An Analysis of How the American Cancer Society Uses Social Media

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#### Abstract

The development of social media has created an online environment conducive to creating connections and fostering relationships. As new social media sites are being introduced, researchers in every field of study are attempting to determine the most effective ways for organizations to use them. By using these findings and implementing social media campaigns into their communication strategies, non-profit organizations now have the ability to inform their respective publics about upcoming events, increase donation requests and create a community around their designated cause. A content analysis was conducted to examine how the American Cancer Society has implemented the use of social media sites into their marketing and public relations strategies. This study examines the Society's use of blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, MySpace, Linked In, the Cancer Action Network, the Cancer Survivors Network and internal social networking sites. The results indicate that the American Cancer Society has established a strong online presence by taking advantage individual social networking sites' distinct features. As a result, the organization has brought additional attention to their cause, created a stronger network of supporters and increased donations.

## Introduction

Over the past several years, there has been a drastic change in the way our society receives and perceives information. What was once a commodity has now become a necessity. The Internet has opened doors for a whole new realm of information gathering and sharing and has become one of the most prominent ways of not only obtaining information but also as a means of social communication. As new technologies are being developed and introduced, we are forced to familiarize ourselves with and take advantage of the new capabilities that were not available before. However, these changes to the way we obtain information are causing both individuals and organizations to adjust their ways of communicating.

New opportunities for communications campaigns and advertising have been established through the development of the Internet. Traditional advertising strategies may not be the most effective, and the way people receive and react to information may also be different based on the media through which it is received. Furthermore, advertising has begun to shift from one-way communication from an organization to its intended public to two-way communication that is interactive, with the introduction of Web 2.0. Research has found that one of the most prevalent and effective ways of this new strategy for reaching a public through the Internet is through social media sites.

Social media sites provide a place for individuals and organizations to directly communicate with each other and foster relationships. Organizations are able to use social media sites in a plethora of ways to reach their targeted demographic. As new social media sites are being introduced, researchers in every field of study are attempting to determine the most effective ways for organizations to use them.

One of the primary goals of non-profit organizations is to gain the support of targeted audiences. They attempt to accomplish this by developing messages regarding their cause and distributing such messages to a wide demographic. The development of the Internet has enabled many non-profit organizations to inform these audiences of their cause for nominal costs, which was not an option prior to the Internet. They are now able to effectively reach specific audiences by channeling different messages through various social media sites, such as Facebook, Myspace, YouTube, LinkedIn and Twitter. By implementing social media campaigns into their communication strategies, non-profit organizations now have the ability to inform their respective publics about upcoming events, increase donation requests and create a community around their designated cause. On the other hand, social media sites can have negative affect on the perception of the organization if the message is not timely or focused.

This research paper will seek to discover the influence of social media on nonprofit organizations with its primary analysis on the American Cancer Society. It will provide a detailed analysis of the organization's current campaigns using social media along with suggestions to improve upon current campaigns and increase the organization's success and public perception through the use of these social media sites.

#### **Literature Review**

Social Media

In order to understand social media, we must first establish a comprehensive definition as it relates to the American Cancer Society and its targeted audience. Although the term social media has not been a part of mainstream culture until recent, it has been around for several decades. Using digital media to network, socialize and gather information began in the 1950's with phone phreaking, in which individuals generated tones that could get access into the back end of telephone systems. Social media was then introduced to the Internet through programs like Prodigy and Compuserve, which brought social online experience to the masses. Today, social media has grown exponentially and has become a new method for communicating. Social media has become so popular that individuals have altered their routines in order to incorporate it into their daily lives. As a result of its increasing popularity, there has been a wealth of new ideas and products that promote and assist in the development and use of social media.

Social media can be defined as web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public image or semi-public profile within a bounded system. It also allows individuals and organizations to articulate a list of other users with whom they may share a connection and view and traverse their list of connections.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, social media develops communities that allow individuals and businesses alike to share experiences, gather information and develop relationships with like-minded people through the use of text, videos and files. Social media sites an individual or company's connections and networks, which enables viewers to browse others' connections. This significantly influences the impact and persuasiveness of social media.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Boyd, D. M. & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social Network Sites: Definition, History and Scholarship. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13(1), article 1. Print.

Two-way communication is becoming increasingly more popular among non-profit organizations. This type of communication uses various methods to negotiate with its publics and promote mutual understanding and respect between the organization and that public and is the backbone of social media. With this type of communication, organizations are forced to develop new ways of reaching their target audiences. Previous strategies used to meet an organization's publics may no longer be effective, and the importance of implementing social media campaigns is necessary if not critical. Many organizations are taking advantage of the benefits associated with social media. For example, they are now able to communicate directly with their audience rather than through an alternate media outlet. Furthermore, organizations can easily direct these specific messages to a target market for minimal costs.

