Nonprofit Organizations and Social Media:

Streamlining Communications to Build and Maintain Relationships

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I. Introduction

Nonprofit organizations rely largely on the fact that people are willing to donate their time and money. Without theses two forms of donation, the majority of organizations simply cannot support their causes. Unlike for-profit businesses, which sell a product or service, nonprofits must market a cause or mission, which requires clear and effective communication of the organization's goals and needs.

The problem usually isn't a lack of interested parties; as a rule, people enjoy giving back and getting involved in causes they believe in. A 2011 Red Cross poll found that 68% of Americans expressed a desire to donate to charities; a 10% increase from the previous year.[1] A slightly older study showed that 63.4 billion people volunteered in 2009, a 26.4% increase from 2008.[2]

However, those willing to donate their time and money aren't often willing to wade through more than a few messaging channels to find the information they want. Nonprofits also tend to have smaller marketing budgets than profit-driven businesses, and thus fewer resources devoted to facilitating online connections with target audiences. If Internet users do not have the time to sort through appeals or search for interesting opportunities, and organizations do not have the staff or the funds to directly reach those users, potential connections are lost.

Social media are pervasive. More than 800 million people use Facebook[3], while Twitter claims more than 100 million.[4] YouTube has "hundreds of millions" of users.[5] Numbers like

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[1] "Majority of Americans Plan to Give to Charity this Holiday Season Despite Continued Slow Economy." *American Red Cross* 17 Nov. 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2012.
[2] "Volunteering in America 2009." *Corporation for National and Community Service* 2009. Web. 23 Feb. 2012.
[3] Parr, Ben. "Facebook by the Numbers." *Mashable.* 21 Oct. 2011. Web. 8 Feb. 2012.
[4] "One hundred million voices." *Twitter Blog.* 8 Sept. 2011. Web. 8 Feb. 2012.
[5] "About YouTube." *YouTube.com.* 2012. Web. 8 Feb. 2012.

these would be staggering if they weren't so commonplace in the evolving community of the Internet.

These tools have proven effective, and have the added benefit of being largely free. This proliferation of messaging channels translates into an increasingly busy user interface though: the Internet is powerful but cluttered. There comes a point at which there is too much to take in. Users only want to read through so many updates and alerts to reach they information they want.

Nonprofits have joined conventional businesses and services in creating profiles and connecting with audiences. Any organization posting on one of these platforms must compete with all the other profiles a user is subscribed to, and suddenly the chance that a passive viewer receives a given message is that much smaller.

These two groups must connect in an organic way, and existing services are far too busy to allow that to happen. Organizations must focus on creating and maintaining strong relationships with their chosen audiences, and doing so calls for carefully crafted and directed communications. Having profiles spread all across the Internet can fragment those messages and, at the very least, fail to support the creation of healthy relationships.

Nonprofits need help, and there are target audiences willing to devote their personal resources to them. These two entities desire a mutually beneficial relationship, and communications should foster the creation of that partnership. While the current social media model does not prevent this, it does not make it easy.

There exists a need for a comprehensive online platform designed specifically for nonprofit organizations. This platform could provide a method for nonprofits to consolidate their information, integrate existing social media accounts, facilitate the sharing of information, and streamline their messages to create more concise and effective communications. Simpler, more

intuitive messaging has the potential to mutually benefit and better support the relationship that exists between nonprofits and their target audiences.

II. Literature Review

Existing literature exploring the ways nonprofit organizations use social media advocates its use and confirms that there is a level of fragmentation of communications. A study from the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth both substantiates the widespread use of social media by nonprofits and mentions the power of word-of-mouth and peer approval when choosing nonprofits for various reasons, a concept that naturally transfers to the realm of social media.[6]

Beth Kanter, a social media and nonprofit blogger, asserts that social media has transformed the nonprofit world, offering a valuable way to engage audiences and promote an organization's cause.[7] A study reported by professor Nancy Macduff explored the various reasons nonprofits use social media, which include marketing, fundraising, program delivery, and market research.[8] Social media use by nonprofits is widespread and legitimate, but should be used only to uphold existing campaigns or programs; it must support but not replace physical operations to be effective in reaching concrete goals.[9]

Current studies show that there are a few ways that the existing social media model is ineffective for nonprofit organizations. A content analysis of existing profiles by the International Communication Association found that calls to action for volunteers and donations were few and far between on social media profiles.[10] A *Philanthropy Action* report confirmed that historically, efforts to gain volunteers and donations online have either not been attempted or

