

Social Media Revolutionizing Non-for-Profit Communication

Social media is revolutionizing how we communicate and work together. While the business sector is rapidly adopting these new ideas and techniques, the same transformation has yet to take place among NGOs and development agencies.

This brief is intended as an introduction for organizations assessing the potential of social media in obtaining their goals.

Connecting Through Social Media

Social media

Social media is an umbrella term that defines the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction and the construct of words pictures, videos and audio.

Social media has brought about a fundamental shift in the way we communicate, connect and collaborate with people. The old communication model was based around a controlled monologue, with the message going from one to many. Social media on the other hand enables dialogue and mass communication, with users interacting, contributing and sharing information with others.

As a result, millions of people are now able to connect using tools such as blogs, microblogs, online chats, RSS feeds, widgets, social networking, social bookmarking, message boards, video sharing, photos sharing, virtual worlds, wikis and more.

The use of these social media tools is widespread and continues to grow. There are for example currently:

- 118 million MySpace users
- 132 million Facebook accounts
- 40 million articles on Wikipedia
- 100 million videos on YouTube (with 10 hours worth of film updated every hour)
- 200 million blogs
- 1.5 million residents in Second Life as well as over 100 million avatars in Habbo

Social media in Figures

Of the 1.407 billion people using the Internet:

- 73% have read a blog
- 45% have started their own blog
- 39% subscribe to a RSS feed
- 57% have joined a social network
- 55% have uploaded photos
- 83% have watched a video

Social media has already become part of the

everyday. Over time, it will become more pervasive and therefore a critical factor in the success of any communications and marketing effort.

Though all ages and groups use social media, it is particularly important for connecting with younger 'digital native' generations who have already fully embraced this communications model. 'Digital natives', spend more than 16 hours a week online compared to the 7 hours spent by the 'digital immigrant', with 96% having joined at least one social network.

Social Media Tools

Here is a quick explanation of some popular forms of social media:

Blogs

Weblogs, or blogs, are websites that usually combine text, images, and links to other blogs and web sites related to its topic. Many bloggers provide commentary or news on a particular subject while others use them as forms of personal online diaries. The ability for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of the tool.

Blogs have been heralded as a revolution in mass communication. The popularity of blogs, is among others, due to the below factors:

- Starting a blog is easy, there's no need for sophisticated knowledge of web publishing
- Blogs are timely and allow for content updates without an editorial review
- The immediacy gives them the leverage to pick up on breaking news stories
- The tone of most bogs is informal and personal
- Most blog host services are free

Microblogs

Micro-blogging is a form of blogging that allows users to write and publish brief text updates. The benefit of micro-blogging is that messages can be submitted rapidly in a variety of ways, including text and instant messaging, email, MP3 or through the web. Messages can thus be sent on the move, for example from a mobile phone and are instantly updated on a blog and to subscribers.

The most popular microblog service is [Twitter](#), though more recently launched tools such as [FriendFeed](#), [Pownce](#), [Spoink](#) and [Plurk](#) are gaining popularity. These latter services seek to add to the minimalism of microblogging by integrating it with file-sharing, event invitations, podcasting, as well as mobile audio, video and picture formats.

Popular social networking websites like such as [Facebook](#), [MySpace](#) and [LinkedIn](#) also have a type of micro-blogging feature called "status updates".

Online chats

Online chat is a way of communicating informally by sending text messages to people in the same online chat-room in real-time, using tools such as instant messaging. File sharing and web cameras are included in some programmes and almost all online chat or messaging services allow users to display or send photos. Among the more popular instant messaging services are [American Online \(AOL\) Instant Messenger](#), [Microsoft Network \(MSN\) Messenger](#), and [Yahoo! Messenger](#).

Bookmarking and link sharing

Social bookmarking is a way of easily saving, tagging and sharing information online. In these systems, saved links are usually public, though they can also be saved privately and shared only with specified people or groups. Many services provide web feeds for their lists of bookmarks, including lists organized by tags. This allows subscribers to become aware and discover new bookmarks as they are saved, shared, and tagged by other users. The sites are free.

[Del.icio.us](#) is currently the most popular bookmarking service. It has more than three million users and 100 million saved URLs. [Digg](#), [Yahoo!Buzz](#), and [Reddit](#) are a few other examples of tools through which people can discover and share content on the internet by submitting links and stories to the site, as well as rating and commenting on submitted links and stories.

RSS feeds

RSS (Rich Site Summary) is a tool for delivering and receiving regular updates on web content. Through RSS feeds people can stay informed without visiting sites individually or joining their newsletters etc. Feed Reader or News Aggregator software is needed to collect the RSS feeds from various sites and display them for the user.

Most Popular Social Networking Sites

- Bebo - 40 million users (US/UK)
- Facebook - 132 million users (global)
- Friendster - 60 million users (South- East Asia)
- Habbo - 100 million users (teen, global)
- Hi5 - 70 million users (teen, Portugal, Cyprus, Romania, Latin America)
- MySpace - 110 million users (global)
- Orkut - 67 million users (Brazil, India)

Social networking

A social network site is a service, which enables the creation of an online community. The main types of social networking services contain directories, means to connect with other users, and recommender systems linked to trust. Popular methods combine these functions with a variety of externally built applications, with [MySpace](#) and [Facebook](#) being the most widely used.

Alongside blogging, social networking has become the most powerful new way of sharing information and connecting with people. The immensely popular service places peer-to-peer influencing at the core, and enables local conversations to rapidly spread on a global scale.

Understanding the way people link through these networks, picking up, creating and sharing content on the way, is central to success in social media.

