Connecting People • Enriching Lives

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Social media 101

for health care development organiz

Your relationship with your supporters, donors and advocates has a tremendous impact on their desire to support you financially. And social media gives you an opportunity to build two-way connected relationships online.

By Frank Barry

Frank Barry manages professional services for Blackbaud and is responsible for driving performance in the consulting, technical services and project management practices. His team is focused on delivering quality work and repeatable solutions to ensure nonprofits are successful using Blackbaud's Internet solutions.

You have a great framework: You can acquire donors, cultivate them and fundraise. Moreover, you are using both online and offline channels to do it. But, you have a nagging interest in social media.

Newspapers and television shows are constantly referring to Twitter and Facebook, and the number of people participating in those channels is staggering. The first thing that strikes you is the potential for reaching large numbers of people. As you think about it more, the type of personalized, engaged, high-value relationships you could cultivate with people through social media becomes perhaps even more intriguing.

Once an organization has gotten to this point in its thinking, the most common next questions are:

1. There are so many options, where do you start?
2. How can my organization use social media to pursue specific objectives—for example, fundraising vs. engagement?
3. What are the risks and how should those risks be managed?
4. How do I track what people are saying about us?
5. What are some examples of social media techniques that have provided real results?

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When did the Web get social?

Given all the current talk about social media, you might assume that the Web's core technology recently changed. But really, the Internet was conceived as a social medium. E-mail, the origination point for social computing, got started 39 years ago.[1] The now venerable World Wide Web made its debut a full two decades in the past. With these beginnings, why was the first Wikipedia entry for "social media" not created until 2005? Consider two recent developments:

1. The Internet's ability to move and store large volumes of data has quintupled in the last decade.[2]
2. A majority of people in the U.S. now have a high-speed connection to the Internet in their homes.[3]

These two trends have created the technical and social environment needed for the original vision of the Internet as social medium to go mainstream. There currently are worldwide:

- More than 2.9 billion e-mail accounts.[4]
- More than 400 million Facebook users.[5]
- 13 billion photos on Facebook & Flickr alone.[6]
- More than 161 million visits per month on Twitter.[7]
- 133 million blogs.[8]

Your supporters and future supporters are now actively out there, sharing photos, making connections, telling stories, giving advice and watching videos. Go ahead, join them—they'll be glad to see you!

How hospitals are using social networking

Hospitals are already reaching out to their communities using social media. As of June 2010, blogger Ed Bennet, who maintains a Hospital Social Network List on his website, http://ebennett.org, had tracked 744 hospitals in the U.S. that were using some form of social media. That's 344 YouTube channels, 530 Facebook pages, 557 Twitter accounts, and 96 blogs.[9]

How are hospitals using social networking to connect with their communities? In just about any way imaginable. Here are just a few examples:

Sutter Eden Medical Center Castro Valley, http://suttermedicalcentercastrovalley.org: Engages the local community about their progress in building the new medical center through a blog and a Twitter account.

Henry Ford Health System, www.henryfordhealth.org: Uses Twitter for real-time education. Through Twitter, Henry Ford has done live surgical Twitter-casts, Q & A with surgeons, updates and breaking news in real time.

Scripps Health, www.scripps.org: Monitors social networks for mentions of the Scripps name and provides suggestions, resources and customer service support in response to customer postings.

Innovis Health, www.innovishealth.com: Leveraged a blog and Twitter during a time of natural disaster during the spring of 2009 to provide real-time updates, freeing up phone lines and providing valuable information to the community. The blog received more than 1,100 media hits and their followers on Twitter included CBS News and FEMA.

Mayo Clinic, http://sharing.mayoclinic.org: Uses a collaborative community blog to give employees, patients, families and friends a place to share stories, creating brand ambassadors. The blog serves as a hub for Facebook, YouTube and Twitter.

What about hospital development offices and foundations?

Social Media isn't for hospitals alone. Development offices and supporting foundations can benefit from the relational, or "social," aspect of social media as well. Think for a second about what really makes fundraising work in the first place. Isn't it all about relationships and connections—the kind that move people to take action and help others?