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[6] Butcher, Lola. "Nonprofit Organizations Outpace Businesses in Use of Social Media." *Oncology Times* 31.21 (2009): 39-40. *Google Scholar.* Web. 6 Jan. 2012.
[7] Kanter, Beth. "4 Ways Social Media is Changing the Nonprofit World." *Mashable* 22 May 2009. *Google Scholar.* Web. 6 Jan. 2012.
[8] Macduff, Nancy. "Social Media and Volunteer Programs." *The Volunteer Management Handbook: Leadership Strategies for Success.* Ed. Tracy D. Connors. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2012. *Google Scholar.* Web. 6 Jan. 2012.
[9] Miller, David. "Nonprofit Organizations and the Emerging Potential of Social Media and Internet Resources." *SPNHA Review* 6.1 (2010): 33-52. *Google Scholar.* Web. 6 Jan. 2012.
[10] Das, Antara. "Facebook and Nonprofit Organizations: A Content Analysis." *International Communication Association* (2010). *EBSCO Host.* Web. 7 Jan. 2012.

have not been largely effective; the result of not putting much time or work into social media.[11] In contrast, a *Nonprofit World* article lists social media as one of the top ten fundraising tools to build a community around a cause.[12] Additionally, professor and PRSA fellow Kathleen Kelly notes that public relations strategies – which often take the form of social media – are underutilized by nonprofits. Opportunities exist to use public relations strategies to build relationships between with target audiences through the use of online resources.[13]

The target audiences nonprofits need to reach must strike a balance between commitment to donations (of time and/or money) and frequency of Internet use for this proposal to work. A *Journal of New Communications Research* study found a desirable age group that bridged this gap and that would be ideal for nonprofits to target online.[14] Another important consideration is the fact that social media is not confined just to the desk: the prevalence of smartphones, tablets, and netbooks means that potential audiences can be reached in a variety of places.[15] Online communities are also valuable when creating a base of support around a cause or organization, as they foster the generation of ideas and can add value to a campaign.[16]

Social media has the potential to help an organization achieve its goals with fine-tuning and care.

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[11] Ogden, Timothy N. and Laura Starita. "Social Networking and Mid-Size Nonprofits. What's the Use?" *Philanthropy Action.* (2009). *Mendeley.* Web. 6 Jan. 2012.
[12] "Top 10 Fundraising Trends." *Nonprofit World* 28.6 (2010): 28. *ProQuest.* Web. 7 Jan. 2012.
[13] Kelly, Kathleen S. "Managing Public Relations for Nonprofits." *Nonprofit Management and Leadership* 11.1 (2000): 87-95. *Wiley Online Library.* Web. 7 Jan. 2012.
[14] Livingston, Geoff. "High-Dollar Nonprofit Donors Would Embrace Social Media." *Journal of New Communications Research* 4.1 (2009): 87-94. *EBSCO Host.* Web. 7 Jan. 2012.
[15] Satchell, Christine, and Marcus Foth. "The Re-creation of Identity in Digital Environments and the Potential Benefits for Non-Profit and Community Organisations." *Journal of Community, Citizen's & Third-Sector Media & Communication* 4 (2008): 16-27. *EBSCO Host.* Web. 7 Jan. 2012.
[16] Brandtzaeg, Petter Bae, Asbjorn Folstad, Marianna Obrist, David Geerts, and Rudiger Berg. "Innovation in Online Communities – Towards Community-Centric Design." *User Centric Media* (2009). *Springer Link.* Web. 7 Jan. 2012.

III. Methodology

Research for this paper was based on a survey of existing surveys. Studies, reports, and surveys were compared and pieced together to form an idea of the issues and possible solutions that face nonprofit organizations as they attempt to communicate online.

Key areas included problems with the current social media communication model and where connections were lost or simply not met. Demographics of those who use the Internet and connect with nonprofit organizations were examined and compared. Existing research was then used to indicate areas in which needs and wants overlapped, and how those instances could be exploited to reach a solution.

Case studies involved researching randomly selected national and regional organizations' online metrics to find discrepancies in user activity. Existing online nonprofit tools were examined to discover how they were both successful and unsuccessful in reaching their target demographics. Finally, best practices were selected and applied to refine the idea of an integrated platform and propose a solution.

IV. Discussion

4.1 Problems with Social Media Use by Nonprofits

What are social media, and how do nonprofits use them?

Social media, by definition, are online communities created by users to share information electronically.[17] These platforms include services like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+ and others, and "allow interactivity between people" both individually and in groups.[18] Social media are useful because they allow brands, businesses, services, and organizations to connect and communicate with people on a much more casual and engaging level than traditional advertisements and media. Nonprofit organizations can use social media to communicate directly with audiences and gain real-time feedback.