In order to develop and distribute messages through social media sites, we must first understand the audience being addressed. Over the past few years, the public's use of social media sites has increased exponentially and has undeniably become a large part of the lives of many people. In fact, the use of social media sites as a way of obtaining information has become so popular that many are using it as an additional source of news.

According to the Consumer Internet Barometer, a quarterly survey of 10,000 heads of household on the trends in usage and attitudes regarding the Internet, 43 percent of the online community now uses social networking sites. This is up 27 percent from those who used them just one year ago. Additionally, more than half of social networkers log on to these sites at least once a day, and the majority of these groups log on several times a day. It is also important to note the amount of time spent on these sites. "According to a new report from The Nielsen Company, Americans spent 17% (5.6 hours/week) of all their Internet time (32.7 hours/week)

using social networking sites. This was nearly triple the time spent a year ago."<sup>2</sup> There are several reasons as to why individuals use social media. Some of these activities include posting messages and photos, downloading music and videos, updating personal websites or profiles and blogging.<sup>3</sup> The most common users of social media have traditionally been young adults. However, we are now seeing an influx of individuals of older generations join into the social media community. Nineteen percent of those age 55 and over now visit these sites, which is up from just 6 percent a year ago.<sup>4</sup>

When developing marketing and advertising campaigns involving social media, an organization must recognize the six demographics of social media users in order to effectively target specific audiences. These users are grouped into distinct categories based on the activities they pursue in social media.

- Category 1: Producers are those online consumers who create online content. This
  includes writing articles and blogs and podcasting on a regular basis. This group makes
  up approximately 18 percent of social media users.
- Category 2: Commentators react, comment and critique posted information and account for about 25 percent of social media users. They also post reviews and ratings on various social media sites.
- Category 3: Gatherers are the smallest group of social media users (12 percent). These users collect and organize content for others to search for on the Internet.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Warren, Christina. "Study: Time Spent on Social Networks Has Tripled." *Mashable*. 29 Sept. 2009. Web. 6 October 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> "Eight Reasons People Use Social Media." *Social Media.org.* 12 Jan. 2009. 8 October 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> "Social Media Explosion." Consumer Internet Barometer. 16 June 2009. Web. 2 October 2009.

- Category 4: Joiners are less involved than the previous three demographics but make up 25 percent of users. This group joins social media sites and maintains their personal pages but does not produce any content for others to consume.
- Category 5: Observers are the largest and most difficult group to monitor. Although they
  consume what the producers and commentators supply, they do not actively participate.

  In fact, some may not even be joiners. Their online presence often goes unfelt, but it is
  crucial to recognize them as an audience as they are still receiving and processing
  information available over the Internet.
- Category 6: Inactives, who do not create or consume any information on social media sites, are the final and least important group. By categorizing users of social media and understanding their purposes and trends, organizations are able to better craft their messages.

Two-way communication and social media also give these users a platform to discuss their positive and negative feelings toward an organization for others to see and be persuaded by. Therefore, it is important for organizations to be aware of what is being said in order to take advantage of positive feedback or to attempt to reverse or change the public's perception of negative feedback. In connection with the development of two-way communication, many organizations find themselves responding to their supporters' posts on these individual social media sites. Each social media site offers unique capabilities and features that allow organizations of any kind to create specific messages targeted to specific publics.

Blogs

Since they were introduced, web logs, more commonly known as blogs, have significantly impacted the way our society obtains information. Blogs have enabled millions of people and organizations to have a voice and, as a result, have changed the face of journalism. Editors and journalists previously served as the gatekeepers to the information that was released to the public. However, organizations no longer rely on these media gatekeepers to tell their story. In fact, a recent Columbia University study found that journalists were turning to blogs as their source of information. "The fact that the media are using blogs for reporting and research also demonstrates that blogs have an enormous potential to not only influence the general public, but to influence the influencers—journalists and the media—as well." Many organizations have taken advantage of this potential to gain attention and support by developing blogs to distribute information to a large audience.

In particular, non-profit organizations are developing blogs to communicate information about their cause to potential supporters and donors. Blogs have proven to be an effective tool for promoting an organization for various reasons. They allow non-profits organizations to frequently and inexpensively update supporters on events and campaign progress. They also include pictures and links to educate their readers. Blogs offer the ability to leave comments, which encourages dialogue and builds an online community. Often times the organization is also involved in the dialogue between its supporters. This on-going communication between the organization and its public enhances their likelihood to continue to favorably view the cause and its efforts.

### **Facebook**

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Fitzpatrick, Kathy, and Bronstein, Carolyn. *Ethics in public relations; responsible advocacy*. Sage Publications, 2006. Print.

