

Module 2: The Value of Social Media

Learning Objectives

At the end of this module, readers should understand:

- The **value of social media** to:
 - **Organizations** in general
 - **Non-profit organizations**
 - **Scientists**
- The **importance of learning from social media experiences** in fields outside of your own

The Lesson

Many individuals may not understand the value of social media, both to their own personal and professional development, and to the success of the organization they work with. This module will provide an overview of the value of social media, generally, to nonprofits, and to the scientific community.

The Value of Social Media

Social media is valuable to a variety of individuals and organizations for many reasons. According to Kaplan and Haenlein,¹ “Social Media represent[s] a revolutionary new trend that should be of interest to companies operating in online space—or any space, for that matter.” By looking on social media sites the importance is clear across many fields: for example, the President of the United States, Barack Obama, has an active Twitter account with 40.3 million followers. Kietzmann² notes two other events from distinct fields that create a picture of just how present and important social media is: The New York Times hired its first social media editor over 4 years ago, and the Catholic Press Association provides educational materials on how the church can use social media.

Social media has been studied extensively in business and marketing for many years. More recently, a body of literature on social media for nonprofits has emerged, however, much can still be learned

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from the past experiences of others. Kaplan and Haenlein² provide insight into social media's value to organizations of all kinds:

“Social Media allow firms to engage in timely and direct end-consumer contact at relatively low cost and higher levels of efficiency than can be achieved with more traditional communication tools. This makes Social Media not only relevant for large multinational firms, but also for small and medium sized companies, and even nonprofit and governmental agencies. Using Social Media is not an easy task and may require new ways of thinking, but the potential gains are far from being negligible.”

Value of Social Media to Nonprofits

There is increasing recognition of the value of social media to nonprofits. Social media allows nonprofits to build awareness of their mission, grow their influence, and empower their supporters to spread their message³. One way to understand the value of social media to nonprofits is through the lens of building a “networked nonprofit”. Scarce et al. explains this term by saying that⁴ organizations are intentionally filling the role of “network weaver”. A weaving network involves connecting both likeminded and diverse individuals and encouraging them to build relationships by working together on small projects.⁴ Here, we will briefly describe what it means to be a **networked nonprofit**, and follow with an explanation of the value of social media to these organizations.

The networked nonprofit. Although it has been suggested that the largest organizations are most successful, strengthening your network as a small organization can have huge benefits. Being a networked nonprofit involves emphasizing connectivity and social capital over hierarchy.⁴ A networked nonprofit must think of itself as part of a larger network, rather than at the centre of its own. It must focus less on the growth of the organization itself, and more on establishing a strong network with like-minded, long-term partners. It is important to focus on the long-term as a networked nonprofit, even if this occurs at the cost of certain short-term successes. A networked nonprofit must also focus on its mission rather than its own growth and development, and on trust rather than control. A critical behaviour of a networked nonprofit is to mobilize resources outside of its own control. This allows nonprofits to achieve missions more efficiently, effectively, and more sustainably than if they were working alone. It also allows them to focus on developing their own expertise, since its partners can provide other expert resources. According to Wei-Skillern and Marciano,⁵ “nonprofits that pursue their missions through networks of long-term, trust-based partnerships consistently achieve more sustainable mission impact with fewer resources than do monolithic organizations that try to do everything by themselves.”⁵

Social media for networked nonprofits. Social media can, by nature, help nonprofits meet their networking objectives. The large and diverse networks that exist on social media and the potential to build new networks using social media are critical access points for nonprofits to engage with their networks. Social media increases nonprofits' ability to communicate with various stakeholders, including: clients, regulators, volunteers, traditional media, and the general public.⁶ By networking with these stakeholders on social media, nonprofits can help to: weave community, access diverse perspectives from large populations, build and share knowledge, mobilize people, coordinate resources, and produce action.⁴ For example, knowledge can be built and shared through discussion in online spaces, and diverse perspectives can be accessed by crowdsourcing for expertise.⁴

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To complete this section, we refer to a table from Convio³, listing ten benefits of social media for nonprofits.