A 2009 University of Georgia study on the use of social media by nonprofits found that of 409 respondents, only 5 reported not using any of the 18 forms of social media listed for their organization.[19] Additionally, nonprofits with dedicated public relations departments were found to be more likely to have social media profiles, which they used to reach audiences, promote causes, and develop communications strategies.[19]

Social media are used by nonprofits primarily for marketing (92.5%), fundraising (45.9%), program delivery (34.5%), and market research (24.3%).[18] The same study that provided those metrics measured the most popular online platforms, finding that Facebook (87%), Twitter (59%), YouTube (49%), and LinkedIn (33.9%) topped the list.[18] Other common

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[17] "Social media." *Merriam-Webster.com.* Merriam-Webster, 2012. Web. 7 Feb. 2012.
[18] Macduff, Nancy. "Social Media and Volunteer Programs." *The Volunteer Management Handbook: Leadership Strategies for Success.* Ed. Tracy D. Connors. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2012. *Google Scholar.* Web. 6 Jan. 2012.
[19] Curtis, Lindley, Carrie Edwards, Kristen L. Fraser, Sheryl Gudelsky, Jenny Holmquist, Kristin Thornton, and Kaye D. Sweetser. "Adoption of social media for public relations for nonprofit organizations." *Public Relations Review* 36 (2010): 90-92. *Google Scholar.* Web. 6 Jan. 2012.

services include blogging platforms like Tumblr and Wordpress. More recently, brands and organizations have latched onto sites like Pinterest, which doesn't facilitate communication so much as provide companies with a way to maintain an online presence.

Another 2009 study from the University of North Carolina examined how 275 nonprofit organizations used Facebook, finding that organizations did not often use the service to disseminate organizational news; rather, the most used feature (74%) was the discussion board or wall.[20] Tools like Facebook provide a powerful way to connect directly with audiences, carry on conversations, and facilitate the sharing of other information: 56% of organizations posted photographs and 54% shared links to news articles on their profiles.[20] There were, however, few calls to action on organizations' profiles. Less than half of respondents used social media to solicit donations, volunteers, or otherwise encourage people to get involved in the organization.[20]

Where the current social media model falls short.

Because nonprofits rely on the help of volunteers and donations, this lack of calls to action across social media is curious. A 2009 *Philanthropy Action* survey found that the primary reason organizations use social media is publicity or general marketing.[21] On a scale from 1-5, with 1 meaning highly important, attracting new donors and volunteers fell just at and above a 2, while the previously mentioned publicity ranked higher at 1.25.[21] A more revealing chart representing the number of volunteers gained via social media showed that 45% of organizations have attracted from 1-25 volunteers. The next closest metric, representing a gain of 100-500

[20] Waters, Richard D., Emily Burnett, Anna Lamm, and Jessica Lucas. "Engaging stakeholders through social networking: How nonprofit organizations are using Facebook." *Public Relations Review* 35 (2009): 102-106. *Google Scholar.* Web. 6 Jan. 2012.
[21] Ogden, Timothy N. and Laura Starita. "Social Networking and Mid-Size Nonprofits. What's the Use?" *Philanthropy Action.* (2009). *Mendeley.* Web. 6 Jan. 2012.

volunteers via social media, fell at just over 6%.[21] The data on donations gained through social media is similarly unimpressive. Around 36% of organizations raised between $0 and $100; 13% raised up to $500, and the numbers decrease from there.[21]

Nonprofit World reported on a 2010 Blackbaud[22] study finding that online donations amounted to a meager 5% of most organizations' total contributions.[23] It went on to suggest that Facebook Causes, a nonprofit feature of the popular social networking site, packs the biggest "fundraising punch" for nonprofits, despite the fact that "only a small fraction of the 180,000 organizations that use Facebook Causes have raised more than $1,000."[23]

The question then becomes whether organizations value the attraction of donors and volunteers less because they don't need them or because the technology used (in this case, social media) is just not effective for those purposes.

National Civic Review reported on a 2010 study that sought to determine how and why nonprofit organizations direct funds towards technology. Social media training tended to be limited and investments were "largely tactical, not strategic:" respondents said the reasoning behind these decisions was frequently lacking.[24] Proving the effectiveness of online tools may be crucial to gaining adequate resources within an organization to fund communications campaigns. This requires research to determine the most effective services for a given organization and how they should be used.

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[22] Blackbaud is a software and services company for the nonprofit industry; they release yearly state of the industry reports based on their research and findings.