With over 300 million users, Facebook has become one of the most widely used social networking sites. Registered users can keep up with friends, upload an unlimited number of photos, share links and videos and learn more about the people they meet. Real-time updates are posted on an individual's page as a way of maintaining relationships with others. Facebook has also seen a rapid increase in the amount of registered users over the age of 30. In fact, a study conducted on the growth of Facebook users between the ages of 35-54 found that the group grew at a rate of 276.4% over a six month time period. It is important for organizations to recognize these frequent changes in demographics as it will affect the way the campaigns they develop.

Non-profit organizations have been actively seeking effective ways to use Facebook's capabilities to foster connections with their supporters. A study analyzing the content of 275 non-profit organizations' Facebook profiles found that more than half of these organizations have not incorporated the vast majority of the applications available to them on Facebook. The study revealed that disclosure was the most commonly used strategy among the non-profit organizations. Additional research suggests that these organizations recognize the value of the Internet in helping to improve an organization's public image but do not take full advantage of all the opportunities provided to cultivate online relationships. The results of the study also indicated that these organizations rarely provided information other than external links to news stories, photographs and discussion board posts.

Facebook has developed several applications designed to help organizations raise money. The Facebook application Causes is the 18<sup>th</sup> most popular application and is considered the most effective for non-profit organizations. The application allows users to donate directly to an organization on the site and to recruit others to support the cause. Most organizations do not take

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Facebook. 4 Feb. 2004. Web. 16 October 2009

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Corbett, Peter. "2009 Facebook Demographics and Statistics Report: 276% Growth in 34-54 Year Old Users" 5 January 2009. Web. 4 October 2009.

advantage of this application and instead choose to create fan pages. Although these fan pages are useful in gaining supporters, the potential for attention and donation grown using Causes is far greater.

#### *YouTube*

YouTube has become the leader in online video and one of the primary destinations to watch and share videos. Non-profit organizations are taking advantage of the fact that videos are one of the most powerful mediums for communicating to a public as they can tell powerful and emotional stories that move supporters to take action. In fact, some of the most compelling videos are honest interviews with survivors or those affected by cancer rather than those that are created by world-class cinematographers. Non-profit organizations are using YouTube as a channel to spread information and calls to action over the Internet to their targeted publics. Campaign messages and advertisements are now broadcasted over YouTube and attempt to create awareness to an organization and its cause. These organizations are also able to collect donations from supporters directly from YouTube's website.

Another critical factor in gaining support and donations through the use of YouTube involves the responses from the audience. Once uploaded, users have the ability to post their responses and reactions to the videos. This feedback has a significant impact on the success of a campaign, as those who are in favor of the video are more likely to re-post it to their personal sites and blogs for others to view. In theory, this would create a ripple effect, which would result in additional attention and donations. Similar to other social media sites, non-profit organizations use YouTube as a way of encouraging their supporters to continue to spread their message to those in their networks.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Stiner, Aaron. *Nonprofit 2.0*. Arizona State University, 5 Nov. 2008. Print.

**Twitter** 

Twitter is one of the fastest growing social media sites to date. According to the Wall Street Journal, the site has attracted more than 32 million individuals, celebrities, businesses and non-profit organizations that post frequent updates or "tweets" of up to 140 characters. The popularity of this site is driven from its simple, user-friendly model of staying connected by developing and replying to short messages. Each user has the choice of who they would like to receive messages from and when, which makes it easy to step in and out of the flow of information. Users also have the ability to attach links to their posts for others to view additional information, photos or video. With its business plan in the works, Twitter faces similar challenges to non-profit organizations when it comes to creating revenue. However, Twitter's focus on developing a compelling and effective service for individuals and organizations makes it a beneficial social media site.

Twitter has become increasingly more popular among non-profit organizations, and now more than 10,000 organizations worldwide are reaching their target demographic through the use of the site. <sup>10</sup> Its simple nature makes the site easy for non-profit organizations to use and maintain. The public can constantly be aware as updates can be made in minutes and detailed knowledge of the site is not necessary. This proves to be beneficial to non-profit organizations who do not have the time or money available to hire a webmaster.

Non-profit organizations are receiving additional attention as a result of other Twitter users who are creating posts about their organization. In most cases, this has positive affects on the organization, because it spreads information about the cause to a community of users without

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Vascellaro, Jessica. "Twitter Trips on Its Rapid Growth." *Wall Street Journal*: 26 May 2009. Web. 8 Oct. 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Nonprofitorgs. "10,000 Nonprofits On Twitter." *Nonprofits Blog*. Web. 17 October 2009.

using its resources. This feature is especially effective as people are more compelled to donate to local organizations or to those they know who are involved. Although Twitter is a relatively new social media site, non-profit organizations have learned to effectively use it to update users and gain their support.