Table 1. Ten Key Benefits of Social Media for Nonprofits³

► Ten Key Benefits of Social Media for Nonprofits
1. Learn what your supporters are saying and sharing about your organization.
2. Drive traffic to your various web properties—website, blog, Facebook, etc.
3. Improve results on search engine result pages with keyword rich content.
4. Drive visitors to online donation pages.
5. Enable supporters to distribute messages about your organization through their social web presence.
6. Empower your most passionate and influential supporters to promote your organization.
7. Enable grassroots movements in real-time and rapidly respond to unforeseen events.
8. Humanize your organization by not limiting communications to traditional methods or messages.
9. Acquire new contacts and build your email housefile.
10. Increase trust and loyalty from your supporters by allowing them to share their voice through feedback forums.

Value of Social Media to Scientists

Beyond the nonprofit sector, it is important for organizations to understand the diverse values and potential uses for social media. Certain organizations will benefit from learning about social media use in fields that relate to their work. For example, a nonprofit organization like the CCGHR, whose mission includes building and strengthening the global health research network in Canada, can benefit from understanding the value and uses of social media to scientists and to academics. This section will explore the benefits of social media to scientists, but all nonprofits are encouraged to explore social media values in the fields that are most relevant to their work. Learning from experiences in other fields, even unrelated, can also be helpful to understanding the landscape of social media.

There are many reasons why scientists should be encouraged to tap into social media channels. Social media allows scientists to build professional profiles, communicate with one another, and be a voice to the public for science.⁷ Darling⁸ states, “Social media can be a powerful tool to speed up how scientists create, publish and communicate their research.”

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To aid professional development, scientists can build profiles online that feature their appointments, credentials, publications, and research interests. Over sites like Twitter, researchers can connect with other like-minded professionals. The potential to network professionally over sites like Twitter and LinkedIn is significant, and online introductions can facilitate real-world interactions at future conferences and workshops. Researchers and other employers are also likely to post professional opportunities via social media channels like LinkedIn.⁷

Scientists can also use social media to impact different communities. The scientific community can be strengthened online by sharing publications, making researchers aware of work they may have otherwise not discovered. Also, scientists can promote their thoughts and opinions through personal posts and contributions to online discussions. Online discussions between researchers can facilitate “fast-paced discussions of topics that scientists ‘want and need to discuss’ (e.g., topics where peer review is not suitable or necessary)”.⁷ Scientists can circulate information about upcoming events, and also tweet from conferences to keep other scientists informed about happenings as they occur.⁷

By posting their work on social networks, scientists also have the opportunity to engage with the general public about academic findings. The ability for scientists and the public to communicate directly over social networks is exciting because of its potential in stimulating meaningful discussion and deliberation about current research (Darling, 2013). Not only can online scientific communities promote important causes to the public, but also connect with policymakers. This has previously been seen in the economic community, “where blog posts and online discussions led to groundbreaking policy decisions at the US Federal Reserve.”⁷

To illustrate the potential for scientists to engage with many audiences over social media, we can look to a study conducted by Darling. In a survey of 116 marine scientists who actively tweet, it was found that 55% of followers were scientists and 45% were media, NGOs and the public. Darling also noted the potential for policymakers to read scientists’ tweets, and that funding boards are beginning to turn to social media impact when considering the impact of a research project.⁸

Steps to Take

1. Ensure you understand the value of social media to your nonprofit, and that all staff and volunteers at the nonprofit also have some understanding of this value.
2. Explore the value of social media to other fields, including fields related to your nonprofit’s work and less related fields that offer valuable lessons in using social media effectively.

Resources

For Nonprofits

Heather Mansfield’s 2012 book, “Social Media for Social Good: A How-To Guide for Nonprofits” offers extensive advice for nonprofits desiring to use social media effectively, and speaks to the value of social media for nonprofits.

Beth Kanter provides various resources on how nonprofit organizations can become “networked

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nonprofits". She wrote an article called "Becoming a Networked Nonprofit" for the Stanford Social Innovation Review, which can be accessed at http://www.ssireview.org/blog/entry/becoming_a_networked_nonprofit. She also co-authored a book called "The Networked Nonprofit", and authored a second book called "Measuring the Networked Nonprofit."

For scientists

- ScienceOnline: a diverse group that comes together to conduct, share, and communicate about science online. <http://scienceonline.com>
- COMPASS: an organization working to connect scientists and their work with society; offers social media training workshops for scientists. <http://compassonline.org/>
- Escape from the Ivory Tower: a guide teaching scientists how to communicate effectively with the public through various media
- Superfund Program at Oregon State University: offers a list of resources for science and social media. <http://superfund.oregonstate.edu/>

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