

A GENEROUS HELPING

Charity is one sector that needs to be accountable in its communications, so it is unsurprising that it is a sector quick to adopt the internet's ever-growing armoury of platforms to target philanthropic surfers. Tictoc's Jo Kerr discovers that charity now often starts at the homepage (or Twitter or Facebook or...).

July 2008 marked a tipping point in the way that charities handle their online presence when the Institute of Fundraising's national convention in London was abuzz with talk of online donations, social networking, Twitter, Flickr, and the rest.

This glut of new platforms and technologies is matched by a huge demand for innovation. However, many in the charity sector still share a profound lack of understanding of the nuances of social media.

While many charities are dipping their toes in the water, there is a desire for an approach that is both strategic and long-term. But what will the future hold for online in the not-for-profit world?

Online expert, and charity strategist, Rachel Beer still sees, "a huge need for the charity sector to get much better at online, aligning all their communications across different areas to help fundraising and campaigning."

"The online environment is a real challenge for lots of brands because it mashes up different audiences in one place, so all your messages have to be appropriate," says Beer.

While she believes that we have yet to see a UK charity with a foolproof social media strategy, she has noticed "nice bits and pieces" from a sector that has only recently started experimenting.

DIVERSE

Dogs Trust was one charity given praise for its canny use of micro-blogging tool Twitter (twitter.com/dogstrust). The site, made popular by a diverse range of famous users like Britney Spears, Stephen Fry and Barack Obama, led to a dog being rehomed only seven months after the Dogs Trust profile launched. For Dogs Trust web editor Alex Goldstein, rehoming had always been one of the aims of her tweets: "We hoped that it would happen, but didn't expect it to so quickly. I tweeted about the dog, linking to a picture of him, and someone who had never engaged with the charity before got in touch."

"A simple idea that was tangible and focussed," is how Beer sums up the Dogs Trust success. "2009 is the year of Twitter, and this is a fantastic example of how to use social media in a straightforward way."



The Dogs trust has seen more than 2,000 followers sign up on Twitter, a figure which is growing quickly, while Shelter CEO Adam Sampson, author of Adam's blog, finds it "relatively easy to churn out 300 words or so"

Dogs Trust currently has over 2,000 followers on Twitter, but that number grows daily. Since launch it has made over 1,600 updates, but Goldstein views Twitter as the least labour intensive of the social media platforms, estimating that she spends only a few minutes a day on her tweets.

The catch phrase, 'Facebook is for people you used to know, Twitter is for people you want to know,' also checks out, as Goldstein uses Twitter to contact "charity social media evangelists who are happy to swap ideas and retweet [or share] interesting posts with their followers," as she adds.

While Dogs Trust is building online success on newer platforms, other charities are sticking to more familiar Web 2.0 technologies. With over 7,000 members the Talking Point forum on the Alzheimer's Society website (www.alzheimers.org.uk/talkingpoint) was originally established by a supporter of the charity.

Now it's the only peer-to-peer support network for

people with Alzheimer's to be recommended by the NHS.

Said Dajani, head of new media for the Alzheimer's Society, echoes the feelings of many charities developing the way they engage with supporters and beneficiaries online: "Charities were nervous of forums at first – online communities can be difficult to manage...but the penny has dropped, and now more and more health charities are jumping on the bandwagon."

RULES

"My advice to any charity thinking about setting up a forum would be: do it, but do it with your eyes open, and consider what's right for you. Each charity has to find their own model, and their own rules."

One charity that has taken the forum model and expanded on it is Macmillan Cancer Support who, after running forums for three years, have now expanded to What Now? (www.whatnow.org.uk), a



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social networking site for cancer sufferers. Designed to offer “more freedom, variety, and options” for its 6,000+ users, the site offers private messaging, live chat, a full social networking profile with pictures and videos, groups, and blogs.

“What Now? members are able to give valuable experiential information about living with cancer that Macmillan staff could never contribute,” says Macmillan’s Thomas Muirhead. “It has helped us increase our generic knowledge of our users, improving the services we provide. We are now more able to tailor the site to the needs of the people who join.”