# Myspace

Since its launch in 2004, MySpace has acquired nearly 125 million active users around the world with over 66 million users in the United States. MySpace seeks to connect people through personal expression, content and culture. It has since expanded its services to include music, videos and applications. The primary demographic for MySpace users differs from the majority of social networking sites. Most registered users on MySpace are between the ages of 14 and 21, and there is a sharp downturn in the number of registered users over the age of 30. Despite recent news that questions the future success of the site, MySpace continues to attract users, and, therefore, non-profit organizations have begun to use MySpace as another channel to create online communities. MySpace has created a unique feature for non-profit organizations. The purpose of MySpace Causes is to gain support and attention from users by allowing them to support a specific cause. Once a user chooses to support the cause, a message is displayed on his/her personal profile for anyone to see. Other registered users are then exposed to these organizations and can learn more about the non-profit's cause. It is this viral spread of information through user connections that brings constant attention and support to an organization.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> "Myspace Fact Sheet." *Myspace.com.* MySpace, n.d. Web. 25 October 2009.

LinkedIn

With a network of over 48 million professionals in over 200 countries worldwide,

LinkedIn is rapidly becoming a powerful social media site. LinkedIn was founded in 2003 and
enables business professionals to develop contacts, grow businesses and promote opportunities.

Users have the ability to add blog content, slideshows, files and more to their personalized pages.

They are also able to join companies and groups as a way of forming online communities.

In 2007, LinkedIn launched "LinkedIn for Good," a philanthropic initiative for raising awareness and funds for non-profit organizations around the world. LinkedIn for Good involves the LinkedIn community and allows users to rally for their causes. New members are also allowed to join their teams. Although LinkedIn had created an initiative solely to enhance non-profit organizations' abilities to reach audiences and raise money, many are not taking advantage. Instead, non-profit organizations are encouraging their employees to create personal profiles as a sub-part of the larger company profile. They are also creating groups that provide a wide variety of information as well as links to other pages for the organization. Non-profit organizations have the potential to continue to create connections as LinkedIn continues to grow and people become familiar with its networking abilities.

American Cancer Society

The American Cancer Society is one of the nation's largest, most well known and well-respected non-profit organizations. Founded in 1913, the organization has dedicated itself to eliminating cancer as a main health problem by preventing cancer, saving lives and diminishing suffering through research, education, advocacy and service. <sup>12</sup> The American Cancer Society's research program aims to determine the causes of cancer as well as to support prevention and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Cancer.org. American Cancer Society. n.d. Web. 2 November 2009.

efforts to cure the disease. It has invested over \$3 billion in cancer research thus far. Educating the public about cancer risks, early detection methods and prevention is another main focus of the organization. Prevention programs have been designed to encourage adults and children to make healthy living choices and to schedule regular medical checkups as a way of early cancer detection. The American Cancer Society also serves as an advocate for the diagnosed as well as the friends and family to state legislatures, Congress and the White House. Efforts are constantly made to increase federal funding for research as well as to increase the quality of life for those suffering and their families. Lastly, the American Cancer Society offers a wide variety of patient support and service programs. The primary goal of these programs is to lessen the impact that cancer has on an individual by connecting them with others in their area who are suffering from similar diseases.

The American Cancer Society now has thirteen divisions, over 3,400 local offices and more than two million volunteers across the country. With over 55 million constituents, the organization caters to several different audiences and attempts to meet their needs by providing specific messages directed to their purpose for involvement in the society. Some of the target publics include patients, friends and family, survivors, caregivers, health care professionals and researchers, and donors and volunteers. Campaigns directed toward patients, friends and family include messages of medical information, hope and inspiration through other survivors' experiences and local community connections, while messages geared toward health care professionals and researchers include the latest figures and trends of cancer along with current findings in the field. Lastly, the American Cancer Society presents donors and volunteers with a multitude of ways to donate, participate, advocate and volunteer. All of these messages are presented to the public through various promotional and advertising campaigns.

The American Cancer Society has a long-standing history with communications and marketing campaigns. The organization has developed and implemented several communications campaigns throughout its history with its first campaign focusing on providing cancer education to the general public. Other early campaigns include the fights to stop smoking, prevent cervical and breast cancer and support health care reform. Later campaigns have focused on connecting individuals of all audiences with specific cancer related causes. Today, the American Cancer Society organizes several annual campaigns and fundraisers including the Relay for Life, DetermiNation, Making Strides against Breast Cancer, golf tournaments and other fundraising galas. This wide variety of campaigns is effective in reaching the organization's target audience and gaining support as it allows individuals to relate to a cause that has affected them or that they endorse.

Most non-profit organizations like the American Cancer Society rely heavily on external funding such as private donations, fundraising and grants to maintain their operations. Because of such a heavy reliability on these outside and sometimes insecure sources, the capabilities and stability of these organizations often fluctuates. Although the annual budget for the American Cancer Society in 2008 was over \$1 billion, local offices still saw the need to increase their funds. One way to do this is through the use of communications and advertising campaigns. In fact, the implementation of communications campaigns through the use of social media sites has proven to be a cost efficient and beneficial way for these non-profit organizations to reach a large audience.

