

[Why every nonprofit needs a social media strategy](#)

Jan 15th, 2009 by [Amy Southerland](#) – SPURspectives.com

A few high-performing nonprofits across the nation are embracing social media and tapping into its power to further their missions. They are using social media tools to connect with the communities they serve. They are attracting donations, volunteers, media coverage, and employees.

However, the majority of nonprofits seem to be taking a “wait and see” attitude about social media. For every nonprofit that has a staff member assigned to oversee social media efforts, there are hundreds (maybe thousands) that are simply missing out on everything social media could do for their organization.

Several others are dabbling in social media – often because a younger staff member “gets it” and takes the initiative to start a blog or set up a Facebook page – but don’t have a plan for coordinating or integrating their efforts. This is almost as bad as not using social media at all, because it means they are missing out on the powerful cross-pollination that occurs when you employ a strategic suite of social media tools.

The handful of nonprofits that are fully embracing social media have the right idea. There’s real value to be reaped from this emerging channel, and early adopters are showing that it’s worth the investment to establish a strong social media presence.

If you lead a nonprofit and don’t already have a social media game plan, it’s time to make social media a priority.

Social media is here to stay

Social media is not a trend. It’s an established and evolving channel that needs to be part of your overall communications and capacity-building strategies. You only have to consider the central role that social media played in electing our incoming President (and his reluctance to give up his Blackberry!) to realize that social media isn’t a passing fad.

Facebook, which was launched in 2004, is now the largest and fastest-growing social-networking site. It recently surpassed 150 million users, 70 percent of which joined in 2008, and half of which use Facebook *every day*. As of December, the social-messaging platform Twitter (which is less than 2 years old) had between 4 and 5 million users, representing 600% growth in 2008. An estimated 5-10 thousand new Twitter accounts are opened every day.

Social media is now a routine part of how many people connect with each other and the world. Rest assured, social media isn’t just for college kids or geeks. People of all ages, from all walks of life, are engaged in social media, and the numbers are only going to grow.

This is good news for nonprofits because the ethos and etiquette of the social media sphere is a perfect fit for nonprofits. But you have to be in the sphere to reap the benefits!

Two models worth watching

If you're having trouble envisioning how social media could work for your organization, try connecting with a few nonprofits that are using social media to get a feel for what others are doing and how the tools are being used.

One good model to look at is the American Red Cross, which is dedicating staff and resources to implement a broad social media strategy. Social media has huge potential for organizations that deal with emergency management and response, so it makes perfect sense that the Red Cross is leading the way on incorporating social media into their communications strategy. The Red Cross has a [blog](#) and participates in multiple social-networking sites, including Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Twitter, Ammodo, SocialVibe, and LinkedIn. The [Red Cross channel on YouTube](#) features more than 90 videos. You can follow Claire Sale, Red Cross social media guru, on Twitter [@clairesale](#).

Another national nonprofit with a growing, multi-pronged social media presence is the National Wildlife Federation. The NWF website features [four blogs](#). The [NWF channel on YouTube](#) currently features 77 videos. Supporters can follow [@NWF](#) on Twitter, as well as Danielle Brigida, NWF's social media expert, who tweets under the user name [@starfocus](#). In addition, NWF has 9 more staff members who recently started tweeting to give people a "behind the scenes" perspective on different NWF programs and initiatives. [Here's a list of NWF tweeters](#).

These two nonprofits are definitely worth watching, and there are many more that are increasingly active in the social media sphere. To find more examples, try searching for nonprofits in your region or your issue area on Facebook and YouTube. See if you can also follow the organization or specific staff members on Twitter. Check if the organization's website includes a blog or links to social networking sites.

When you see the creative, innovative ways others are implementing and integrating social media tools – and how those efforts are mission-driven and support a larger communications strategy – it may open your eyes to how social media can work for you.

Getting started: social media basics

The exact way you employ social media tools will depend on your mission, your goals, and your target audiences.

But it's safe to say that every nonprofit organization needs to take a serious look at five standard components of any social media plan:

- Adding a blog (or blogs) to your website
- Setting up a nonprofit page on Facebook
- Video-sharing (such as YouTube's Nonprofit Program)
- Having one or more staff microblogging on Twitter
- Connecting with colleagues and community leaders through LinkedIn

If you aren't familiar with all of these tools and how they work, don't be daunted. They are user-friendly by design. Your staff (or volunteers) can learn to use any of these services quickly and easily – and there are plenty of online guides and social media experts (like the team at Spur) who can help you get started.

What are you waiting for?

Social media opens up new ways to connect with the communities you serve and the communities you belong to (real and virtual). It's a low-cost, low-risk way to try new things and learn what works. It's remarkably flexible and offers exciting potential for raising awareness and raising money.

Most importantly, social media can further your mission by allowing more people to understand, value, and support what you do.

Amy Southerland is a freelance writer and communications consultant who specializes in nonprofits and philanthropy. She works with Spur Communications on a wide range of projects. Follow her on twitter [@wordjockey](#).