[23] Schipul, Ed. "Accelerating Fundraising Through Social Media." *Nonprofit World* 28.3 (2010): 20-22. *ProQuest*. Web. 9 Feb. 2012.

[24] Perlstein, Jeffrey. "Amplifying Social Impact in a Connected Age: A Survey of Technology-Related Philanthropy for Social Benefit." *National Civic Review* 100.3 (2011): 45-49. *EBSCO Host.* Web. 24 Feb. 2012.

The next step is to examine the other half of the equation and try to determine why Internet users do not respond to most online calls to action and if they would given a more effective use of resources by nonprofits.

Case Study #1: National Nonprofit Metrics

To get an idea of how effective existing nonprofit social media efforts are, each organization's website traffic was compared with followers on various social media profiles.

Make A Wish Foundation's website, Wish.org, gets an estimated 225,000 hits per month.[25] Its Twitter handle has 62,300 followers,[26] while its Facebook page has 340,000 likes:[27] quite an impressive audience across all channels.

The Committee to Protect Journalists, a national press freedom nonprofit, gets around 14,000 visitors per month to its website.[28] The Committee's Twitter handle has 26,149 followers[29] and its Facebook page has 9,271 likes.[30] Here, the average social media numbers are fairly reflective of site traffic.

Lastly, the Union of Concerned Scientists, an environmental nonprofit, sees more than 132,000 visitors to its website each month on average.[31] Its Twitter account has 6,600 followers[32] and its Facebook page has 20,000 likes.[33] Compared to the previous two examples, the social media metrics are not as representative of the organization's site views.

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[25] http://www.trafficestimate.com/wish.org
[26] @MakeAWish. *Twitter.com* 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.
[27] Make A Wish Foundation. *Facebook.com* 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.
[28] http://www.quantcast.com/cpj.org
[29] @pressfreedom. *Twitter.com* 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.
[30] Committee to Protect Journalists. *Facebook.com* 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.
[31] http://www.quantcast.com/ucsusa.org
[32] @UCSUSA. *Twitter.com* 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.
[33] Union of Concerned Scientists. *Facebook.com* 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.

This discrepancy in numbers, coupled with a general lack of cohesion of metrics in all the cases, suggests that audiences don't necessarily flow from one channel to another. Followers must be reacquired across every new medium, a process that takes resources away from an organization and requires a new effort every time another in-demand social network pops up.

Future research might seek to determine if there is a correlation between organizations with similar metrics across platforms and higher donation/volunteer rates. If so, nonprofits might be interested in a service that encourages users to follow organizations across different channels through integration and targeted messaging.

Case Study #2: Local/Regional Nonprofit Metrics

The San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation website gets more than 1,200 visitors on average each month.[34] Its Twitter handle has 60 followers,[35] while its Facebook page has 85 likes.[36]

The Capital Area Food Bank of Texas, a regional nonprofit based in Austin, sees 3,700 visitors to its website per month.[37] The Food Bank's Twitter has 160 followers[38] and its Facebook page has 288 likes.[39]

The Oregon Environmental Council website gets 5,300 visitors on average per month.[40] Its Twitter handle has 2,500 followers[41] and its Facebook page has 2,400 likes:[42] the most consistent social media numbers thus far.

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[34] http://siteanalytics.compete.com/sloccf.org/
[35] @SLOCCF. *Twitter.com* 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.
[36] San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation. *Facebook.com*. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.
[37] http://siteanalytics.compete.com/austinfoodbank.org/
[38] @CAFBTX. *Twitter.com* 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.
[39] Capital Area Food Bank. *Facebook.com* 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.
[40] http://siteanalytics.compete.com/oeconline.org/
[41] @OECOnline. *Twitter.com* 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.
[42] Oregon Environmental Council. *Facebook.com* 2012. Web. 15 Feb. 2012.

Metrics for regional nonprofits tend to reflect their smaller scale across channels. All three had at least half as many followers on social media as website hits. Hits will likely never match followers since they represent an altogether different kind of metric; however, organizations can easily aim to have a consistent number of followers across social media tools. This will extend the reach and frequency of their messages and promote unified communications tactics.

Comprehensive studies might take a larger-picture view at how these numbers measure an organization's effectiveness, both on a national and regional level. Doing so will allow nonprofits to gauge whether the integration of websites and social media has the potential to increase the effectiveness of their communications campaigns.