# Methodology

A Look at How the American Cancer Society Uses Social Media

The American Cancer Society has implemented a wide variety of social media campaigns as a way of increasing its public perception and revenue. The primary campaigns have been developed for the purpose of connecting cancer victims, supporters and medical professionals and creating a community where they are able to interact over the Internet. The organization relies on these groups to provide information, make new connections and create discussion about the American Cancer Society and to accomplish its mission. The following analysis critically reviews how the American Cancer Society is using distinct social media channels to reach its public.

## Blogs

The American Cancer Society developed the Blog for Hope. In 2005, Yahoo! collaborated with the American Cancer Society to create a month-long blog with featured stories written by celebrities who had direct connections to cancer. The blog was promoted on all of Yahoo!'s networks and received a significant amount of attention from the general public. The organization currently hosts one official blog: Dr. Len's Cancer Blog. Created in September 2005, Dr. Len's Cancer Blog has served as a source of cancer information for patients, supporters and medical professionals. Dr. Leonard Lichtenfeld, Deputy Chief Medical Officer for the national office of the American Cancer Society and Director of the Society's Cancer Control Science Department, is the primary contributor to the blog. Posting relevant and timely content is essential to keeping supporters interested and traffic to the site high. Therefore, Dr. Len's posts discuss a variety of topics, ranging from coping strategies to health care reform. It is also important to frequently add new posts to the blog as a way to maintain supporters' attention.

The number of posts on Dr. Len's Blog varies from two to ten posts per month. The blog also provides a forum for the public to discuss the posted information. The number of comments per blog range from zero to ten. An analysis of the number of comments posted on each entry suggests that Dr. Len's Blog does not create discussion among readers. This further suggests that the organization should examine whether or not readers are interested in the information being provided. Lastly, links to additional cancer information are available on the blog for those readers who are interested. Additional blogs hosted by the organization include the Relay for Life blog and the Global Fight Against Cancer blog, which present specific event and donation information. Overall, the American Cancer Society uses blogs as a way to build credibility and gain public support on cancer-related issues.

#### Facebook

The American Cancer Society's official page follows the current trend of most non-profit organizations. This includes creating a fan page with a strong group of supporters and posting news, links and videos. The Society's Facebook page discloses a large amount of information and engages a significant number of its 165,000 supporters. The site provides links to nearly all associated websites, including the Gift Shop and Tender Loving Care catalog. The site also posts links to recent news and activities. This encourages supporters to become more involved in the cause by participating in events and online surveys associated with the American Cancer Society. Supporters frequently post comments about these links and engage in active discussion with other users. In addition, the page features over 25 online videos targeted at varying demographics. Although the organization does not take advantage of all the available applications, users are still actively engaged on the site and continue to frequently share their personal stories.

Aside from the general page created by the American Cancer Society, there are also many additional pages and groups developed by the organization's supporters to encourage others in their networks to support the cause. These pages often contain information about support groups and volunteer groups in a specific area. Other pages are created in remembrance of someone who lost their life to cancer. These highly specific and often very personal pages significantly help to generate interest in the organization and continue to promote their mission and goals.

The American Cancer Society has over 435 causes on Facebook. The Fight Cancer: Support the American Cancer Society cause has recruited over 237,000 members and has raised \$27,782 as of November 2009. New members constantly join the cause, and existing members frequently make donations. Although it has been difficult to assess the overall effectiveness of Facebook as a relationship-building tool, the steady increase of support and donations validates its importance for a non-profit organization.

## *YouTube*

The American Cancer Society uses YouTube for a variety of purposes. By creating a channel on the site, they have enabled users to watch posted videos and donate directly to their organization. This function aims to persuade supporters to donate immediately after they have viewed a compelling video clip related to the cause. The American Cancer Society channel on YouTube has over 550 subscribers and more than 75,000 channel views. The organization is also using YouTube to educate the public by posting public service announcements and campaign advertisements. These short videos are geared toward the spread of information among supporters and affiliates. The American Cancer Society also posts their videos to the majority of

their other sites. This increases the success of the campaigns as the rapid dispersion of the videos over the Internet gains the public's attention.

Developing a well-crafted message is essential to reaching a targeted audience. The American Cancer Society understands its importance, as each of the videos uploaded onto the organization's channel contains distinct messages that are targeted to different publics. They have developed unique messages that are geared towards members of varying demographics as a way to effectively reach the different audiences through online videos. These videos range from advertisements featuring survivor testimonials to music videos and news segments. This variety helps to reach the goal of marketing and communicating different messages to distinct demographic groups.

