

Is Social Media Transforming Philanthropy?



BY SALLY BOUCHER, CFRE

“Facebook was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission—to make the world more open and connected.” This is the opening of a letter Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook CEO, included with the Facebook initial public offering application filed on Feb. 1, 2012.

Unless you have been under a rock, you have witnessed the phenomenal results of the new era of transparency and connection being ushered in by social media. The Arab Spring, the meteoric rise of new charities like Charity: Water, and the mobilization and delivery coordination of resources and manpower in Haiti have all been fueled in part by social media.

Zuckerberg continued, “There is a huge need and a huge opportunity to get everyone in the world connected, to give everyone a voice and to help transform society for the future.”

This sounds a lot like philanthropy, not unlike what we do every day, working in the trenches to position our organizations to build a better future. Isn't philanthropy—at its core—all about creating and strengthening relationships to enhance our missions?

Social media is all about connections.

Philanthropy is all about relationships.

What is the relationship between social media and philanthropy?

What Is 'Social Media'?

Social media is literally transforming the way we live and work. In the broadest sense, the widespread use of social media is breaking down communication barriers and opening organizations, companies, governments and individuals to new kinds of interactions and new levels of transparency. Social media platforms have substantially changed the way organizations, communities and people communicate and are notably different from traditional media for their accessibility, lack of hierarchical structure and rapid interactivity. (See Figure 1.)

1. Charitable organizations are using social media in creative and innovative ways.

Many nonprofits are using one or multiple types of social media to help meet some of these strategic objectives:

- Enhance prospect development through profiling and prospect identification
- Increase constituent engagement via community and relationship building

- Raise funds through nontraditional methods, including community, national and international campaigns

Within the prospect research profession, the discussion of the uses, misuses, pros and cons of social media has been an active topic for several years. A survey conducted by Wealth-Engine (June–July 2011) of 1,300 U.S.-based fundraisers and prospect researchers explored the ways nonprofits are using social media in their profiling, prospecting and engagement activities.

2. What's working: Details from social media sites help flesh out prospect profiles and alert analysts to events that may warrant additional research.

The majority of development professionals responding to the survey indicated they use social media most frequently for finding details regarding employment, education, familial relationships and marital status. LinkedIn is the most popular site, with 72 percent of respondents—and 84 percent of those who identified prospect research as their primary focus—using LinkedIn as a regular source for this type of information. LinkedIn was generally considered more reliable than other platforms, such as Facebook and Myspace, and some respondents felt it was likely to be even more up-to-date than corporate websites for accurate employment and job title information.

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Jennifer Huebner, a research analyst at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, Va., explains how she has successfully harnessed the power of LinkedIn: “I’ve set up searches within LinkedIn with specific criteria to locate alumni who have recently been promoted or changed positions. This has been a great way to identify prospects who may warrant a second look. We have used it not only in ferreting out details of employment histories but also as an opportunity for our gift officers to proactively reach out to prospects with congratulations and build relationships with them.”

Facebook is considered a useful research resource by 52 percent of respondents (54 percent of researchers), with Twitter and YouTube a distant third and fourth in popularity for research purposes at 13 percent and 12 percent, respectively. (See Figure 2.) Researchers are using these sources, in addition to the ways suggested above, to

- determine the social and professional networks of donors and prospects;
- identify the interests, hobbies, causes and missions about which prospects show interest and passion;
- dig deeper to build a more comprehensive picture of their prospect; and
- find photographs and/or video of their prospects.

3. Tapping into social networks helps nonprofits build prospect lists.

Fifty-six percent of respondents use social media to determine the social and professional networks of their prospects and donors. This helps to build a 360-degree view of an individual prospect by identifying relationships that can correlate to higher affinity for your organization and uncover potential influencers and natural partners in the qualification, cultivation and solicitation processes.

This type of networking information also can be useful in the area of prospecting. An organization’s inner circle, for instance its board members, is frequently asked not only to “give”



FIGURE 1

SOCIAL MEDIA
 Social media includes web based and/or digital technologies that facilitate connections among people, information and organizations through interactive communications and networks.

but to “get.” These discussions are normally conducted face-to-face, during which committed board members may, given their understanding of their interests and drivers, suggest some of their social and/or professional connections as good prospects for the organization.

A similar dynamic can work within the cyber sphere. Nonprofits are using the networking data visible in applications like Facebook and LinkedIn to proactively identify their supporters’ connections. These connections also may be good prospects for the organization.