4.2 Who Connects with Nonprofits Online?

The Internet is a pervasive medium, and it's growing. U.S. Census data from 2010 (the most recent available) shows that 80.23% of Americans use the Internet.[43] The largest age group of Internet users falls between 35 and 54 years of age (37.77%), followed by those 55 and over (31.75%).[43] Surprisingly, the youngest age group—those between 18 and 34 years of age—makes up the smallest portion (30.48%) of Internet users,[43] a fact that bodes well for organizations looking to connect with audiences that have enough money to become regular donors. The key then becomes tapping into the youngest generation of Internet users and encouraging them to volunteer their time and resources to causes they believe in.

Income demographics largely mirror the makeup of the country as a whole: 41.9% of Internet users make less than $50,000, while only 10.66% sit in the highest income bracket,

[43] U.S. Department of Commerce. "Digital Nation: Expanding Internet Usage." National Telecommunications and Information Administration. Feb. 2011. Google Scholar. Web. 8 Feb. 2012.

making more than $150,000.[43] However, the second largest group, making up 28.5% of the population, reported earning from $75,000 to $100,000 per year.[43] Those who fall into this category comprise a core group of donors: those who use the Internet with enough frequency while earning enough money to potentially donate comfortably.

Internet use, however, does not translate into social media use. Social media campaigns are of little use if a nonprofit's key demographics are unwilling to log onto Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube. A broader study found that 65% of online adults used social networking sites in 2011; for comparison, just 5% of adults reported using such sites in 2005.[44] Rates like this suggest promising future growth.

Once the typical American Internet user is understood, the key becomes finding the connection between age, Internet use, and willingness to donate or volunteer. *Community Philanthropy 2.0* conducted a report in 2009 to determine the sweet spot among these demographic categories. The study discovered that "the 30 to 49 age group unequivocally represents the best fit to cultivate major donors using social media strategies," based on the finding that 47% of survey respondents within that age range donated $1,000 or more to charities the previous year.[45] Another report showed high response rates to calls for donations via social media (24%) compared to those for direct mailings, which ranged from 0.5% to 2.5% for acquisition.[46]

The same study also examined volunteer rates, finding that a promising 58% of those asked to volunteer through social media channels actually did.[23] A volunteer's time is incredibly

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[44] Madden, Mary, and Kathryn Zickuhr. "65% of online adults use social networking sites." *Pew Internet* 26 Aug. 2011. Web. 23 Feb. 2012.
[45] Livingston, Geoff. "High-Dollar Nonprofit Donors Would Embrace Social Media." *Journal of New Communications Research* 4.1 (2009): 87-94. *EBSCO Host.* Web. 7 Jan. 2012.
[46] Kaplan, Andrea M., Michael Haenlein. "Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of Social Media." *Business Horizons* 53.1 (2010): 59-68. *Google Scholar.* Web. 8 Feb. 2012.

valuable to organizations: nonprofit "leadership network" Independent Sector estimated that an hour of an American volunteer's time is worth $21.36.[47]

A report measuring the social media response to the 2010 Haiti earthquake found that "Twitter users appear motivated to connect to individuals with a common cause."[48] These statistics show that online campaigns can be successful, but nonprofits must ask the question in the first place.

Cultivating this group appears vital to crafting and carrying out a successful social media campaign. Research up to this point suggests that this group is willing to offer their resources to causes they believe in, yet online donation and volunteer rates remain unimpressive. Further studies might look at whether this is because organizations are not invested in their online presence and thus have not created firm and persuasive calls to action. Another factor to investigate may be the inherent busyness of the Internet: too many outlets, too many messages, and too many factors competing for each audience's attention.

4.3 Opportunities for Connecting Nonprofits and Audiences

With so many numbers to wade through and so many demographic groups using the Internet in different ways, connecting a nonprofit with its target audience may seem daunting. The wide variety of Internet users, though, has the potential to provide organizations with opportunity: as long as nonprofits make an effort to research how exactly their audience uses the Web, targeted communications can be effective.

The largest group of Internet users—those from 35 to 49 years of age[43]—overlaps with the 30 to 49 age group[45] with the highest donation potential. This, paired with the fact that the

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[47] "Value of Volunteer Time." *Independent Sector* 2009. Web. 23 Feb. 2012.
[48] Smith, Brian G. "Socially distributing public relations: Twitter, Haiti, and interactivity in social media." *Public Relations Review* 36.4 (2010): 329-335. *Science Direct.* Web. 17 Feb. 2012.

majority of online adults use social media[43] paves the way for a streamlined, integrated communications campaign. The users are out there; organizations simply need to commit themselves to creating an effective campaign and then launching it not on a variety of social media networks, but on a dedicated platform anchored by the nonprofit's existing website.

