what people are saying about an organisation and where they are saying it is a key step in the initial process of creating a social media presence. As one participant said, 'That first step sometimes is just a good strategy of listening to what people are saying before you jump into conversations'.

After establishing a presence, it was suggested that organisations should avoid simply broadcasting messages, because to do so would be to underutilise the media. Instead, organisations should use the tools to 'listen to what people are saying and see if we can echo it to show that we're listening. And then when people hear what they have said, they will see themselves in the message and they will embrace it'. Another participant said organisations could start to understand how people are talking and what is important to them in order to know what topic will be of interest to the audience:

'Nonprofits do best financially in terms of their mission arguably when they listen to what their funders are saying needs to be done. When they go in and say we know better than everyone else, even if they are very, very smart and experienced, inevitably they are doing the wrong thing. They should trust the people that fund them.'

Nonprofits must also be aware of who their audience consists of, and recognise that the audiences for each social media channel are different. For example, one participant noted that her Facebook audience is much more diverse than her Twitter following. To discern who an audience consists of for organisations currently using social media, another participant suggested paying attention to which posts yield the most audience response. Organisations that are just starting to venture into social media should start by identifying target audiences and then using those to begin building their social media community. The same participant said that nonprofits must use the early phases of relationship building to build trust with their audiences.

A different participant described the difficulties of providing information that appeals to everyone — even if a nonprofit thinks it knows the types of people supporting it through social media: ‘Figuring out a way to meet expectations of this group of people who all have such diverse interests has been probably the hardest part’. Getting into the heads of one’s followers and figuring out what they want is difficult because it seems that everyone wants something different from the organisation. That said: ‘If you aren’t pleasing them, then they’ll let you know’.

### **ENGAGING INSTEAD OF FUNDRAISING**

All participants agreed that although the majority of nonprofits are most interested in raising money and increasing their number of volunteers, it should not be the focus of their social media objectives. In fact, the participants each expressed that organisations should be engaging their supporters in two-way dialogue, and that social media should not become simply another channel through which to push out messages. ‘What we really want to do is

create a tool or experience that our audience will find valuable enough to pass on’, said one participant. Several participants suggested that nonprofits can build up goodwill by providing useful information, helping supporters with information or services, or just having a good conversation online. These participants also noted that this strategy might build trust between the organisations and their followers.

Through social media, organisations can identify and communicate with key influencers. Participants defined influencers as individuals with a strong network of connections either online or offline. These are also individuals who hold a lot of credibility with their own social networks and express passion for the organisation’s mission. ‘You win over those people and they become great advocates for you’, said one participant. Others said that if a follower has been sharing a lot of content posted by the organisation they need to be identified and thanked. For example, a development officer from the organisation can communicate with the supporter through social media and arrange an offline meeting to thank the supporter properly. This meeting can also provide the organisation with the chance to learn more about the supporter and how they might be interested in becoming more involved with the organisation and its cause. Another participant called social media a ‘one-to-one direct interactive relationship-building tool’ that can be very effective with specific target audiences. They explained, ‘I would just like to be able to have meaningful conversations with people who I wouldn’t have been able to develop a relationship with otherwise’. To this participant, it was more important to build relationships using social media than to identify and engage influencers. They explained:

‘You want to have a relationship with influencers, but at the same time I don’t

know if influence is what I'm looking for. I'm looking for relationships, and so I think I'm more interested in retweets and Facebook shares and discussion. Meaningful discussion.'

Another participant, however, stressed the importance of getting quality visits to social media sites rather than simply a large quantity of visits. She explained how her organisation is taking engagement through social media so seriously that she is in the process of creating an engagement rate that compares how many supporters actually engage through social media by commenting, sharing and other actions, versus the number of supporters that visit social media pages without doing any of those things. 'I feel like if you're getting the right audience and you are giving them the right kind of content, they should be engaged and it should be natural. Social media is a social place and people engage', she said. One of the participants' organisations makes it a priority to respond to every single person that connects with them through social media:

'We avoid bombarding our supporters with asks. In fact, we only do two to three donation asks a year in social media. Our policy in social media is that everyone with a legitimate question or concern gets a personalised answer; therefore, social media is a priority for us in terms of engagement and customer service. Engagement and integration are the secrets to our success in social media.'

