

Oh What a Tangled Web!**... a quick overview of nonprofit use of the Web**

A couple of years ago or so the guidance most nonprofits needed about the Web involved either just establishing a presence at all, or using a relatively static presence wisely. Until then the most common shortcoming of more Web-savvy organizations was indulgence in staff-driven features (employing capabilities just because they were there) over user-centered benefits (or mission-based needs). The most typical approaches were, and largely remain:

The brochure (enduring information)

A Website begins by providing basic information about the organization, its offerings programs and services, and perhaps some external resources. This provides essential visibility, but minimal reason to visit more than once.

The bulletin board (changing information)

At the next level of complexity, the site communicates timely news and information simply and clearly to various constituencies and offers features such as event information and calendars.

Both of these approaches use the power of the Web as a one-way reference tool. The brochure may be refreshed every few months, while parts of the bulletin board must be updated regularly (weekly or even daily). Both serve functions that are still necessary, but further opportunities have transformed what nonprofits can do in cyberspace, starting with:

The marketplace (transactions)

By the late 90s e-commerce became a hot issue, and nonprofits began to note that the Web offers much more than one-way broadcast communication—it can also act as a *marketplace*, not only for goods and services, but for such diverse activities as online giving and event promotion, registration, and payment—all with the added value of gathering data from users.

Once the one-to-many (brochure and bulletin board) and many-to-one (marketplace) communication possibilities began to sink in, a whole new round of invention brought the Web to its current state of interactivity, known as Web 2.0, a boon to nonprofits both externally and internally:

The forum (community, education, advocacy...)

The blossoming of social media capabilities—networking sites, blogs, wikis, Webinars, tweets, etc.—has been magnified by the explosion out of the confines of the computer-based Web to smart phones and other new and/or hybrid devices. The possibilities are so open-ended that they offer a bewildering array of diverse opportunities to every different kind of organization.

Workflow (internal operations)

While most attention is focused (appropriately) on external interactions, the evolving tools for managing and sharing information have enormous potential for even the smallest nonprofits, whether for collaboration, facilitating multi-step tasks, or just scheduling a meeting.

Where we are now

There is much to be said for the brochure and bulletin board uses of the Web, and they can still suffice in Web 1.0 form for many needs. However, 21st century challenges in communications, advocacy, fundraising, education, and many other functions require nonprofits to keep up with the stream of new tools and the evolving ways of using them. However alien Facebook, Twitter, Digg, Delicious... feel to current senior management, they will be eclipsed later—or probably sooner—by phenomena that are even further from the pre-digital age.

The Boomer generation will recall when their mantra was never to trust anyone over 30. Now that we are hitting twice that age, we find that the Millennials and the Digital Natives that follow them exercise comparable scorn for us—not just toward those of us gradually adding text messaging to e-mailing as our arsenal of modern communication tools, but, with poetic justice, toward even the avid bloggers and tweeters who dare to remember life before the DVD. Just as in the 60s and 70s, the role confusion can be challenging to effective action. The disconnect between the generation in charge and the generation that “gets it” has been slowing the adoption of some readily accessible tools and attitudes that offer great opportunities to nonprofits.

Where we're going

The social media revolution has already happened, even if its character is still developing and consequences are still unfolding. Organizations that have not yet begun to adapt to it are already at risk. They may also, of course, have had an advantage so far in watching other organizations make mistakes in approach, strategy, or tools. The central challenge is to absorb the implications of the new landscape, frame new opportunities in terms of mission-based goals, and take actions that will lead to successful adaptation.

What are the opportunities? In broad terms, the new tools, working in conjunction with traditional means, offer major opportunities for organizational effectiveness:

External relations

Communication: Most of the attention paid to date to social media by nonprofits has come from communications and fundraising people. Not surprisingly, they are best placed to see a direct benefit from new means of access—immediate, customizable, inexpensive—to existing constituencies and prospective ones. Social media take the organization beyond the one-to-many mode and offer multiplied engagement through many-to-many discussion.

Relationships: Those who understand development know—and people who start nonprofits quickly find out—fundraising is not a starting point. It is the *result* of developing relationships. While the traditional means of cultivation and stewardship remain critical, social media can cast an enormously broad net, capture the attention of people with shared interests, and begin to establish relationships.

Engagement: Relationships can be developed partially because interactive media can create immediate and vivid connections to an organization and its issues. Through social media virtual visitors are not passive receptors, but are able to be active participants in a discussion. This creates relationships that will lead to support, advocacy, physical visits, or whatever actions constitute the next step in engagement for a given nonprofit.

Feedback: By giving the public an opportunity to interact, an organization can gather valuable insights into how they are perceived in various quarters.

Organizational development

Empowerment: Social media represent a challenge to traditional hierarchical controls, but in recent decades, in both the corporate and nonprofit worlds, individual empowerment has been the preferred route to increased efficiency and effectiveness. Social media is a natural tool for empowering all constituents—trustees, staff, and stakeholders of various sorts—to take initiative, promote the organization, and in the process, increase their effectiveness.

Professional development: New resources, such as Webinars, virtual conferences, training documents and tools shared by other nonprofits offer a vast new portfolio of professional development opportunities that are either inexpensive or free.

Culture: With all of the benefits of interactive media, they represent a major challenge to the organizational culture of most nonprofits. While some individuals thrive on novelty, very few organizations adapt easily to change. Those that do generally are small and/or newly formed. Change typically is more difficult for nonprofits because their staff and other stakeholders are motivated by a personal involvement with and internalization of mission, and are unusually committed not only to the value of their work, but also to the way they do it. It may take some time to effect the changes in organizational culture required to make meaningful use of the power of Web 2.0, but among the rewards will be development of an enhanced ability to adapt to ongoing changes in conditions.

Programs and services

While in each sector the effect will be different, the power of interactive media to deliver information- or knowledge-based services can greatly expand the capacity of an organization to serve its constituents.

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