One benefit and possible feature of a dedicated nonprofit platform is the creation of "content communities:" powerful online groups of users who drive change and produce organic material.[46] This content can then be shared and spread through the integration of existing social media services, giving both the organization and its message a much broader reach. These communities can be regional – like Craigslist and its location-based classifieds – or based on beliefs, likes, or common goals.

Over 50% of respondents in a survey on who connects with nonprofits via social media showed that they chose to follow local organizations.[49] Internet users were found to be "motivated" to link up with others that shared belief in a common cause or mission, as well as with the communities they may be helping.[48]

Fostering the creation and growth of these communities could prove vital to the success of online efforts to recruit donors and volunteers. Further research on the power of networks as content curators and disseminators in the nonprofit sector may shed more light on the opportunities social media offer.

Existing online nonprofit platforms and where they fall short.

It's hard to argue for an entirely new social media platform; fresh services crop up daily, and most are lost in the shuffle. Sometimes, it just makes more sense to align an organization

[49] Miller, David. "Nonprofit Organizations and the Emerging Potential of Social Media and Internet Resources." *SPNHA Review* 6.1 (2010): 33-52. *Google Scholar.* Web. 6 Jan. 2012.

with what already exists. However, "in some cases, the right application might just not be available yet."[46] Both Sears and Fujifilm created their own successful social media networks to bridge a gap and build relationships with target audiences.[46]

VolunteerMatch, a service first drafted in 1994, now successfully connects volunteers with more than 81,000 nonprofit organizations through a dedicated website.[50] Interested volunteers search for opportunities close to them based on their interests, illustrating the efficacy of a community-based system for linking these two parties.[51] The site does not, however, facilitate donations, nor does it integrate with nonprofits' existing social media accounts beyond generic click through buttons.

Sparked, "the microvolunteering network," harvests the power of the Internet by recruiting people with skills ranging from research to web design and then connecting them with nonprofits in need of those services.[52] Launched in 2009, it's an innovative service with cross-platform social media integration, but it makes no effort to gather monetary donations.

Network for Good is a donation site that has collected $637 million in donations since 2001.[53] While it does have a volunteering feature, the site is not intuitive and does not integrate with existing social media tools. Organizations do not create profiles on the site; rather, Network for Good routes donors to a third-party site which then links to the nonprofit's own website.

There does not appear to be a platform currently in existence that intuitively connects nonprofits organizations with potential donors and volunteers through the integration of social media and dissemination of targeted communications. Filling this gap could potentially bring about better online donation and volunteer response rates.

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[50] *VolunteerMatch.org* 2012. Web. 9 Feb. 2012.
[51] Wilcox, Melynda Dovel. "Volunteers Meet Their Matchmaker." *Kiplinger's* 53.6 (1999): 24-25. *EBSCO Host.* Web. 9 Feb. 2012.
[52] *Sparked.com* 2012. Web. 23 Feb. 2012.
[53] *NetworkforGood.org* 2012. Web. 23 Feb. 2012.

A dedicated platform would have the added benefit of retaining users even when new online profiles are created. Rather than devoting time to gaining Twitter followers or Facebook likes from scratch, a strong user base could be cultivated and connected via this nonprofit service, and then linked to external social networks. Users will not adopt every new social media tool, but organizations will certainly not be starting from nothing; they will only have to tap into an existing database of connected users and encourage them to link up on different platforms.

4.4 Best Practices for an Integrated Online Platform

The use of social media can be either a benefit or a detriment. Effective communication requires planning, foresight, and careful tailoring; add to that the immediacy and feedback potential of social media, and it becomes a very powerful—and potentially dangerous—method of reaching audiences. Gaffes are not uncommon in the realm of instant communication: a staffer needs only to tweet from the wrong account or post something inappropriate to a nonprofit's profile to threaten an organization's entire reputation.

Gaining supporters relies on the effective communication of the organization's cause or goal. For this reason, social media campaigns should be carried out by those well versed in the ways of the Web. A 2011 state of the industry report by Blackbaud found that communications, marketing, and public relations staff most often managed an organization's social media channels.[54]

For a nonprofit, an effective communication model relies on the organization transmitting information and the public receiving and accepting it – and then, ideally, offering to give something in return. This system means that clear communications are vital to a nonprofit's success. According to Blackbaud, "There is potential to see increased value for social media if

organizations understand how to best utilize it."[54] A *Public Relations Review* study urged that "well-articulated calls to action [are] particularly vital"[48] to getting Internet users to take action rather than passively take in information. Knowing how to use the chosen technology, coupled with strong and effective communications, has the potential to finally result in a considerable response to online campaigns.