Nonprofits are also identifying prospects and potential prospects through existing groups on social networking sites. For instance, a health-related organization may join health and wellness Facebook groups in its region or nationally. There, it can listen and learn what members care about and add rel-

evant and meaningful content in a non-threatening manner. In this way, it can identify the interests and passions of group members and determine where there is potential overlap with the organization’s mission.

Followers and those who interact with, “like,” add content to or post messages to organization blogs, microblogs, websites, social networking pages or other social media outlets, are expressing a desire to begin or maintain a relationship. Minimally, the organization should be aware of these followers and supporters and research them if warranted. One step is to cross-reference these supporters with the institution’s current database of donors and prospects.

Mark Miller, director of philanthropic marketing and communication at Children’s National Medical

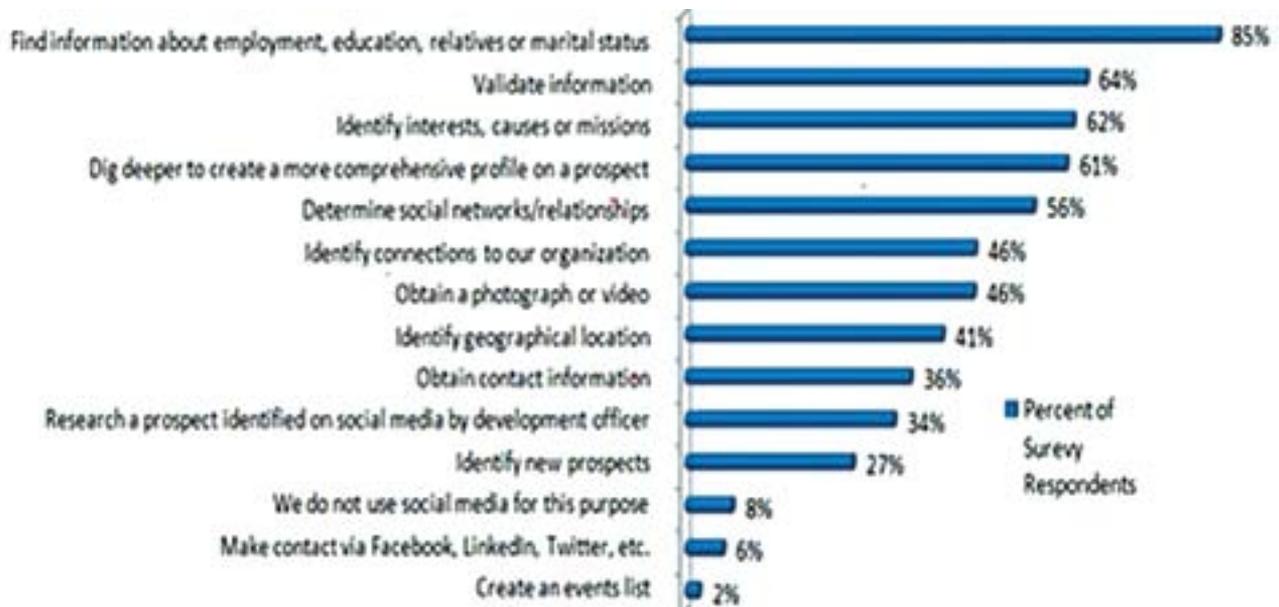
The Ethics of Social Media

Most respondents to the *WealthEngine Social Media Survey 2011* strongly cautioned themselves, their organizations and anyone using social media as a source for prospect data to be fully aware that social media data are self-reported and should be verified using other sources when possible. Many researchers either do not include details from social media if they cannot be cross-verified, or at the least include a note within the profile that information is self-reported and not verified.

Seventy-five percent agree that social media is ethical to use because it is public information just like any other public source, but almost all drew the line at creating connections with prospects (“friending”) for the purpose of collecting personal and otherwise hidden information. Among the 5 percent who disagree that it is ethical to use data from social media in prospect research, their concerns center on the accuracy of the information. Many respondents commented that the use of these data should be in accordance with the *APRA Ethics Statement*, which says in part that any data collected and recorded be both accurate and appropriate to the fundraising process.

FIGURE 2

How survey respondents (1,300 prospect researchers and fundraisers) are using social media in prospect development.



Center in Washington, D.C., explains: “We wanted to better understand how our donors are using social media, so we cross-referenced emails from our donor database with publicly available information on three social media sites: Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. With this information, we’ve learned which tools our donors are using and which platforms are worth investing in to meet their needs.”

Including this type of basic research in your organization’s social networks will tell you if most of your followers are already donors to your cause and which are potential annual fund or major-gift prospects. Additional research, social media surveys and continued engagement through social media and other methods will give you ideas on how to most effectively cultivate those relationships.