Recognising and rewarding audience members for their social media contributions can be an effective way to increase participation — whether that participation comes in the form of comments, likes, increased volunteerism or financial donations. One participant cited an example from her organisation in which the organisation partnered with the location-based social network Foursquare

to develop a 'badge' to recognise and reward donors. The campaign allowed donors to 'check in' while they were donating and immediately be recognised with the donor 'badge'. The 'badge' campaign resulted in an increase in people receiving and using the badge. The participant added, 'Social media mentions and conversations about donating also increased during this period'.

Part of this strategy includes being careful about who is sharing information from within the organisation. Social media represent something that is so important that it needs to be the institutional voice or come from the highest-level communicator, according to one participant. She added that it could be learned by others, but warned that the voice audiences hear represents the institution and the brand, so it is very important that the message is aligned with the overall communication goals of the organisation. Another participant suggested that marketing professionals are not the right individuals to control social media channels. Because fundraisers or development officers are the experts in building and maintaining lasting relationships, he suggested that control over social media should be delegated to them. As one participant noted, there is a lot of bad advice being given by marketing professionals who are well-intentioned, but are not

'[people who] understand who a person is, asking them why they are engaged, asking them what they want to do, and then varying those interests to our needs to make something happen. Only that kind of person is going to be the right one to determine how this channel should be utilised.'

The study participants suggested that the dialogic nature of social media means that it is only effective as a fundraising tool if a nonprofit organisation has established



close, trusted relationships with its community members. For example, a nonprofit asking for a financial donation without properly establishing a trusted relationship is 'like asking someone for money without knowing them first'. Another participant likened responding only to negative comments through social media to ignoring a stranger after they compliment your wardrobe. They added, 'They're using it as crisis management, and they're not using it as a way to engage an audience in meaningful conversation'.

With trust already established as an important aspect of relationship building, one participant said that she found fundraising messages in social media networks could be effective, but their success depended on who was doing the asking: 'I think that people are much more receptive to fundraising asks on social media, provided that they come from a trusted source, like getting a message from your friend or mom, instead of getting it directly from the organisation'. One participant noted that direct asks should be 'social' asks that come from an organisation's supporters instead of the organisation itself. As another participant said, 'We do know that providing apps and tools for our event participants to fundraise through social media as peer-to-peer fundraising is incredibly successful. We raise millions doing that'. Participants offered suggestions for increasing the effectiveness of social media fundraising asks for nonprofits who have established trust with their audiences, including (1) asking only occasionally — no more than two to three asks per year, and (2) asking for a specific item or dollar amount.

### **SHARING RELEVANT, VALUABLE AND ACTIONABLE CONTENT**

Because most organisations will have a diverse community of supporters through

social media, finding messages that appeal to everyone is difficult. One way to appeal to a wide variety of audience members is to provide information that is relevant, valuable and actionable. For example, one participant described encouraging communicators at her organisation to ask three questions before posting content on social networks: (1) Is it an action item audience members can do? (2) Is it relevant right now? and (3) Is it mission-critical? She added, 'We want people to feel that they're getting enough value out of what we're saying so they want to pass it on to their friends and family'. Another participant reported success using content that audience members could act on. On a campaign focused on animal issues, audience members were encouraged to do more than just read about the issues. Instead of driving traffic to a website of static content, the campaign encouraged audience members to take a variety of actions to support the cause, such as caring for animals, making a donation, and 'checking in' to a shelter using Foursquare.

Several participants noted that social networks should not be seen as simply another push channel. They reported that audience members became more responsive once the organisation began posting fewer marketing messages and 'actually helped people find the information they needed and the resources that they needed and helped them through their struggles'. One participant avoids repeating information that has already been communicated through news releases, but said that some things, like good news, were worth sharing. 'A lot of it is how you're framing it, and what you're saying about it', she said. 'Post or tweet something that invites readers [and] invites the audience to go and read more or hear more'. Another suggestion was that organisations ask questions of their audiences. The more responses an

organisation gets, the better the analytics will be, which means that the organisation's posts are more likely to show up in the newsfeeds of its followers. Participants agreed that organisations should tell stories about their successes.