Today's model simply involves too much noise; too many channels to monitor and too great a chance of an organization's message getting lost in the clutter. *Business Horizons* urges organizations to choose carefully between the hordes of social media tools available today, adding that nonprofits "simply cannot participate in them all."[46] Rather than scattering an organization's message across so many channels, nonprofits could craft a targeted message and launch it from their profile on this platform, and then adapt that same message to a select set of tools (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) through multi-platform messaging.

The *SPNHA Review*, published by Grand Valley State University, also cautions against adopting every social media tool available, explaining that this only takes resources away and ultimately "does not prove to be beneficial to the organization."[9]

Online campaigns should not replace traditional or existing efforts to gain volunteers and donors, but support them.[49] Although more and more organizations are communicating through innovative new interactive social networks, most "continue to leverage traditional channels" as well.[54] The Blackbaud industry report also notes that when reporting impact, organizations tended to favor their own website over social media channels.[54] This supports the suggestion that organizations should plan for strong integration with their website and use social media to disseminate a core message.

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[54] "2011 State of the Nonprofit Industry Survey." *Blackbaud* Oct. 2011. Web. 9 Feb. 2012.

Personalized Messaging

Another key to effective online communication, according to *Public Relations Review*, is personalization.[48] Dry press releases get little attention in the increasingly dynamic realm of social media. Nonprofit organizations have the added benefit of representing causes that people want to get behind, and they should exploit this. Communications should be always professional, but carry a conversational tone; this can make an organization appear friendly and open. Additionally, nonprofits cannot simply push information at users—they must become good listeners as well.

Social media is incredibly powerful in that it has a "human voice" and can foster collaboration.[48] This translates into a responsibility on behalf of the nonprofit to monitor its online presence and respond to the inquiries and comments of its followers. Internet users are, for the most part, willing to connect, and so organizations must take this extra step of encouraging feedback. "Information sharing and interaction facilitate relationship cultivation,"[48] and strong relationships are vital to building a reliable group of donors and volunteers.

A study examining the qualities potential donors desire when communicating with nonprofits found that trust was a major factor, meaning that connections wanted organizations to remain in contact with them beyond fundraising cycles.[55] This also included sharing tasks, meaning donors expressed interest in working with nonprofits towards common goals, even participating in organizational activities.[55] This level of collaboration requires the personalization of messages; organizations must be willing to reach out directly to interested parties and make an effort to keep donors in the loop.

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[55] Waters, Richard D. "Increasing Fundraising Efficiency Through Evaluation: Applying Communication Theory to the Nonprofit Organization-Donor Relationship." *Nonprofit and Vountary Sector Quarterly* 40 (2010): 458-475. *SpringerLink.* Web. 29 Jan. 2012.

This sort of involvement is evident in offline activities. *Philanthropy Action* notes that events like the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, which require physical participation on behalf of the donor/volunteer, forge "durable relationships."[11] Involving Internet users in communications campaigns by literally making them part of the message has the potential to increase donation and volunteer rates by encouraging audiences to invest themselves in the organization's mission. This requires messaging that does not just express an organization's cause, but actively challenges connections to pursue and maintain a relationship.

Despite the opportunities that online tools offer, *Nonprofit World* stresses the importance of personal relationships.[12] While it's not possible for organizations to physically connect with all of their online followers, maintaining a personal level of communication and fostering closer ties has the potential to create lasting, valuable relationships.[12]

Static vs. Dynamic Content and User Participation

First Monday, a peer-reviewed Internet journal focusing on social media, acknowledges the rapidly changing nature of social networks. While blog posts can have a lifetime of a week or more, and web pages often exist as they are for years, social media must be updated relatively frequently or be pushed down by more recent postings by other users.[56] These networks are built on dynamism: they rely on account holders and users to participate, create, and share content as part of an almost constant cycle.

A nonprofit platform could rely on this dynamic model to help an organization build, shape, and spread its messaging. A static profile with little room for interactivity would be soon forgotten in the ever-changing landscape of the Internet. A presentation on emerging Internet

[56] Cormode, Graham, Balachander Krishnamurthy, and Walter Willinger. "A manifesto for modeling and measurement in social media." *First Monday* 15.9 (2010). 6 Sept. 2010. Web. 23 Feb. 2012.

practices noted that "self-publishing media are becoming increasingly popular" as the Internet transitions from a static database of information to "a social interaction facilitator for its users."[57] While this focuses mostly on blogs, the idea easily translates to tools like Twitter or the Facebook wall, where organic content is used to initiate dialogue and create relationships.