4. Social media provides organizations with new ways to engage followers and cultivate relationships.

Nonprofits that are using social media to engage and cultivate relationships with their donors find it valuable in a number of ways. More than 90 percent of survey respondents use social

networking sites to share information about their organizations, missions, upcoming events and activities. While these are important and worthwhile activities, many experts stress the importance of listening to and interacting with followers as being a key ingredient for developing relationships and turning them into beneficial connections to meet organizational objectives.

For the past two years, Children’s National Medical Center has publicly recognized hundreds of community and corporate donors through a week-long “thank-a-thon” on Twitter during Thanksgiving. “Nonprofits are still figuring out the best ways to use social media for fundraising,” Miller says, “but they shouldn’t ignore the tremendous value in stewardship, especially

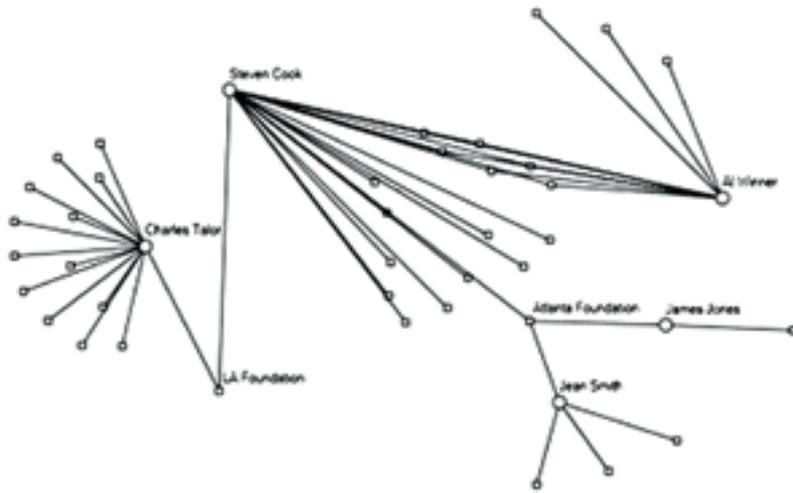
How Researchers Use Social Media

According to the *WealthEngine Social Media Survey 2011*,

- 16 percent of prospect researchers have found blogs to be useful sources of information for prospect research;
- 17 percent use social media resources once a month or even less often;
- 25 percent of researchers have tried video-sharing sites for prospect research, but only 5 percent have found such sites useful;
- 40 percent of prospect research professionals believe that the growing information from social media sources increases the value of the profession;
- 48 percent of prospect researchers use social media resources daily or more frequently;
- Researchers in higher education use social media at this frequency slightly more than average (50 percent); health care just about average (47 percent); and other nonprofits less than average (40 percent); and
- 75 percent agree it is ethical to use social media in prospect research.

Visit http://info.wealthengine.com/rs/wealthengine/images/APRA_2011_SocialMedia.pdf for more information about the survey results.

FIGURE 3



*Network visualization created by Jason Boley
Director, Research Services, Technology and Analytics
Riley Children's Foundation
using NodeXL plug-in with MS Excel 2007*

for corporate partners. The thank-a-thon was such a simple idea—and cost nothing—but the feedback from our partners was so positive.”

Not all social media, or even all social networking sites, are the same. Your Twitter followers may look considerably different from your Facebook fans. To the extent possible, organizations should be learning who these followers are and tailoring their interactions and messages accordingly. Within Facebook, for instance, you can obtain demographic data related to your followers, including gender, location, age ranges and the like. The demographics can be especially useful as you segment these followers for future cultivation opportunities.

At Children's National Medical Center, for example, Miller can see that his organization's Twitter audience is more national than its Facebook audience, which tends to be more regional. And while more than 50 percent of all Facebook users are male, nearly 80 percent of the people who follow the Children's National Medical Center page are female—which makes sense for a children's hospital.

You also can uncover your nonprof-

it's best advocates, who may not be the largest donors but are well connected

and can serve admirably in a volunteer role. As social media usage continues to grow, so will the value of volunteers who are

- influential with many online friends and followers,
- passionate about your organization and/or cause and
- technically savvy and comfortable with the platforms that are important to your communications strategy.

Where Are We Headed?

While the ways nonprofits are using social media (in addition to fundraising) are exciting and moving us in new directions professionally and personally, the most exciting developments are yet to come.

The field is developing so fast that whole new, as yet unimagined, technologies will undoubtedly burst onto our tablets, smartphones and the cloud.