### **BEING HONEST, ACCESSIBLE AND RESPONSIVE**

Honesty and trust arose as key issues in light of the public relations and social media fallout of an organisation that botched its response to a crisis in early 2012. Study participants concurred that the organisation's failure to be honest with its publics served as a case study on how not to communicate through social channels. Gaining an audience's trust and maintaining it through honest communication is essential. As one participant said, '[In real life] if someone has lied to you, they might be really sincere the next time they talk to you, but you're going to have a hard time believing them. It's exactly the same online and building communities'. Another participant added, 'When people are upset you don't blow it off or dismiss it. You address it'.

At the same time, some issues are better addressed offline. Although being responsive through social media may be a good first step, some issues need closer attention. 'We've found that if somebody is really upset with us as an organisation and we can get them on the telephone it's so much easier to try to communicate with them and calm their fears and try to communicate with them', said one participant.

### **USING SOCIAL MEDIA AS ONE PART OF A MULTI-CHANNEL STRATEGY**

Most study participants said that social media needed to be combined with other media channels to be most effective. 'It's a mixed media world, so we really need to

find out how to use a combination of different tactics that are to our clients' advantage', said one. In addition, it is important for nonprofits to consider their mission objectives and audience before deciding which communication channels to use.

Among the limitations of relying on social media channels as a standalone strategy is their inability to reach all audiences. As one participant said:

'What we're trying to do with social [media] is show [our chapters] how they can target different segments of people online through social [media], and that goes alongside people who watch television, [people] who go through their e-mails but never go to Facebook, [and people] who read the newspaper'.

However, another participant suggested that social media alone might work for smaller organisations with limited marketing budgets and manpower. One prediction is that social media will cease to be seen as a discrete communication channel as they continue to evolve over the next few years. In the words of one respondent, 'People are over-hyping social right now, but in reality, it's going to become a standard way we do business'.

### **MEASURING IS MANDATORY**

If nonprofits take the time to develop their strategy and decide their business objectives, measuring the success and effectiveness of a social media campaign should be easy. However, study participants reported concern and anxiety when it came to measuring the effectiveness of social media. Some participants said it was important to think carefully about the data being measured. In the words of one participant:

'They're looking at it almost in a sense of instant gratification, because it makes you

feel good when you suddenly see an increase of fans, but how are these followers and fans going to help us? Are they actually going to help us achieve our objectives?’

Participants also reported that measurement was difficult because its actual effect on an organisation’s overall mission was hard to define. One such comment was, ‘It’s really easy to get a “like” [on Facebook], but what does that really mean to me?’ Participants agreed that it is important that nonprofits think carefully about what they measure: ‘Make sure that you don’t just track data because it’s readily available, but that you’re tracking the data to help you measure your impact; [that] you’re really counting the numbers toward your mission’. Larger organisations can utilise paid tools, such as Radian6, to measure and aggregate social media mentions from blogs, forums, and other social media channels automatically. Smaller organisations, however, often do not have the budget to pay for such expensive tools and must rely on the free analytics services offered by Facebook and other social media networks. Despite their limitations, these free tools provide smaller organisations with a clearer picture of their audience engagement.

## Discussion

In an increasingly challenging economic environment, nonprofits are exploring methods through which they can maximise their resources to engage stakeholders and achieve measurable increases in financial donations and volunteerism. Compared with more traditional methods of communication and advertising, such as direct mail or paid advertising, social media can be a cost-effective communication channel for nonprofits.

This study sought to discover the best social media strategies and tactics for effectively identifying and engaging

existing donors, volunteers, and stakeholders, according to social media nonprofit professionals. Through interviews with social media professionals, several best practices were identified to help nonprofits effectively utilise social media.