Research shows that if used properly, YouTube has the ability to increase both public perception and donations for a non-profit organization like the American Cancer Society.

## **Twitter**

The American Cancer Society has developed two Twitter accounts: a General Profile and one created specifically for the "More Birthdays" campaign. The two accounts have more than 14,500 and 2,000 followers, respectively, who have chosen to receive tweets. The organization also follows the updates of nearly 18,000 users. The general profile posts an array of information ranging from new findings in the field and events to more practical articles like giftwrapping ideas. The posts also encourage followers to participate in other activities such as the "Health is Wealth" video contest. The "More Birthdays" page is less informational and focuses on tweeting about individuals and companies who are celebrating their birthdays each day. By

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> American Cancer Society Twitter. Web. 24 October 2009.

posting about topics other than cancer, the organization can continue to foster attention from its audience in a variety of ways.

Analysis on different social media sites has found that user interaction is significant to an organization's online presence. The American Cancer Society receives a large amount of publicity through the postings of registered users. The majority of these posts include information about attending a local event or donating to a local chapter of the American Cancer Society. One final feature of Twitter includes the ability for users to choose one of five personalized American Cancer Society designs for their personal page. This serves as another way of receiving support and attention from a wide demographic. While many are still new to the concept of Twitter, non-profit organizations have seen an impact in the support and attention they are receiving from the public.

# MySpace

The American Cancer Society utilizes a wide variety of the features offered by MySpace. In fact, the organization has created several unique profiles to cater to the needs of varying audiences. Furthermore, independent individuals have also developed pages that support the organization's cause and attract additional attention. Although the organization does not have control of the content on these pages, they still prove to be an effective way to gain support. This analysis will focus on the organization's two main pages: the general page and the ACS CAN page. The general American Cancer Society MySpace page has more than 900 followers and provides a plethora of information including facts about its history, links to related sites and volunteer opportunities. MySpace incorporates other social media sites into its own, which has been fairly uncommon up to this point. For example, the general page features YouTube videos that include commercials and tips for healthier living.

The American Cancer Society's sister page on MySpace, ACS CAN, is targeted at those interested in the organization's efforts to eliminate cancer through voter education and issue campaigns. With over 800 supporters, this page is focused on developing connections to strengthen relationships rather than increasing revenue through donations. Supporters are able to post comments on the page as well as pictures from events hosted by the American Cancer Society. Similar to the organization's general page, the ACS CAN page also incorporates other social media sites to increase awareness. For example, direct Twitter posts are displayed as well as links the latest blog entries and YouTube videos. The page also displays cancer-related images hosted by Flickr, a popular images and video hosting website. Supporters can also submit their phone number on to the page to receive up-to-date mobile action alerts from the American Cancer Society. All of these features increase the interactivity of the site between the organization and its audience, which in turn increases awareness and support.

The organization has also created a cause on the MySpace. Users can donate directly to the American Cancer Society through this feature. The organization has nearly 2,000 supporters of their cause but has only raised \$105. This shows that although MySpace is effective for gaining support and spreading information, it is one of the least effective sites for raising money.

## LinkedIn

The American Cancer society has followed the same trend as the majority of non-profit organizations by creating a company profile and a group page. Their company profile page informs the public of all the key players in the organization along with company statistics including the average age, sex and education of its employees. This gives the public an understanding of who is behind the cause and also provides them with direct contact information, which can be beneficial as this direct contact is essential to maintaining supporter loyalty.

The American Cancer Society group on LinkedIn has over 2,500 supporters from all over the world who have joined to become a part of the organization's online community. The group's discussion board is open for all employees and supporters to post upcoming fundraisers and events and to share their stories. Media appearances are also listed as an effort to gain more attention for the organization. Additionally, American Cancer Society supporters and employees have posted recent news related to all aspects of cancer ranging from self-testing tips and new treatment to new findings on the causes of cancer. LinkedIn provides supporters of the American Cancer Society with a sense of community and encourages two-way communication, which fosters supporter-participation and increases the chance of further involvement and donations to the organization.

