Snapchat and Pinterest and Vine, Oh My! Leveraging Social Media to Meet Organizational Goals

Tracking social media networks and trends can be time consuming even for experienced users, and likely more so for nonprofit organizations combatting resource constraints and prioritization challenges. Yet leveraging the right social media platforms in the right ways can lead to unprecedented levels of success. Initiatives by organizations such as the ALS Association, the Human Rights Campaign and the Movember Foundation—each nimble enough to capitalize on expected and unexpected opportunities—have shown the degree to which social media campaigns can be powerful.

Begin with the End: Determine Goals for Social Media

A social media strategy should be a component of the overall marketing strategy, aligning an organization’s goals with targeted social media campaigns and frequent interactions. Common objectives include fundraising, advocacy and volunteer recruitment, as well as recognizing donors and milestone events. Different platforms bring distinct advantages based on particular goals. While Twitter and Facebook are often used to raise funds and promote activism, YouTube and Vine tend to be effective outlets for sharing success and impact stories.

An example of effective social media advocacy is the March 2013 Human Rights Campaign program that led up to the Supreme Court’s consideration of two landmark marriage cases. In addition to elevating the national conversation through partnerships with like-minded organizations, HRC posted a red-tinted version of its logo on Facebook. Supporters were urged to change their profile picture to the modified logo. The initiative went viral, with over 18 million posts of HRC’s logo and messaging appearing on individual user newsfeeds. The campaign crossed over to Twitter and Instagram, garnering support from celebrities, politicians and corporate organizations. This resulted in the HRC position receiving news coverage from major networks and publications.

The “In-Crowd:” Define Your Audience

“If you build it, they will come” may have worked in the movie *Field of Dreams*, but it does not lay the groundwork for a sound social media marketing campaign. A proven best practice is to first determine the target audience in order to identify the best social media platform to further the organization’s cause. There are countless ways to segment audiences by age, generation, gender or specialized groupings such as college students, alumni or animal lovers. For example, if an organization’s primary audience is women, Pinterest might be a good choice, since the overwhelming majority of Pinterest users are female.

If young adults are the focus, private platforms like Snapchat might be a strategic alternative to Facebook, which appeals more to the over-30 crowd.

The Movember Foundation, for example, is a social media movement that promotes men’s health issues. The campaign encourages followers to grow a mustache each November in an effort to raise awareness of issues like prostate cancer. As a result, ‘stache photos flood Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, with followers,
known as “Mo Bros,” becoming free human billboards for the campaign. To date, participants have raised over $550 million and funded more than 800 programs in 21 countries due to the foundation’s savvy use of social media.

Social networks are a distribution channel to deliver targeted content to the right people, at the right time. A strong social media campaign strikes a balance between “good content” and “good medium.” However, there must be a compelling theme, idea or initiative that engages the audience. While it is important to establish goals and identify a target audience in advance, the absence of captivating, relevant material will cause any campaign to fall flat, regardless of the platform.

An example of a great match of content and medium is found in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s use of the mobile application Snapchat. The western United States’ largest art museum, LACMA employed the visual nature of Snapchat as a backdrop to showcase its artwork. Pop culture references are paired with photos of the museum’s art and sculptures to create “snaps” from the museum’s corporate account. The application also creates an interactive experience for users, encouraging visitors to the museum to “tag” LACMA through Snapchat’s Geofilter feature. This not only advertises the individual’s patronage of the museum, but exponentially multiplies mention of the museum through personal user accounts.

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To Infinity and Beyond

Social media can also be used to realize larger organizational goals, such as collecting donor or volunteer contact and demographic information. It opens up whole new ways to engage with supporters through informal interactions or by gathering real-time event and campaign feedback. The possibilities seem endless, as does the stream of new social media platforms and applications emerging daily.

In today’s changing philanthropic landscape, social media’s role will only expand, redefining how charitable organizations do business and opening new markets for fundraising and brand awareness. It will challenge staff and board members alike to embrace new skills, create new marketing strategies and develop appropriate oversight and governance protocols. Strategic and tactical use of social media presents countless opportunities for nonprofit organizations to engage new audiences in dynamic and thoughtful ways.

ALS Ice Bucket Challenge by the Numbers

Who: ALS Association
Website: www.alsa.org
What: The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge—individuals are challenged to film themselves dumping a bucket of ice water over their heads, in turn challenging others to do the same. Individuals have 24 hours to accept the challenge or, instead, make a charitable donation to the ALS Association. Many participants choose both options.

Funds Raised: $106 million (as of September 2, 2014)¹
Donors: 3 million¹
Social Networks Used: Facebook (primary); YouTube, Instagram, Twitter (secondary)
Countries: U.S., Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Germany, Philippines, Puerto Rico, India ²

Number of Facebook Posts, Likes, and Shares: 28+ million (as of August 17, 2014) ²,³
Why It Worked: “The Ice Bucket Challenge was successful because it took a simple formula for viral content creation, and added the charitable request as part of its easily reproducible format.”⁴

¹ www.alsa.org
² http://techcrunch.com/2014/09/03/the-ice-bucket-challenge-by-the-numbers/?ncid=pushup
³ Facebook
⁴ Sarah Perez, techcrunch.com