Chu and Kim<sup>5</sup> showed that establishing trust was a key factor influencing the spread of positive eWOM by for-profit organisations, and the same could be said for nonprofit organisations. Stressing the dialogic nature of social media engagement, one key finding was that nonprofits need to build trusting relationships with their audiences before making any hard marketing calls to action or fundraising asks. To build trusted relationships, key tactics include asking questions, recognising audience members for their contributions, and developing and cultivating ‘champions’ to spread the organisation’s message. This is especially important in light of Edelman’s most recent ‘Trust Barometer’ findings, which indicate a shift of influence from traditional authority figures toward employees, peers, and ‘people with credentials’.<sup>13</sup> The report suggests that in the current era of scepticism, the traditional pyramid of top-down communication by authority figures is now joined by an inverted pyramid of community, consisting of employees, action consumers and social activists.

A key finding related to building trust is the concept of organisations letting supporters raise money on their behalf, rather than relying on direct asks from the organisation. Additionally, supporters do not necessarily need to be raising money on an organisation’s behalf to be influential. By simply sharing a message, they are putting their support behind an organisation’s cause, which increases awareness and builds trust with both current and potential members of an online community. Chu and Kim<sup>5</sup> have

shown the use of champions and social influencers to be effective for for-profit organisations as audience members serve multiple functions in virtual networks, such as taking on the roles of opinion provider, opinion seeker and opinion transmitter. Because nonprofits must build trust to engage their audiences, the use of social champions and influencers can encourage opinion seekers and transmitters to spread their positive eWOM messages about nonprofit organisations.

The findings of this study also revealed the importance of providing content that is relevant, valuable and actionable to key audiences, so that they are likely to share it with their own social networks.

Nonprofits must understand that social media champions and influencers have a role in helping organisations transmit their messages through blogs and tweet-a-thons, for example. Studies have revealed that eWOM transmitters often alter marketing messages to make them more palatable and a better fit to the narratives of an audience community.<sup>14</sup> Just as Briones *et al.*<sup>8</sup> explored audience engagement in their study on the American Red Cross, the findings of this study confirm the importance of knowing and engaging with an audience appropriately.

Previous research<sup>6,7</sup> has found nonprofits failing to use social media effectively, and audience members wanting to receive information from nonprofits that they consider useful and actionable; such findings are consistent with the results of the present study. This study also confirmed that social media was most effective when used as a complement to more traditional methods of communication. The experts agreed that social media should not be a nonprofit's sole form of engagement with its audiences, with the possible exception of smaller businesses that may not have the budgets to sustain large media buys.

Social media measurement continues to be problematic for nonprofits with limited budgets. The experts discussed paid and free measurement tools that can provide information on audience demographics, mentions of an organisation across multiple channels, and numbers of active users. Participants expressed concern about the accuracy and usefulness of measuring hard returns on investment. Because of this, they stressed the importance of defining success measures before implementation of a social media strategy. The findings of this study indicated that nonprofits needed to commit the appropriate amount of staff time to a social media campaign for it to be successful. Unfortunately, adding more staff to a social media campaign is often cost-prohibitive in the nonprofit world. One tactic nonprofits might implement is to involve potential donors and other stakeholders on their behalf, as suggested by Bernoff and Li.<sup>4</sup> When tapping into the groundswell, nonprofits could identify lead ambassadors not only to carry the conversation but also energise and motivate new donors. This form of eWOM<sup>5</sup> might help to implement the nonprofit's clearly articulated and measurable strategic business goals.

Many of the present study's findings reflect the principles of dialogic public relations theory.<sup>11</sup> The theory outlines ethical public relations practices that form around dialogue between organisations and individuals. Through dialogue, relationships can be built on trust and empathy while exhibiting a collaborative spirit between organisations and their publics. While other studies have emphasised the need to close the dialogic loop by allowing stakeholders to query organisations and the organisations responding to queries, this study showed that establishing ongoing relationships with audience members *before* asking for donations was extremely important. In

fact, this study found that fundraising requests and other calls to action are likely to be viewed negatively if the nonprofit has failed to previously establish trust and rapport with its audience members. The findings suggest that nonprofits should continuously participate in and close the dialogic loop with potential stakeholders before asking for donations of time and money.

While most organisations house their social media duties in the marketing or communication departments, the participants of this study suggested nonprofit organisations hire a professional fundraiser or development officer to build and maintain those relationships as well as research prospects outside the typical pools from which organisations tend to draw.

