

Online Communications for Change



505.466.4044
asr@icchange.org
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Adam Rubel

Hosted by the Santa Fe Community Foundation. A workshop to explore the role online communications can play in helping nonprofit organizations bring about the change they seek.

Key Lecture Points

Four things to take away from this lecture:

- The world, civil society and organizations are changing. We must understand our context or we will become irrelevant.
- First understand your communications needs and goals within this context, then identify the appropriate technologies. Don't lead by identifying the tools you want first.
- Develop your online communications based upon how others will use and view what you create, not on your own desires. Avoid being narcissistic.
- Think big and communicate like a human using technology, not like technology trying to act like a human.

The need for context

It would be quite pointless to begin any discussion on how to effectively use online communications if we were to start by focusing on the technologies that are available to organizations without first examining the context within which organizations operate. Without an understanding of this context, organizations risk becoming ineffective and irrelevant no matter what technology they deploy if it is based upon an obsolete model of change. It is my argument, as well as the view of many others, that we are in a time of transition in the broadest context. Old structures are failing to serve the needs for which they were created and are becoming irrelevant and unsustainable. Just a few of the characteristics of this obsolescence includes:

- Modern era: born out of the industrial/ factory era
- Need for broad scale social, economic, environmental change not widely recognized as being critical
- Most communication tightly controlled and top down: Impersonal, alienating, cliché and pompous with no humor or irony and no listening.

Out of the ashes a new epoch is arising, characterized in part by:

- Entering a post-modern era
- Widely recognized sense of urgency on issues and failing institutions
- Human like communication is becoming norm with less rigidness and more personality
- Government has devolved responsibility to the social sector
- Business wants to do well while doing good
- Donors want more impact for their dollars
- Citizen participation is on the rise

The evolution of the internet has had a profound impact in changing society and the way we communicate:

- An unprecedented flow of ideas from around the world over the internet accelerating the rate at which new forms can be conceived and take shape.
- Facilitation of collaborative efforts to produce results that transcend individual efforts.
- Mass communication has shifted from a monologue to a dialogue
- Growing sense of connection and interdependence.
- Nature deficit, especially in children

This new, networked society is having an impact in changing organizations as well:

- **Shift from managerial thinking to ecosystem thinking:** groups must transcend traditional organization boundaries to create greater good.
- Focus away from organization as means of social change towards organization as a change agent, a catalyst that works through larger networks and leverages all sectors of society for the greater good.
- Organizations no longer control flow of information.

Organizations need to adapt to continue to make themselves relevant. A recent study by the Chronicle of Philanthropy highlights eroding confidence in nonprofit organizations:

- Only 25% say nonprofits do a “very good” job. This figure was 30% in 2006 and 34% in 2003
- 64% of Americans have a “great deal” or “fair amount” of confidence in charitable organizations. This figure was 69% in 2006 and 90% before 9/11/01
- 56% of those with a “great deal” of confidence in charitable organizations say orgs waste a “great deal” or “fair amount” of money.

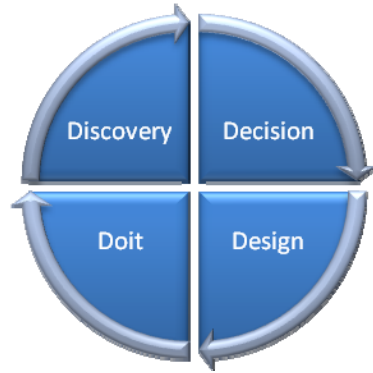
Organizations must think big to be agents of change:

High-impact nonprofits do this	...Not this
Work externally with all sectors of society	Focus exclusively on their own organization
Advocate for policy change and run programs	Only provide direct services, avoid politics
Harness market forces and work with business	Avoid engaging with business or capitalism
Engage outsiders in meaningful experiences; build long-term relationships	Treat volunteers as free labor or donors as check-writers; focus on transactions
Nurture networks of nonprofits, build the field	See fellow nonprofits as “competitors”
Constantly adapt	Become mired in bureaucracy, or get overwhelmed with too many ideas
Empower others to lead and take action	Maintain a command-and-control hierarchy, and allow the CEO to be the “hero”
Use leverage to change entire systems	Use organizational growth to scale impact

Change the Way You Change the World: A Model for Wide-Scale Social Change by Leslie R. Crutchfield & Heather Grant McLeod

Communications Planning

The most critical aspect in any successful online communications endeavor is well thought out communications planning. If the time and resources are not invested up front on this process, your organization will risk spending much more in terms of technology cost, staff time and consulting time as well as limit its chances of a meaningful ROI. There are some fundamental elements to any planning, and they certainly apply in this case to technology planning as well.