With online comments a large concern for both charities and corporations it would be understandable if Macmillan were fazed by the possibility of user comments on medical issues. To the contrary, Thomas Muirhead is philosophical: “It is necessary to make a distinction between user generated content and what is from Macmillan.”

“However, there is a wisdom in crowds. For example, if someone were to post that tea tree oil is a cure for cancer, others will post to correct this. Then, when another person searches for tea tree oil as a cure for cancer, they will be linked through to these informative posts.”

LOSING OUT

Another problem faced by many charities is losing out to supporters when it comes to taking the tentative first step on a particular platform, and creating an online profile. Many charities will start this process on YouTube or Bebo only to find a well-meaning volunteer has got there first.

As Rachel Beer explains: “If there is a void, someone will fill it. Your supporters will set up profiles and generate content, storing up problems for later.

People want and need head office leadership, and these people are going to be engaged supporters, who would welcome it.”

Fortunately, housing charity Shelter doesn’t have this problem, as their support for social media goes right to the top – CEO Adam Sampson, author of Adam’s blog (<http://shelter-hosting.org.uk/adamsampson/>).

“I find it relatively easy to churn out 300 words or so,” confesses Sampson, who pens the regular posts himself on issues as diverse as his own media appearances, the internal operation of Shelter, and homelessness both at home and abroad.

While his posts are monitored internally and he is occasionally asked to change what he has written, he relishes the chance to “trespass across different areas and talk about the trivial [when] we do tend to be a bit serious in this sector.”

The decision to show a different side of an organisation through the opportunities of social media is one that’s shared by all the charities at the forefront of this new wave of online development.

Muscular Dystrophy Campaign’s marketing and communications manager Sally Otter sees the charity’s Facebook page as crucial to the development of the charity’s social media presence, as well as the expanding demographic being targeted: “Facebook is free marketing and enables immediate interaction with a broad range of supporters.

“In the past we had to correspond with people by letter but that type of communication doesn’t engage younger supporters. We want to increase our reach as much as possible as muscular dystrophy affects children and adults of all ages. The internet is the best way to appeal to younger people, as they grow up online nowadays.”

However, with so much of this happening on

free-to-use channels, is there a chance that online agencies will be cut out of the loop? Beer thinks not: “We are in a period where people are starting to use these channels themselves in-house because it’s free. However, the technical and strategic thinking is something they will still need input on. External input is required if charities are to use online to their full potential.”

Charities are keen to take further steps in the online arena, however they still rely on agencies to show them the way. As Ben Supple, marketing and communications manager for animal rehoming charity Scottish SPCA puts it: “I don’t doubt that Bebo, Facebook, Twitter and more will start to play a significant role in how we talk to our supporters of today and tomorrow. The key from our perspective is to be guided as to best practice.”

While not yet established on social networking channels, Scottish SPCA currently runs viral video campaigns in its eNewsletters. With open rates reaching over 80 percent, this approach demonstrates the importance of utilising online video in marketing collateral. The obvious next step is the creation of a YouTube channel, as demonstrated by charities like Friends of the Earth (<http://uk.youtube.com/friendsoftheearth>), who with almost 2,500 subscribers are the top non-profit UK channel on YouTube.

BENEFITS

Friends of the Earth’s web manager Chris Graham believes the three key benefits from YouTube are, “debate, campaigning work, and agenda. YouTube is not just driving traffic back to the Friends of the Earth site. It is a form of outreach, engaging with those who are not necessarily expecting to hear from us, and getting our message across in a different way.”



Giving it large (Left to right): Macmillan Cancer Support who have now expanded to What Now? a social networking site for cancer sufferers; with over 7,000 members the Talking Point forum on the Alzheimer's Society website is now the only peer-to-peer support network for people with Alzheimer's to be recommended by the NHS; Friends of The Earth, with almost 2,500 subscribers, is the top non-profit UK channel on YouTube; Mara Triangle in the North-Western part of the Masai Mara game reserve, Kenya, has next to no team or budget. However they integrate Twitter, Flickr; video channel Vimeo, and blogs into their website.