## LIMITATIONS

A key strength of this study was the nonprofit experience of the authors, which is a desired characteristic in qualitative research.<sup>9</sup> The researchers had experience working as professional nonprofit communicators, and thus had personal experience with the challenges of developing and implementing successful social media strategies for nonprofits. This experience also assisted researchers in selecting interviewees that had wide-ranging experiences with social media and nonprofits, which helped provide nuanced, well-rounded results. One limitation of this study was the small number of participants. However, purposeful sampling was used to extract best practices for social media strategy in the nonprofit sector from the perspective of social media experts who have worked successfully in the nonprofit social media space. As with all qualitative studies, the results of this research cannot be generalised due to the non-random sample and overall purpose of the approach.<sup>9</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATORS

This study provided several best practices that nonprofit communicators can use when developing and implementing a social media strategy. By taking the time to set a social media strategy that complements existing traditional marketing strategies, and dedicating resources such as staff time, to that strategy, nonprofits can make the most of their limited human and monetary resources. Although this study did not discuss at length the processes needed to measure social media success, it did establish the importance of building a strategy that defines success measures at the very beginning and using free or paid tools to monitor these measures. Finally, the results underscored the importance of building trust and rapport with audiences before making a fundraising ask or a call for volunteers. The findings of this study align with the recommendations of Edelman's 'Trust Barometer',<sup>13</sup> suggesting that nonprofits that successfully engage their audiences through social media can build an inverted pyramid of community and convert these digital relationships to 'real-life' donors and volunteers based on trust.

## References

1. Smith, A. (2011) 'Why Americans use social media', Pew Internet & American Life Project, available at: <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Why-Americans-Use-Social-Media.aspx> (accessed 1st July, 2012).
2. Blackburn, Common Knowledge, Nonprofit Technology Network (2011) 'Nonprofit social network benchmark report', available at: <http://www.nten.org/blog/2011/03/18/new-report-2011-nonprofit-social-network-benchmark-report> (accessed 1st July, 2012).
3. Li, C. and Bernoff, J. (2011) 'Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies', Harvard Business Review Press, Cambridge, MA.
4. Bernoff, J. and Li, C. (2008) 'Harnessing the power of the oh-so-social web', *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Vol. 49, No. 3, pp. 36–42.
5. Chu, S. and Kim, Y. (2011) 'Determinants of consumer engagement in electronic

- word-of-mouth (eWOM) in social networking sites', *International Journal of Advertising*, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 47–75.
6. Miller, D. (2010) 'Nonprofit organizations and the emerging potential of social media and internet resources', *SPNHA Review*, Vol. 6, No.1, pp. 34–51.
  7. Waters, R. D., Burnett, E., Lamm, A. and Lucas, J. (2009) 'Engaging stakeholders through social networking: how nonprofit organizations are using Facebook', *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 102–106.
  8. Briones, R. L., Kuch, B., Liu, B. F. and Jin, Y. (2011) 'Keeping up with the digital age: How the American Red Cross uses social media to build relationships', *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 37, No. 1, pp. 37–43.
  9. Creswell, J.W. (1997) 'Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions', Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.
  10. Jugenheimer, D.W., Bradley, S. D., Kelley, L. D. and Hudson, J. C. (2010) 'Advertising and Public Relations Research', M. E. Sharpe, New York.
  11. Kent, M. L. and Taylor, M. (2001) 'Toward a dialogic theory of public relations', *Public Relations Review*, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp. 21–37.
  12. Rabiee, F. (2004) 'Focus group interview and data analysis', *Proceedings of the Nutrition Society*, Vol. 63, No. 4, pp. 655–660.
  13. Edelman, R. (2013) '2013 Edelman trust barometer executive summary', available at: <http://www.edelman.com/trust-downloads/executive-summary/> (accessed 27th November, 2013).
  14. Kozinets, R. V., de Valck, K., Wojnicki, A. C. and Wilner, S. J. S. (2010) 'Networked narratives: understanding word-of-mouth marketing in online communities', *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 74, No. 2, pp. 71–89.