As you think about how to utilize social media make sure to remember that your relationships with your supporters, donors and advocates have a tremendous impact on their desire to support you financially. And social media gives you an opportunity to build two-way connected relationships online—something the Web has lacked until recent years.

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Let's take a look at a few examples of where social media is being used for fundraising.

BC Children's Hospital Foundation, http://www.bcchf.ca: Has a broad and integrated approach to their social media strategy. They blog (http://bcchf.wordpress.com), tweet (http://twitter.com/bcchf) and participate on Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/BCChildrens) with a focus on building community and driving online giving. Two key aspects of their Facebook strategy are a simple link to their online donation form in the left column of their Facebook page and a custom Facebook application that allows their Facebook fans to show their support by placing a "badge" on their personal Facebook page (http://apps.facebook.com/bcch-superhero/). The badge has already raised more than $8,000 dollars.

Mount Sinai Hospital Foundation, http://www.mshfoundation.ca: Uses Twitter (http://twitter.com/mountSinai) and Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/MountSinaiHospital), but they've gotten creative and added custom tabs for "How to Help" and "Gifts" to their Facebook page. These tabs provide both information and an opportunity for their Facebook fans to support the hospital.

University of California San Francisco Foundation, http://www.ucsf.edu/support/: Has raised more than $56,000 dollars through the Causes application (http://apps.facebook.com/causes/beneficiaries/19347/causes) on Facebook for several causes supporting UCSF's children's hospital and cancer center. What's unique about UCSF is that they don't have a Facebook page. They only use Causes through Facebook, but that seems to be working for them so far.

Overcoming obstacles

Even though the evidence is there for moving forward, there are unique challenges that hospitals and their supporting foundations face in getting started.

It's hard to get approval or buy-in from executive staff

Leadership may think that social media/networking sites are useless, that they provide their hospital or foundation with no real value and that people will spend all their time "playing around." Are these real concerns? Sure. What does it take to overcome these? Show them the value, impact and potential through what others are doing. Look at hospitals, foundations, nonprofits, for-profits, small organizations and large organizations. Show the success of others and come to them with ideas and plans on how you can be successful as well.

We can't get access to social networking sites due to IT restrictions

A common issue with hospitals is that IT departments often limit access

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because they want to keep a tight rein on things to make sure the hospital's network is safe. One suggestion for overcoming this challenge is, if people abuse their access, fire them. That may sound extreme, but when you think about it for a while it makes perfect sense. Isn't it similar to people not doing their job or performing at a less than satisfactory level? Put a policy in place that makes this clear so everyone understands and move on. If accessing these sites is not part of a person's job responsibilities, then limit their access.

There's a disconnect between the hospital and the supporting foundation

This one is tough. Hospitals and their supporting foundations often have conflicting priorities and may not be united around a joint online strategy. If you're a foundation that has worked through your goals and is ready to get started, and your hospital counterpart is not, my suggestion is to lead the way. Start deploying your social networking strategy. If you do it right, you will demonstrate success and educate your counterpart along the way. My guess is they will soon follow. If your hospital already has a social media presence, then you will want to develop a close working relationship with your counterpart and coordinate your efforts.

Does it make sense to piggy-back on the hospitals' social networking sites so your development goals are integrated and executed by the hospital communications or marketing group? Or should your foundation launch its own Facebook page and/or Twitter account and maintain a unique identity? There's no one right answer—hospital foundations are out there successfully engaged in social media on their own and through their hospitals.

A few questions to consider: Can your goals be achieved through the hospital's social networking vehicles? What audience is the hospital reaching through their social media efforts and is that your target audience? For example, some hospitals' social networking sites are largely used by employees, while others primarily engage grateful patients. Do you have the resources to support your efforts in-house? Does the hospital have the resources to support your additional efforts? The best way to proceed will depend on your unique situation.