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22 Responses to “Why every nonprofit needs a social media strategy”

1. on 15 Jan 2009 at 1:21 pm [1Whitney](#)



Non-profits need not look further than Forrester's 2008 online activity statistics. 75 percent of online adults participate in social technology Web sites.

<http://tinyurl.com/5u4xom>

In my experience with non-profit event planning, social media was the best method for communicating our cause! We reached a ton of people for practically zero cost.

2. on 15 Jan 2009 at 3:08 pm [2Beth Kanter](#)



The Red Cross did an extraordinary job at listening prior to launching and still continues to do so. Wendy Harman, their staff person responsible for social media, is a rockstar.

3. *on 15 Jan 2009 at 4:02 pm*[3mebuell](#)



I'm the Director of Communications of a non-profit policy research organization for Indigenous Peoples in Canada (www.naho.ca). We've been dabbling with social media fro more than a year - four or five employee blogs, twitter, a few facebook groups. Our challenge has been getting our audiences using social media. With the exception of facebook, few of out stakeholders have embraced social media.

4. *on 15 Jan 2009 at 6:15 pm*[4Laura Howe](#)



Thanks for the shout out to the Red Cross. Embracing social media has opened up a whole new world to us of listening to the public, engaging supporters and helping people understand our services. There's no longer mainstream media strategy and social media strategy anymore. It's all mainstream and they all work together to get our message out! (And by the way, Beth Kanter is right-Wendy Harman is a rockstar!)

5. *on 15 Jan 2009 at 9:15 pm*[5CouchSurfingOri](#)



Don't forget that despite HAVING to have a social media presence- (which is absolutely true!) they need to also watch what they say!

<http://shankman.com/be-careful-what-you-post/>

6. *on 15 Jan 2009 at 10:59 pm*[6Marco Ramirez](#)



Your post is so timely. I just finished reviewing a 5-year plan for a nonprofit (I'm a new board member). I scanned the document looking for the section on technology; there was no mention of increasing their online presence. They already have a Facebook page and produce a regular podcast on affordable housing - a good foundation for them to expand upon.

Rest assured that I will use this post to help convince the board and leadership team of the benefits (ROI) of leveraging social media in this economy. Thank you very much!

7. on 16 Jan 2009 at 12:13 am [7Dave Chase](#)



Great article! I am a college student who worked for a nonprofit for a year in between high school and college and I was that 'younger staff member.' I believe the last day I work there was the last time any of the organizations social networking pages were checked. I sort of figured that if I did all of the ground work and left a written strategic plan then the organization would continue with social media. Turns out I was wrong. My advice to non profits is they either need to hire someone who fully understands social media and web 2.0 or they need to stay away from it.

8. on 16 Jan 2009 at 8:04 am [8Social Media for Nonprofits: How and Why / Social Velocity](#)



[...] social media (what it is, how to use it, whether its a good idea for your organization or not) read this great post by Amy Southerland, a communications consultant for nonprofits. Social media is Internet and mobile [...]

9. on 16 Jan 2009 at 8:56 am [9Stephanie Pendrys](#)



Great article! I'm working for a non-profit in AZ and it's been a challenge to get the executive staff on board with social media. Most of them are still convinced that Facebook is just a way for college kids to post their frat party pics online or that social media is just another fad. We did get our FB page up and running last week and we are planning to launch our podcast in February. My biggest challenges have been finding the right blend of social media and traditional MKTG tactics (pitching to journalists, personal selling advertising) and time management. As I'm sure all of you have noticed, it takes hours each day to update FB, Twitter, etc.

10. on 16 Jan 2009 at 9:24 am [10Beth Kanter](#)



Hi ya, I also meant to say how much I appreciate the trailblazing work Danielle Brigida, NWF's social media expert, who tweets under the user name @starfocus has done. She is not only a rock star, but a genius!

11. on 16 Jan 2009 at 10:12 am [11Paul Miser](#)



@Whitney: Thanks for your great insight. It is amazing to see the power of Social Media when people band together. Great Post by the way on your blog.

@Beth: Thank you so much for your post. It is an honor to have you visit our site and participate in the conversation. You are doing amazing things in this arena.

@mebuell: Your comment is much appreciated. Finding the right mix of social media tools and getting your constituency to adopt these tools can be a struggle. Keep at it and I'm sure you will find a great mix.

@Laura: Keep up the great work. It is amazing to see such great results through open two way conversations through social media. Thank you so much for your insight and post!

@CouchSurfingOri: Great input. It is amazing how we sometimes forget that anyone can see what we say on the Internet space. Thanks for stopping by.

@Marco: Thanks for the comment. I wish you the best of luck with convincing. Please feel free to contact us with any more information you may need. We can help you build your arsenal of facts and figures.

@Dave: Keep up the good work Dave. Keep your mind open to innovation and good luck in college. You have a bright future in front of you!

@Stephanie: Thank you so much for your feedback. As Laura points out in her comment, social media is mainstream now. Finding that perfect mix of traditional and social strategies will be a forever changing dilemma. I wish you the best of luck. Let me know if you have any questions.