## American Cancer Society - Cancer Action Network

The American Cancer Society's Cancer Action Network is one of the organization's most interactive and comprehensive social networking sites. After surveying all of the organization's social media sites, the Cancer Action Network also appears to be the most current and user-friendly. By incorporating elements from all of the Society's existing sites, the Cancer Action Network creates an online environment that is conducive to attracting supporters, volunteers and donors. For example, direct links to the organization's Facebook, MySpace and Twitter pages are distinctly displayed on the homepage with additional YouTube videos presented throughout the site. This social media channel engages users by presenting a wide variety of information and activities targeted to different publics. The site's primary method for creating connections with cancer advocates around the country is by encouraging them to register on the ACS CAN. By creating an I CAN Page, individuals are able to customize a personal webpage that includes stories and pictures to share with others. The I CAN Page also allows supporters to raise money

for the Society and to ask others to take action on cancer issues. Furthermore, supporters can view volunteer opportunities and upcoming events on the site. Users are also encouraged to create connections with supporters through the Action Center. The Action Center provides opportunities for the public to participate in a wide variety of active campaigns. Some of these opportunities include directly contacting U.S. Representatives through the site to promote breast cancer education, screening and treatment and supporting legislation that will give volunteer drivers higher mileage tax deduction rates for volunteer activities. Several resources are available including recruitment packets, voter guides and cancer information. Additionally, users interested in current state and nation-wide campaigns can find information regarding the current legislative agenda. News releases and statements are also available for those who seek up-to-date information on the organization. The American Cancer Society uses all of these tools as a way of building an online community, and, as a result, the strength of the Cancer Action Network is through its supporters.

#### Cancer Survivors Network

As previously discussed, one of the defining components of social media is the relationships and connections that are formed in online communities. The primary purpose of the Cancer Survivors Network is to connect cancer survivors with each other to help in the healing process. The Cancer Survivors Network is an online community that was created by and for cancer survivors and their supporters. This online network provides support for survivors and patients and encourages them to share their experiences, support one another and exchange practical tips for living with the challenges of cancer. 15

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> "Campaigns." American Cancer Society, Cancer Action Network. Web. 21 October 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Cancer.org. American Cancer Society. Web. 2 November 2009.

The network is free, and registered users have access to several cancer-related resources. For example, the American Cancer Society has compiled over 250 hours of tape in the form of a talk show that defines the first-hand experiences of several survivors. Users also have access to a private messaging service, discussion boards and personal web pages. The organization encourages users to share photos, start an online journal and contribute resources to the resource library, which includes over 1,000 articles and multimedia clips.

The network's discussion boards and chat rooms present users with an additional opportunity to network and develop friendships. The discussion boards are highly popular with some of the topics receiving over 95,000 posts. The Cancer Survivors Network is continuing to grow and implement new social media that will engage supporters and encourage further involvement and donations.

# Internal Social Networking

Aside from external social networking sites that attempt to reach audiences outside of the organization, the American Cancer Society also uses a form of social media that focuses on maintaining connections within its organization.

When the American Cancer Society expanded from two divisions to six, executives were faced with challenges related to the large growth of the organization and the geographical distance between each division. With over 600 employees in six locations across the country, the organization sought after the most effective way to reach and maintain collaboration across the board. Staffers no longer had the familiarity and cohesiveness they were once used to, and the

organization's new challenge was to bridge the inter-office divide, encourage strong working relationships and ultimately advance their cause. <sup>16</sup>

The launch of SocietyConnect.org, the American Cancer Society's own social network, in 2008 has had rewarding results. Employees of the organization can learn more about their coworkers and can collaborate with them by reading their profiles and blogs and viewing their posted pictures. Employees are encouraged to create groups, share videos and create events as a way of communicating to create an effective team. We grew so large so fast that even conducting conference calls was difficult because there was such a large disconnect between employees who didn't know one another, and Renee Kelley, Director, Internal Communications, American Cancer Society. Now, we see staffers progressing from getting to know one another to exchanging information on specific topics. Whatever the subject matter raising more money, finding that key volunteer, even finding a great restaurant for lunch - there's a place for it on SocietyConnect.org."

The development of this internal social networking site has also made it possible for younger staffers and top executives to make connections that were once unable to make.

Additional connections are developing as new employees join the network as a result of campaigns like "Get Connected," which is aimed at increasing the use of the site. The exclusivity of this social network strengthens the audience's likelihood to become involved and develop internal connections with coworkers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> "Taking the Fight against Cancer Online, The American Cancer Society High Plains Division Turns to Social Media to Bridge the Miles." *Small World Labs*. Web. 21 October 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Society Connect. American Cancer Society. Web. 29 October 2009.

#### Conclusion

Research shows that non-profit organizations are constantly incorporating various social media sites into their public relations campaigns. These social media sites have opened doors for non-profit organizations to engage audiences to raise the visibility of the social cause, deepen existing donor relationships and inspire a new generation of philanthropists. A study to determine the top 50 digital influencers for social cause ranked the American Cancer Society at number five behind the American Red Cross, PETA, Kiva and Greenpeace Fund. The study ranked over 100 non-profit organizations on the magnitude of their efforts, social engagement and digital stretch. An organization must have a strategic plan regarding its launch of social media sites in order to effectively reach their market. The following sections discuss the benefits/drawbacks of using social media sites and offer suggestions for further research regarding this topic.