We don't have staff knowledgeable about social media or how to use it to support our mission

A new skill set is emerging with the rise of social media/networking. Look to hire someone with these skills or develop someone on staff. There are a lot or resources out there to help you get started, from how-to books to webinars. It's a minimal investment in your program's future.

Five steps to start leveraging social media

1. Pick a goal to pursue

Having a social media strategy is not its own objective. Rather, social media strategies can support your existing objectives. Reflect on your organization's current objectives and identify something your organization wants to accomplish through social media. Many organizations find that social networking provides good support for:

- Building awareness.
- Connecting with new supporters.
- Soliciting online gifts.
- Cultivating supporter relationships.

If you are just starting, pick one of these to focus on and let that objective guide you every step of the way.

2. Make success someone's job

Or at least make it an explicit part of someone's job. Treat social media like you would your other communication channels: Figure out where responsibility for your social media programs should reside in your organization and assign responsibility. Making an overt assignment (like you probably do with direct mail, e-mail, telemarketing, public relations and advertising) will let a person or group of people on your staff develop the focus, comprehensive view and skills needed to leverage these new techniques effectively.

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3. Listen

With your team identified and your initial goal in mind, you might be tempted to start doing something. Resist, at least until you have two more pieces in place. The first is your ability to listen in the social media channels. There are at least three reasons for this:

1. Social media is a two-way channel; as politeness prescribes, you need to be ready to listen before you add to the conversation.
2. Organizations like yours already are participating. Seeing what they've done will give you inspiration, cautionary information and a sense of what you need to do to differentiate your organization.
3. Once you do start to contribute content, the disciplined framework for listening you've put in place will be used to measure the reach and impact of your initiatives.

Some starting points for regular monitoring include:

- Use the flexible automated alerts feature through Google to receive periodic e-mails or an RSS feed (which you can set-up through Outlook or Google Reader) to get alerts any time your organization is mentioned across a variety of different types of Web content: www.google.com/alerts.
- Search for your organization's name (or topic words) being used in the micro-blogging world with Twitter's search portal, www.search.twitter.com, and create an RSS feed of the results.
- Track the number of times a blog mentions your organization or related topics at www.technorati.com.
- Set up a listening dashboard where you can monitor all of your searches with free tools like iGoogle or TweetDeck.

Track the number of mentions for your organization name, your staff and events you are currently running in each of these mechanisms. This will help measure your organization's current social media footprint and prepare you to measure the reach of your future initiatives.

4. Establish a baseline social media presence

After establishing your organization's ability to listen in the social media channel, the second step is to establish a baseline presence that you can use as a foundation for your subsequent social media campaigns. Remember the places you choose to engage should be places that make sense based on your objective.

Create a Facebook page

This will provide a simple outlet for any of the more than 400 million Facebook users who would already like to connect with your organization. The first version of your page can be very simple, and you can launch it in minutes. To get started, you don't need to do much more than greet your supporters and provide a link back to your website. Advanced features include importing blog feeds and customizing your page with unique tabs.

Create a Twitter account

This will give your organization a voice to speak with in the micro-blogging world. To get started, send out regular updates about newly available web resources, events or programs your supporters will be interested in. Include links to the root content on your website. Every Twitter strategy should include being responsive, engaging in conversations and providing social capital or value to your supporters.

5. Evolve

Now you have an objective, dedicated staff, a way to listen and to measure results, as well as a baseline presence in the social media landscape. What's next? Reflect on what you've learned in your first few weeks of watchful monitoring, review the program examples above, and formulate the plan for your first social media campaign. Once you determine your team, objective and strategy, evolve your social media toolkit. Explore other platforms to employ, including location-based applications like Foursquare, video sites like YouTube, networking sites like LinkedIn, social bookmarking sites like Delicious and photo sites like Flickr. Your supporters are out there waiting to engage.

Ready? Go!

Editor's note: You can find additional resources, including Frank Barry's interview with Deborah Braidic, who manages social media at Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, on the AHP website at www.ahp.org, Publications and Tools>AHP Journal>AHP Journal Archives>Fall 2010 AHP Journal.

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