JUMBLEAID.COM – AN ETHICAL RIVAL FOR EBAY?

JumbleAID.com is a new website that allows consumers to find a new home for unwanted items while doing their bit for charity and the environment.

The brainchild of two West Yorkshire entrepreneurs, Simon Pailin and Colin Feeley, JumbleAID.com combines the ethos behind Freecycle with the technology of eBay and aims to reduce the amount of waste sent to landfill, while providing a new income stream for charities.

The initiative has been backed by the co-founders of internet service provider Freeserve, Ajaz Ahmed and Rob Wilmot, as well as The Drum's Agency Agony Uncle, Carl Hopkins. Huddersfield University lecturer Nadio Granata completes the team of six who have invested a six-figure sum into building the complex website and developing the brand.

The JumbleAID process is simple; those looking to get rid of unwanted items can post them online free of charge, nominating a charity they would like to support and a nominal target donation.

Anyone who would like to take a gift registers their interest by making a pledge that they are prepared to pay if successful. The successful Seeker makes their payment and then collection or delivery is organised between the two.

The payment does not go to JumbleAID but directly into a Charities Trust Account who add GiftAid where applicable and distribute the funds, less transaction charges, to the nominated charities. Not a penny of any donation goes to JumbleAID.

According to JumbleAID if only 1% of the adult population of the UK were to put one item a month on to the website and the average donation was just £2, over £10 million per year would be raised for charity. An average donation of £5 could generate over £25 million.

With Barnado's, World Vision, and The Prince's Trust among the founding charity partners, the team behind JumbleAID hopes that ultimately all UK charities will embrace the scheme and publicise it to their members.

Commenting on the potential amounts of money to be raised for charity, Carl says: "Apart from traditional jumlbers, JumbleAID.com attracts a whole new sector to this virtually untapped source for charity revenue generation. It doesn't just make the charity pie get sliced a different way – it actually brings new money to the pot."

The team also hopes that the site will appeal to councils across the UK looking to lower their landfill reduction targets. Leeds City Council is already on board and promoting the site to its residents.

By the same vein, JumbleAID also hopes to appeal to larger companies keen to make a difference on the corporate social responsibility agenda. The site already has the support of HSBC and Principle Group who are also keen to involve their employees and raise money for their preferred charities. But more corporate support in the form of sponsorship, advertising and affiliate marketing is needed to promote, develop and sustain the site.

Future plans for the site involve extensions of the JumbleAID brand to help even more charities and interest groups that include education, business, communities and even JumbleKids. There is also talk of TV channels and ultimately the team wants to take the JumbleAID name worldwide.

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The use of video by charities online increased over 2008 with a growth in video channels, and phone applications. And the iPhone will continue to power this growth.

This growth could be fueled by 12 seconds (http://12seconds.tv), a micro-video application that limits the length of movies you can upload to 12 second clips (because, according to the site's creators, "anything longer is boring") while working in tandem with your mobile phone.

A first step for organisations new to social media could be as simple as setting up an RSS feed from their website to a Twitter account, however for some charities it's about finding "the next exciting things to emerge online" rather than choosing easy options.

"We are entering a period of consolidation in terms of the variety of platforms available," Rachel Beer says. "There has been an explosion in microblogging services, and there's still a huge amount of fragmentation with new ones launching all the time and others dropping off. The biggest growth [in 2009] will be new functionality in existing platforms."

By far the most important development could be an increase in connectivity within social media strategy. Perhaps surprisingly, Rachel Beer looks to Africa where one small charity is putting integrated digital solutions to much better use than some of its bigger Western counterparts.

Mara Triangle (http://www.maratriangle.org) in the North-Western part of the Masai Mara game reserve, Kenya, has next to no team or budget. However they integrate Twitter, Flickr, video channel Vimeo, and blogs into their website. They use these tools together to tell great stories of the area's wildlife and people, while raising vital funds: an ideal model for charities striving to meet the challenges of the online world.

