

Understanding Nonprofit Organizations' Use of Social Networking Sites: An Examination of Management Factors

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how nonprofit organizations use social networking sites to enhance stakeholder relations and what organizational management factors may contribute to the effective use of social networking sites. Local nonprofit organizations in the Central Florida area were surveyed. The authors found that the strategic use of social networking sites can better foster online connections between nonprofit organizations and their stakeholders. Organizational managerial decisions can have a great impact on how effectively organizations use their social networking sites.

KEYWORDS

Nonprofit Organizations, Social Networking Sites, Stakeholder Relations, Strategic Use

INTRODUCTION

Social networking site¹ can be defined as web-based services that allow users to create a profile in the system and to view the information updates and connections made by them and others in the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211). Social networking sites allow users to explicitly articulate their social connections, make their connections visible to others, and see the social networks of other friends in the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Twitter have instigated an unprecedented paradigm shift in the way the world communicates. Many nonprofit leaders realize the immense potential to reach and attract a vast audience utilizing innovative social networking websites (Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009). Previous studies have shown that nonprofit organizations adopting social networking sites enhance their advocacy and positively affect donor behaviors (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Shier & Handy, 2012; Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009).

Social networking sites provide an interactive and decentralized structure for nonprofits to communicate with their stakeholders (Guo & Saxton, 2014). Individuals can directly communicate with an organization by sending messages on Facebook or 'tweeting' a favorite nonprofit's link on Twitter. And through social network sites nonprofit organizations are able to create a dynamic web presence that creatively interact with their supporters (Waters & Lo, 2012). Nonprofit organizations can utilize YouTube to tell their story through a dramatic video, choose Facebook to ask the supporters to attend a special event, or choose Pinterest to educate the public through purposeful images and web links. Nonprofit practitioners are convinced that using social networking sites to engage with people based on common interests is more effectual and entertaining than traditional, pre-social network methods (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011). Social networking sites are bringing an exciting and bright future to the charities.

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However, before nonprofit leaders choose to rush exclusively into social networking sites, they need to be aware that having a dynamic website is not a substitute for effective public engagement. Many nonprofit experts point out that organization leaders are often not fully prepared before they move significant resources online (Kanter & Paine, 2012). They lack a systematic plan to measure and analyze valuable data that could be available from an online source; opportunities to evaluate performance and monitor information flow are lost. Instead, most organizations have a simple, graphic webpage with little built-in utility (Kanter & Paine, 2012). There is limited literature that examines how to best use social networking sites to engage with stakeholders.

In this study, we examined factors that affect nonprofit organizations' interactions with their stakeholders using social networking sites. We surveyed local nonprofit organizations in the Central Florida area that have a presence on the social networking sites. We found that a large number of the surveyed nonprofit organizations did not have clear strategic goals for using social networking sites. Although the majority of nonprofit organizations monitored their social network sites, only a small percentage actually used analytic tools to analyze their data on social networking sites. Nonprofit organizations that spent time managing their social networking sites could develop more social ties with their stakeholders and gain more interactive stakeholders on the social networking sites. We also found that having target audience is another important element in a nonprofit organization's strategy of using social networking sites. Nonprofit organizations can use social networking sites as an interactive tool to reach a large audience with a great passion for philanthropy. However, the nonprofit organizations need to effectively invest their limited resources in social networking sites. We argued that nonprofit managers must think strategically and align their use of social networking sites with their organizational missions, goals, and programs in order to build strong stakeholder relations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nonprofit organizations use social networking sites to communicate with stakeholders (Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009; Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012; Waters, 2011). The online mechanism is also used to educate the public about the organizations' missions and programs (Waters et al., 2009). Common social networking sites include, but are not limited to, Facebook, Twitter, Google+, LinkedIn, and Pinterest (Xu & Li, 2013, p. 91). These sites, bring together people who might not be able to connect in the real world (Best & Krueger, 2006). Social networking sites not only create, maintain, and engage with large audiences, but they also simultaneously attract new and younger people every day (Saxton & Wang, 2013). Many scholars believe social networking sites can improve advocacy and fundraising efforts (Guo & Saxton, 2014; Reddick & Ponomariov, 2013; Saxton, Guo, Chiu, & Feng, 2012). Nonprofit organizations are vital to society by representing neglected public interests and promoting changes in perceptions and policy (Guo & Saxton, 2014).

To be able to better pursue organizational missions, nonprofit organizations foster dialogic interactions with an audience who shares similar concerns or interests related to societal issues. This can be done expeditiously through social networking sites (Guo & Saxton, 2014). These new online channels allow the organizations to engage with potential stakeholders by sharing, cooperating, and activating awareness in near-real time (Greenberg & MacAulay, 2009). For example, donors are particularly important stakeholders to nonprofit organizations. Studies presented that social networking sites could benefit fundraising activities (Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009; Saxton & Wang, 2013). Pentecost and Andrews (2010) pointed out that social networking sites are important tools to enhance a donor's perception of the importance of the charity for giving.

Connections on Social Networking Sites

Nonprofit organizations may use various types of social networking sites for different goals, such as raising awareness, building the brand, and connecting with their stakeholders. To obtain these organizational goals requires relationship-cultivation (Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009; Ott, 2001).

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