Below are some key components that are helpful for a successful planning process:

- Situational Assessment
- Target Audience
- Message development
- Communications Vehicles
- How is success measured?
- Reality check

Online communications are effective when they become a dialogue. Rapport is necessary so there is a connection with the audience, and empathy must be developed to emotionally engage your audience in your cause. Avoid the pitfalls of narcissism – people want to hear about your cause, not about your organization, so be careful in framing things in terms of only building support for your entity. The days of droning, emotionless banter are on their way out. Forget a lifeless “corporate” approach and use human characteristics such as humor to help your cause. The 80/ 20 principal states that 20% of your effort, or what you say, yields 80% of the results, while 80% will only give way to 20% - chose which slice of the pie you want to focus on. Finally, nonprofits have the opportunity, and in some sense obligation, to innovate in their approaches. Remember, you are trying to change something that doesn’t work in the world, not preserve the status quo.

Email

Email is the fundamental technological component used in most organization’s successful online efforts, here are some of the reasons (*From the Gilbert Email Manifesto, www.gilbert.org*):

- Everybody on the net has email and most of them read most of their messages.
- People visit far fewer websites than they get email messages.
- Email messages are treated as To Do items, while bookmarks are often forgotten. Email is always a call to action.
- Email is handled within a familiar user interface, whereas each website has to teach a new interface.
- Email is a very personal medium.
- Email is very much about building a relationship with your constituency.

List Building & Tactics

- Bigger list means more potential donors, people served and supporters

- List needs to be high quality: subscribers that are interested in your cause and will remain on the list for years (building relationship)
- Carry out permission based email marketing, not SPAM!
- Consider segmenting your list
- Make it easy!
- Collect emails at every opportunity
- Exchange a piggyback mailing with another group
- Create and incentive

Email Strategies

- Relationships and Conversion Rates.
- Don't be a narcissist.
- What Format: Plain Text, HTML, Attachment?
- Distribution Technology: Bulk mailing client, list-serve, third party service?
- When to send?
- Provide a clear and consistent subject line
- List the email's contents at the top
- Use short summary paragraphs with link to full article/ item on your website
- Give them something they will want to read!
- Be honest, focused and clear about what you write
- Include an action component and remember to follow up
- Frequency – Not more than once or twice a month.
- Be consistent with the timing of newsletters
- Ask your subscriber to add your "from" address to their address book
- Check your metrics - conversions
- Always provide an easy un-subscribe option

Online Donations

- *"The ability to accept online donations is equivalent to having a bank account. Just because it is there, doesn't mean people are going to begin filling it."*
 - Paraphrased from the Gilbert Center
- It is important to have the right tools, but relationships need to be cultivated.

Online Donation Tools:

- What is your anticipated monthly size and volume of donations?
- Will you need to collect payments in addition to donations?
- What are your overall online communication goals and what is your capacity to meet them?
- What is your budget?

Online donation strategies:

- Fundraising is ALWAYS about building relationships.
- Fundraising online is no different.
- Keep donors and constituents (potential donors) informed and ENGAGED.
- Develop creative campaigns that leverage the tools you have.
- Keep your online presence fresh, consistent and compelling

- Make it easy for them to contribute.
- In a nutshell, build your relationships and drive donors

Website

Having a great looking website is no longer sufficient. How is it connected to your other online strategies to ensure it is adequately utilized and an adequate rate of viewer conversion (from passive viewers to taking guided action) is achieved? Here are some basics:

- People need a reason to visit
- Keep it relevant
- Keep it fresh
- Write for the web
- Keep the layout clean and functional
- Search engine optimization: an afterthought
- Don't display email addresses: name@site.org = SPAM

Ways to promote your website:

- Turn supporters into evangelists
- Distribute your content
- Cross-link with relevant groups
- Display site address at every opportunity: publications, email signatures, t-shirts
- Keep it bound to your email campaigns