12. on 18 Jan 2009 at 5:09 pm [12Susan/Together We Flourish](#)



Thank you so much for pointing out the benefits of social media for the nonprofits. I am working to help the small and mid size nonprofits gain a voice in my area. I will be sharing your post with them.

13. on 19 Jan 2009 at 8:01 am [13Tom B - Online Registration & Member Management](#)



Great article. I agree social media is a key ingredient for success. Through simple social applications like Facebook causes, great things can happen most of which are viral in nature and essentially manage themselves after you get them going. One thing to keep in mind is that social media is just one ingredient of an overall web strategy. So much emphasis is place on social media these days that sometimes the fundamentals are overlooked. Non-profit needs to have a strong foundation in place with a website, online donations, volunteer management, event registration etc. and use social media for marketing and branding support, viral interaction and awareness.

14. on 20 Jan 2009 at 2:43 pm [14Paul Miser](#)



@Susan: Thank you for your comment. I hope this post helps you with your discussions.

@Tom B: Getting people to stand up and communicate your cause is a great feeling. This is a great use for social media. You are correct about social media just being an ingredient. There needs to be a solid communication foundation before embarking in anything social media. Thanks Tom.

15. on 22 Jan 2009 at 9:47 pm [15Mike Gifford](#)



Ok, you've made a good case for why big NGOs should have a social media strategy, but must NGOs are much smaller than the Red Cross or NWF. Facebook, LinkedIn, Delicious & Flickr are easy for everyone with time to join in with, even if you don't have a budget. However, not sure how many smaller NGOs are going to have time to create a social media strategy any more sophisticated than that.

We've got some posts on this which may be relevant for NGOs:
<http://openconcept.ca/topic/flickr>

16. on 30 Jan 2009 at 9:07 am [16Alex](#)



Thank you for flagging the importance of this! I'm very lucky in that Dogs Trust took social media seriously enough to hire me to do it full time, but many charities have so many volunteers who are itching to help them online. It only takes a few days and a bit of searching on Twitter to find a lot of them. Great post.

17. on 03 Feb 2009 at 3:09 pm [17The Fundraising Payback of Social Media / Social Velocity](#)



[...] articles about how to dip your nonprofit foot into the social media space. And there are some good tips. But the bottom line of all of them is just to try something, jump on Twitter, set up a Facebook [...]

18. on 16 Mar 2009 at 6:46 pm [18Mickey](#)



Great post! I'm with a small nonprofit that has been struggling to incorporate social media into our mission. We're trying to get our nonprofit partners to engage in social media, as well. I plan to share this write-up with them.

I echo Mike's comments, above (15) - most of what I'm hearing about nonprofits participating in social media spotlights the efforts of large nonprofits. Please understand, I'm learning a lot from them and really respect their creativity and achievements, but if you are a tiny nonprofit with a total staff of two, it can be challenging to address day-to-day mission-based issues and roles in addition to managing social media profiles effectively.

I would love to learn about some smaller nonprofits that are successfully incorporating aspects of social media into their mission, too - in fact, spotlighting their efforts might help to inspire some other small nonprofits to give it a try. Thanks again!

19. on 17 Mar 2009 at 9:04 am [19David Svet](#)



Thanks for your input! I agree, it can be all consuming to try to manage a social media presence and your real job at the same time. It's important to get the management team on board with the concept that this is how people communicate now. It IS part of everyone's job and you need time to do it well.

20. on 25 Apr 2009 at 4:19 pm [20Judy Vorfeld](#)



Terrific article. I'm on the board of the dynamic Arizona Center for Disability Law (a 501c3), and after much research, felt that Ning.com was the way for us to get out our information and begin to bring board, staff, and other interested parties together.

The center has a website, and another site to dispense information, but this new effort is paying off because it is so multifaceted. Ning has exceptional features with many ways to control things.

I'm also volunteer webmaster for 4 Paws for Ability (a 501c3), and felt Ning was ideal to bring together the many groups of people who have (or soon will have) service dogs. Plus it's a powerful informational and support site: <http://4pawdogs.ning.com/>.

I launched the site less than two weeks ago, and already there are 69 members (each must be approved) and a wealth of information and support. These parents of children with disabilities are thriving on this type of contact, where they can post pictures, videos, blogs, and where they can ask questions and help others.

Sometime you might want to review Ning. I first learned of it last August, and it's growing on me.

21. on 26 Apr 2009 at 12:32 pm [21David Svet](#)



Judy,

Thank you so much for your kind words and comments. It sounds like you've done a great job of connecting your community together. I agree, Ning is a great way to create a place for communities to gather and share. 69 new members in less than two weeks is awesome! Way to go!

David

22. on 28 Apr 2009 at 8:02 pm [22frank](#)



I love the fact that you pointed nonprofits to other nonprofits. There are a lot of them out there. LAF, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Life Rolls On, PBS and many more. It's exciting to see the NPO industry take hold of new media.

<http://twitter.com/franswaa>