## Benefits of Using Social Media

Social networking sites have proven to have measurable positive impacts on non-profit organizations. Social media's focus on building connections has enhanced the success of these organizations. Non-profit organizations like the American Cancer Society are able to engage followers through the use of these sites by allowing them to share their stories and establish communities. Similarly, individuals are able to create and join groups related to a specific cause associated with the organization without its direct control. This proves to be extremely beneficial in that discussion and promotion of the organization is occurring without the use of its resources.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Capece, David. "Digital Influence in Social Cause." *Sparxoo*. 9 Nov. 2009. Web. 10 Nov. 2009.

As more people become engaged, the messages continue to spread with little effort by the non-profit organization.<sup>19</sup>

Non-profit organizations are using social media to not only tell their story but also to encourage donations to their causes, build communities and expand their reach. They are now able to distribute their messages to a large audience in the shortest amount of time on a budget of limited funds and human capital. This is an area that many organizations have struggled with in the past. By understanding how social media fits into the purpose and goals of a specific organization, messages can be tailored to accurately meet the needs and expectations of the group. The wide array of social networking sites further allows this to be possible.

As new social media is developed, organizations are beginning to determine which channels are the most effective for delivering certain types of messages. Similarly, they are able to specify which sites are most useful to use to satisfy their organization's purpose. For example, some organizations may use social media solely to share information with the public rather than attempting to raise money whereas others may focus their attention on gaining more volunteers. The newly developed features of these social networking sites have also been influential in creating new forms of campaigns and messages. Now, non-profit organizations can use social media to develop campaigns that include interactive contests, creative video clips and real-time information. This significantly affects an individual's likelihood to become part of an online community, to participate and to donate, as it becomes less of an obligation and more of an experience.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Canter, Beth."4 Ways Social Media is Changing the Nonprofit World." *Mashable*. 22 May 2009. Web. 14 October 2009.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Kadaba, Lini. "Nonprofits Tap Online Networks to Raise Funds." *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, (2009): C.3. Print.

If used effectively, social networking sites have the ability to increase awareness, support and donations for a non-profit organization. However, if used carelessly or without a strategic plan, social media can be extremely detrimental to an organization's public image.

# Drawbacks of Using Social Media

Social media sites are relatively new to the greater public and are constantly evolving. New sites are frequently being introduced and additional features and applications are being developed for existing sites. These constant changes make it difficult to manage and track the outcomes and effectiveness of specific social media outreach. This uncertainty is often difficult to overcome when an organization's resources are limited.

While social media sites have the ability to create and maintain connections between a non-profit organization and its publics, they also have several drawbacks that prohibit them from reaching their goals. Most non-profit organizations have not been able to cultivate high dollar donations. A study performed by the Society of New Communications Research on the likelihood of social media users to donate to charitable causes revealed that the group of social media users is younger than the traditional composition of donors. Forty-seven percent of social media users were aged 30-49, 40 percent were under the age of 30 and 13 percent were 50 or older. Furthermore, only 15 percent of those under age 30 donated more than \$1000 to a charitable cause. This is not to say that it is not possible, but rather it is not a high revenue generator at this time.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Livingston, Geoff. "Social Media for Social Causes." *Mashable*. 26 March 2009. Web. 15 October 2009.

"It's not a magic cure all," said Rick Cohen, director of membership and technology for the National Council of Non-profit Organizations."<sup>22</sup>

Although supporters of a cause's social media sites have the ability to add and share information without the direct involvement of the organization, these sites must still be maintained. This requires additional resources that the group may not be able to afford. If these sites are not frequently updated, the non-profit organization may experience the opposite of its intended goals. Rarely updated and abandoned sites can create a negative public perception as they lack current information and credibility. Similarly, poorly constructed sites and messages can have a negative effect on the organization's public image.

Overall, strategic plans for implementing and maintaining social media sites are critical for an organization.

#### Potential Further Research

With over 890,000 visitors to its sites a month, the American Cancer Society has been effective in gathering its public by providing them with hands-on tools to increase awareness and involvement. These tools allow the public to share personal stories, offer advice and connect with others who have encountered similar experiences. However, as social media evolves, there are constantly potential growth opportunities for non-profit organizations.

As we have discovered, research is constantly being conducted in order to determine the most effective ways for organizations to use social media. Furthermore, new social networking sites along with new features to existing sites often create the need for additional research on the topic. This research paper sought to examine the overall effectiveness of the American Cancer Society's use of social media sites. However, although it addresses some critical questions, it

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Kadaba, Lini. "Nonprofits Tap Online Networks to Raise Funds." *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, (2009): C.3. Print.

does not answer all of them. In order to determine the complete effectiveness of the American Cancer Society, additional research on the audience's perspective of the organization and its choice of social media sites is necessary. Further research should also seek to determine a more comprehensive way of understanding these sites' effectiveness, as it is often difficult to quantify.

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