Tips for Using Social Media in Your Organization

1. Don't have a "social media strategy." Integrate social media into your existing strategies.

2. Create guidelines for the effective use of social media. This documentation and/or training should address all legal and ethical considerations, how to appropriately represent the organization in the digital sphere, how to coordinate the organization's messaging across all communications platforms and how to respond to negative publicity.

3. Form a cross-departmental team to coordinate efforts and educate the organization about the benefits of tapping into social media platforms. Social media is a tool that is useful in many departments: fundraising, research, marketing and communications, stewardship, engagement or community relations/outreach. The opportunities to work together to craft effective messaging and interaction strategies with your organization's friends and supporters could improve all aspects of your team's internal and external communications.

4. Encourage conversations. Interactions between the nonprofit and the fan are important, but fan-to-fan communication may be even more beneficial in creating community around important issues. Post questions and create surveys that allow for engagement; these do not always need to be specific to your organization's mission but can tie nicely to current events.

5. Celebrate your stakeholders. Post promotions, milestones, etc., for your constituents, volunteers and staff—let your social media followers feel a sense of personality and community.

6. Test and learn. The only way to gauge what works is by posting frequently, building a following and trying new techniques.

But even without the next big thing, some technologies, already developed and deployed in the commercial sector and larger nonprofits, have the potential to be game-changers for the way we do prospect development. They may need another step or two to make them assessable, affordable and user-friendly, but when the time comes, these innovations will represent significant opportunities.

Social network visualization: There are a multitude of products and technologies available that allow users to map or display quantitatively the relationships between people, subject matter, usage frequency, organizations, etc. Some nonprofits are already using these visualization tools in innovative and effective ways. For most, though, these technologies are beyond budget reach or technological capabilities—or both.

It won't be long before a user-friendly, relatively low-cost product will become more widely available to the nonprofit market, and when that happens, imagine viewing your organization's social networks, or donor management system, by the relationships it represents. This kind of visual transparency will provide deep insights with just the click of a mouse. (See Figure 3.)

- Who are my organization's influencers—the people we need to engage to help spread our message and serve our mission?
- Whom should we invite to this event?
- Who should manage this prospect?
- Who can help us connect to this prospect?
- Who is connected to these grant-making foundations or corporations?

The opportunities provided by visualization technologies that represent complex patterns of social and professional connections and interactions of our constituents will be powerful new tools for prospect research and fundraising offices.

Data mining/analytics: In the commercial sphere, companies are already bringing to market sophisticated tech-

nologies to mine, analyze and integrate the wealth of data generated through social media interactions. This unstructured data represents a huge reservoir of untapped potential. When you are able to harness this data and use it in your data mining and predictive modeling, you will be able to

- better understand your constituencies, your fans and their networks;
- monitor and adjust your cultivation strategy to align with constituent perceptions and interests;
- optimize constituent experiences and relationships; and
- determine the best social media platforms for your organization and the optimal deployment of resources in these areas.

These technologies are just around the corner. Completely new and

unimaginable technologies are right around the block. Social media is transforming philanthropy. And maybe philanthropy is at the heart of social media, too. Now that's a partnership to tweet about!

Note: The article "Is Social Media Transforming Philanthropy?" by Sally Boucher, CFRE, was originally published in the 2012 Spring issue of *Connections*, the online magazine of the Association of Professional Researchers for Advancement (APRA), www.aprahome.org. Reprinted with permission. ©

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Resources

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg's letter that was included with the Facebook initial public offering application filed on Feb. 1, 2012

<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/technology/2012/02/facebook-ipo-mark-zuckerbergs-letter>

AFP Social Media Guidelines

www.afpnet.org/files/ContentDocuments/SocialMediaGuidelines.pdf

APRA Ethics Statement

<http://www.aprahome.org/p/cm/ld/fid=110>

Further reading:

- "The Growth of Social Media: An Infographic," *Search Engine Journal*
www.searchenginejournal.com/the-growth-of-social-media-an-infographic/32788
- *Philanthropy and Social Media*, Institute for Philanthropy, September 2011
www.instituteforphilanthropy.org/cms/pages/documents/Philanthropy%20and%20Social%20Media.pdf
- "Social Media: From Tactics to Strategy," Academic Impressions
www.academicimpressions.com/news/social-media-tactics-strategy
- "State of the Media: The Social Media Report," Nielsen
www.nielsen.com/content/corporate/us/en/insights/reports-downloads/2011/social-media-report-q3.html?status=success