Today, the Internet is "characterized by a common property: the integration of users [sic] collective intelligence" through both user generated content and the dissemination of that content.[58]

As a rule, Internet users desire this level of interactivity: the *Journal of Website Promotion* suggests that people have a "demand for two-way symmetrical communication."[59] Collaboration has the potential to add value to communications; however, that assumes organizations are able to solicit feedback in the first place.

The next step, naturally, is monitoring that feedback and learning from it. *Public Relations Review* notes that communications from users can be used to gauge the effectiveness both of online efforts and external organizational actions.[48]

Philanthropy Action goes as far as to encourage organizations to "demand sacrifice" from audiences; that includes seeking quality connections rather than a large number of followers.[11] A small number of dedicated donors and volunteers is more important than thousands of followers who do little more than consume an organization's messages without taking action. The committed group should be cultivated and fostered and the rest should be encouraged to join

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[57] Wang, Jia, Qing Li, Yuanzhu Peter Chen, and Zhangxi Lin. "Recommendations in Internet Forums and Blogs." Proceedings of the 48th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics. 2010. *ACM Digital Library.* Web. 23 Feb. 2012.

[58] Murugesan, San. "Handbook of Research on Web 2.0, 3.0, and X.0: Technologies, Business, and Social Applications." IGI Global, 2010. 312-313. Web. 23 Feb. 2012.

[59] Yeon, Hye Min, Youjin Choi, and Spiro Kiousis. "Interactive Communication Features on Nonprofit Organizations' Webpages for the Practice of Excellence in Public Relations." *Journal of Website Promotions* 1.4 (2005): 61-83. Web. 23 Feb. 2012.

them. “Sacrifices” can be anything from donating and volunteering to attending events and making “personal appeals” to friends in a user’s network.[11]

Organizations need not be shy about asking for donations; clear information on how to give, coupled with an easy to navigate payment system, is vital to achieving results.[9] The greatest communications campaigns do little good if the actual donation process is hard to complete or nonexistent.

Mobile donations are another growing option, and have become well known due to worldwide disasters like the Indonesian tsunami and Haitian earthquake. *National Civic Review* calls mobile a “missed opportunity” for the majority of nonprofits, adding that these initiatives should primarily seek to reach youth and “historically underserved communities.”[24] Strong mobile integration with an online nonprofit site would be vital, and could be achieved through a linked application.

Essentially, Internet users can potentially help shape this new platform by providing real-time feedback and helping to create a crowd-sourced tool that meets the needs and desires of both potential users and nonprofit organizations. Applying these practices will simplify the process and ensure that the best online resources are paired with the best communications ideas to produce results.

V. Conclusion

It's difficult to come to a concrete conclusion when the Internet is changing almost constantly. However, good communications practices rarely change, and strong relationships have the potential to weather shifts in technology and resources. Research on the subject of social media is truly an endless endeavor, but one that must be undertaken to effectively distribute messages and achieve results.

Internet users are out there, and for the most part, they are willing not only to support causes they believe in, but spread the word about them and recruit more supporters. Linking these groups is vital to a nonprofit organization's success, and the current model has simply not been doing the job. A dedicated online platform specifically designed to build, monitor, and maintain relationships can fill the gap left by current social media tools.

Getting a reliable base group of users will be the largest hurdle for organizations in launching this platform. Once that group is locked in, further research can track whether a catch-all site for nonprofits is more effective in delivering communications than the existing scattered model. The keys to success will include careful planning on the platform's behalf so as to offer features that are truly useful and effective. Nonprofits should focus on targeted communications with strong and clear calls to action.

There are a few things nonprofits can do immediately to more effectively use their social media tools. Studies have shown the power of an organization's website as the core of their online presence: the site should be the anchor for all other online communications. Efforts to reach out to audiences should be targeted, integrated, and concise. Messages should be adapted to different mediums, but carry the same theme and have the same goal. Most importantly, these

efforts should be tracked and studied so as to better understand what works, what doesn't, and add to the developing understanding of how the Internet is shaping modern communications.

Ultimately, nonprofits follow a business model just like any other company or service. While they typically don't offer anything concrete in return for a consumer's money or time, they do have the benefit of being a commodity of sorts in that people are willing to donate resources if they feel strongly about a cause. The challenge to organizations is to move their audiences; to encourage them to take action and believe in their mission. Some people do this, but are unwilling to put their belief into action, and it's in this area that social media are incredibly powerful—and can be very effective. The ability to share one's actions and beliefs with an increasingly large group of acquaintances online makes social media invaluable as people and organizations move into the future. Embracing this technology, along with determining where it fails and how to fix it, is the first step to creating real change.

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