Video and photo sharing

Video sharing websites enable users to upload, share and view video clips. The bulk of video sites offer free services and are easy to use. The most popular video site is [YouTube](#), with over 100 million videos uploaded to date. Other popular sites include [Google Video](#), [Yahoo Video](#) and [Vimeo](#).

With the tag line ‘Broadcast Yourself’, YouTube has fundamentally changed how video content is delivered. Previously one had to invest a significant amount of money to produce a sophisticated video that would attract attention. Now anyone with access to a handheld camera and a good idea has the means to create a video viewed by millions, opening up a completely new environment for marketing.

[Flickr](#) is currently the most used photo-sharing site. In addition to being a popular web site for sharing personal photographs, the service is widely used by bloggers as a photo repository. Its popularity has been fueled by its organization tools, which allow photos to be tagged and browsed by a certain topic.

Virtual Worlds

A virtual world is a computer based, simulated environment intended for users to inhabit and interact through created avatars. The basic avatar is human in appearance, but may be of either gender, have a wide range of physical attributes, and may be clothed or otherwise customized to produce a wide variety of virtual life forms.

The most popular of these worlds are [Second Life](#), a 3D world created mostly by its residents, and [Habbo](#) with over 100 million avatars. Due to their growing popularity, virtual worlds are increasingly being used by the private and non-for-profit sector for marketing, educational and information sharing purposes.

Mobile Phones

At the same time as social media is becoming part of the everyday, another important technology transition is taking place: the mobile device is displacing the personal computer for many commonplace communications tasks. The phone already handles voice, email, text and instant messaging, mobile TV and music, web browsing, commerce, social networking/bloggging on the move, accessing and managing professional data, etc. This link up of the phone with the Internet will only continue to evolve.

Mobile phones are also important tools in developing country communications. They also provide new opportunities for improving programmes (for example, data collection, social mobilization, education, emergency/crisis support).

Widgets

A widget is a snapshot of a web page that is displayed in another web site by pasting a small piece of code on the page. It allows information to be shown on the site without the host having to create and update the content. Widgets can be particularly useful advocacy and fundraising tools (such as [Six Degrees](#) and [Yahoo!For Good](#)) as hosts can also personalize them.

Viral Marketing

Viral marketing encourages individuals to pass on a message through social media, creating the potential for exponential growth in exposure and influence. The strategy takes advantage of rapid multiplications (like viruses) to bring the message to a wide audience.

The growing popularity of the above mentioned social media tools has made viral marketing one of the most effective means of communicating, campaigning and advocating today.

“The future belongs to the people who unleash ideaviruses. What’s an ideavirus? It’s a big idea that runs amok across the target audience. It’s an idea that propagates through a section of the population, teaching and changing and influencing everyone it touches”

Seth Godin, Unleashing the Ideavirus

In addition to reaching a large audience, viral marketing offers a cost-effective solution compared to traditional techniques, which are becoming increasingly expensive and complex to implement and manage (due to user segmentation). Moreover, unlike most traditional campaigning, viral campaigns are measurable and can provide accountability when tracked.

A final strong point is that it can be used successfully even when a brand or issue is unknown or has no obvious ‘wow’ factor. The buzz is instead created around the viral campaign agent, which then stimulates and builds interest in the issue itself. The challenge in doing this, however, is to have a creative, intriguing ‘ideavirus’ which gets the content on to conversational agendas and ensures that people share it.

What Can Social Media Do For International Development?

Social media is revolutionizing the way in which charities and development agencies interact and communicate. The tools provide new, better ways for stakeholders to collaborate as well as novel means of both presenting development and engaging people in the issues.

The specific benefits of social media are:

- Social media offers cost effective ways to substantially increase an organization's visibility.
- Social media enables organizations to connect with new audiences, and to differentiate them according to their interests.
- The impact of social media is readily measurable, allowing organizations to evaluate and maximize the effectiveness of their campaigns.
- Social media enables an organization to build and easily communicate with a large supporter group who can act and advocate on behalf of the organization.
- Social media provides new tools for mobilizing resources, including enabling supporters to reach out and fundraise from their own social networks.
- Social media allows organizations to receive and publish real-time information, particularly facilitating communication from the field.
- Social media ensures better reach for news, marketing and information material.
- Social media spurs real life action (mass advocacy, social mobilization, message up-take, donations, to mention a few).

A few examples of potential social media uses include:

- Using microblog feeds for urgent mini press releases/updates to key media and donor contacts.
- Receiving real-time news through Twitter as well as voice updates through Earfl from staff in an emergency/crisis situation. Linking these updates to an agency blog covering the emergency (with RSS feeds and links to media, donors, Ministries, influential bloggers, social networks).
- Creating video news releases, short agency intros, mini episodes of 'stories from the field' to be shared through an organizational channel on YouTube (tagging each video with popular key words to optimize search).
- Offering easy-to-build personal fundraising pages or widgets for supporters to use on their social networking sites to encourage action/donations from friends and peers.
- Building organizational and campaign-specific profiles on social networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace through which to recruit and inform supporters 'word of mouth' .
- Promoting an advocacy campaign for free and at an accelerated pace through viral marketing techniques.
- Establishing an internal, collaborative staff blog in preparation of an international meeting and a social networking site event page for attendees to connect through.

- Conducting a social mobilization campaign through a linked mobile/networking site/blogosphere strategy.

These are just a few examples of ways of using social media. With continuously evolving technologies and shifting of services, the challenge in using social media will be in identifying the right combination of tools (for audience and content) as well as developing original, creative ideas that people want to interact with and share with others.