There are a myriad of web based tools that are available to nonprofits, many at no or low cost. Again, figuring out which are appropriate for your organization must rise out of the purpose it is intended to serve, not because it is the latest, greatest, and everybody has it. Some that are out there now include:

- Traditional Build vs. Content Management System (CMS)
- Online Surveys
- Forums & Message Boards
- Blogs and Wikis
- Multimedia
- Gaming & Virtual Worlds
- Many developed and emerging low-cost web-based applications

A content management system is a powerful tool that has a database backend and offers many advantages to nonprofit organizations looking to develop their own web presence. These systems come in a wide array of flavors, with some being open source and others being proprietary. Some of the advantages of implementing a CMS for your organization include:

- Separate Design from Content
- Incorporates Many Useful Functions
- Easily Searchable; RSS Feeds
- Fairly Easy to Manage
- Examples: Drupal, Mambo, Joomla, Plone
- Test Drive: www.opensourcecms.com

Social Networking

What is Social Networking?

- Sites that allow individuals and organizations to create online profiles, discover others who share their interest and create an online network of contacts and supporters
- Big buzzword

Social Networks provide nonprofits new opportunities for engagement, including:

- Allows organizations to connect with constituents in non-traditional format
- Allows constituents to connect with each other
- Helps build a spirit of community and sharing around your campaign

There are some key questions you should ask yourself before delving into the world of social networking. Some of these include:

- Is your organization technically savvy and do you have the basics down?
- Is your target audience using social networking tools?
- Are you willing to invest in gaining a real understanding of the medium?
- Are you willing to give up clear editorial control over your brand and message?
- Can you deal with limitations, including site blocking?

There are many “Walled Garden” networks with large user bases and some “Niche Networks” that have a much more limited base. In either case, these networks are closed, which means there is no crossover of accounts from one network to another. Some examples of each kind include:

- “Walled Garden” = Facebook, Myspace, LinkedIn, Twitter, hi5, Bebo, etc
- “Niche Network” (Not necessarily open) = Ning, Change.org, Donorschoose.org, Good2gether, WiserEarth, etc.

Some strategies to consider when utilizing social networks for your organization include:

- First do your planning, establish your goals!
- Go where people are
- Take the time to understand and be a part of your online communities
- Be yourself and use an authentic voice
- Be creative!

Resources

Andy Goodman	www.agoodmanonline.com	Great nonprofit communications resource. Be sure to sign up for free-range thinking newsletter.
ChangeThis	www.changethis.org	Manifestos on change
Common Knowledge	www.commonknow.com	White papers to help orgs leverage the internet
Digital Aid	www.digitalaid.net	Social enterprise helping nonprofits meet their data and website needs
Free Conference	www.freeconference.com	Free conference calls, set up online
Gilbert Center	www.gilbert.org	Home of nonprofit online news
Hershey/ Cause Communications	www.causecommunications.org	Communications consulting firm with some fantastic publications for nonprofits
Idealware	www.idealware.org	Articles and white papers on technology for nonprofits
Network for Good	www.networkforgood.org	Resources for organizations
One Northwest	www.onenw.org	Serves environmental groups in Pacific Northwest, articles helpful to all orgs.
Progressive Technology Project	www.progressivetech.org	Database and tech support for organizations
reCaptcha	http://mailhide.recaptcha.net	A free way to hide your email address on the web
Tech Soup	www.techsoup.org	Articles, resources and discounted software and hardware for organizations
NfG NM Donation Project	http://info.networkforgood.org/newmexico	Through a generous grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, we are able to provide free online fundraising services and training to nonprofits in the state of New Mexico. For 1 year, your organization can receive free: <u>Custom DonateNow</u> Collect online donations to support your mission with our donation processing solution. Processing fee: 3% for credit card donations <u>EmailNow</u> Send email appeals and newsletters that inspire giving and drive supporters to your website (includes up to 10,000 emails). <u>Donor Management Suite</u> Raise money and track your results in one place with our online donor database. Built on the Salesforce.com CRM. Training Improve your online fundraising results with free teleconferences, tips via email, and our Internet Strategy Trainings. Call 1.888.284.7978