Chapter 49

Social Media as a Tool for Nonprofit Advocacy and Civic Engagement:
A Case Study of Blue Star Families

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ABSTRACT

Blue Star Families is a small nonprofit organization whose goal is to create a virtual community for military families, spouses, children, relatives, and the general public. Founded in 2009 by a group of military spouses, Blue Star Families combines community building and civic engagement with an advocacy role on behalf of military families. Blue Star Families aims to create a cross-sectoral community space that includes other nonprofit organizations, government agencies, private businesses, and private citizens. The organization employs several forms of social media to accomplish its goals. While Blue Star Families has been largely successful in its efforts, the study finds that social media creates challenges for small organizations, particularly in terms of monitoring for appropriate use of the common space by members of the community, acquiring adequate staff resources to analyze usage data, and finding resources to purchase access to more powerful analytics.

INTRODUCTION

Nonprofit organizations are using various social media vehicles as a way to deliver their messages, gain additional interest from new viewers, inculcate sympathizers, propagate their volunteer force, build relationships with community peers and political figures, and generate revenue for their outreach efforts. While practitioners and academics recognize the potential of social media to further the goals of nonprofit organizations, there is a dearth of empirical research illustrating the use and effectiveness of this tool, notably in the areas of non-partisan advocacy and civic

engagement. Nonprofit organizations are actively employing social media tools for advocacy and civic engagement purposes, yet little is known of the effectiveness of these activities (Miller-Stevens & Gable, 2013).

This study addresses the topic of social media use and effectiveness by conducting a case study of Blue Star Families, a nonprofit organization that relies heavily on social media for advocacy and civic engagement purposes. The study asks the questions: What social media tools and methods are being used for advocacy and civic engagement purposes? What is the perceived effectiveness of these methods and how is effectiveness being measured? What are the organizational challenges of social media and how have the challenges been overcome? To answer these questions, the social media strategies employed by Blue Star Families are explored. The aims of the study are twofold: To provide empirical evidence for practitioners and academics of effective social media strategies and tactics that will help nonprofit organizations accomplish their goals of advocacy and civic engagement over a sustainable period, and also to offer insights of the challenges and successes faced by nonprofit organizations working in the cross-sectoral environments of the public and nonprofit sectors.

This research is important for several reasons. The case represents an examination of a virtual organization that relies on the use of social media for its very existence. Without social media tools, Blue Star Families could not achieve its mission of community building for a population spread around the globe. Second, the case taps into the people in the organization who both use and manage social media tools. Rather than focusing on senior executives in the organization, real-world experiences were examined and information was gained about both the strengths and challenges of social media use in a small nonprofit organization. Third, this case is an example of an effort to connect military families (a traditionally discon-

nected group) with each other, as well as with the broader community. The community building and social capital generation efforts offer a different perspective for nonprofit operations. Fourth, the case examines the utility of the common metrics employed to judge the efficacy of the more common tools of social media–Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram. As more nonprofits move to the use of social media tools, the ways in which these organizations evaluate and judge their social media efforts are brought sharply into focus, and there is much to be learned from the experiences of other organizations and their application of metrics.

Finally, this case illustrates how small nonprofits can use social media tools as a "force multiplier." Judicious and careful use of social media can extend the reach of a small organization well beyond traditional geographic and social boundaries, and can do so at a small monetary cost. The use of social media is not free, however, and the organizational and staff costs associated with social media use are not insignificant. This case examines some of these challenges, and discusses ways in which organizations can ensure that social media use does not detract from other organizational missions.

The chapter is organized as follows: first, an overview of the definitions of civic engagement and advocacy within a nonprofit context are provided. Second, social media is discussed from a broad perspective, followed by a review of the limited empirical research on nonprofit organizations' use of social media for advocacy and civic engagement purposes. Next, the research methodology, data, and analyses are explained. This is followed by an overview of Blue Star Families and a discussion of the organization's use of social media for advocacy and civic engagement, and the organizational challenges this tool presents. The chapter concludes by offering recommendations to address the challenges revealed in the case study analysis and discussion.

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