Chapter 5.8

# The Use of Social Media by Nonprofit Organizations:
## An Examination from the Diffusion of Innovations Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Nonprofit organizations are an essential part of the social, political, and economic landscape of contemporary society. Social media provide ample opportunities for these organizations to increase their community presence, impact, effectiveness, and efficiency. A qualitative study of 39 nonprofit leaders explored how nonprofits are utilizing the potential of the social media technologies to carry out their programs and services. Thematic analysis revealed that nonprofits are slowly embracing the possibilities offered by the new social interaction technologies. Most nonprofit organizations lag behind and wait to see how other nonprofits incorporate these new communication outlets into their budgets and daily operations. Paralleling Rogers' diffusion of innovations theory, innovators and early adopters are using social media to revitalize their fundraising and volunteering efforts while the majority lags behind.

## INTRODUCTION

Nonprofit organizations are an essential part of the social, political, and economic landscape of contemporary society. They provide a way for individuals to connect to their communities, effectively participate in the democratic process and ultimately to "make a difference." Currently, there are more than 1.9 million nonprofits in the United States (IRS, 2006). Though it is difficult to generalize about what nonprofit organizations are or what they do, most of these organizations share similar experiences, for example, raising funds or attracting volunteers.

Despite widespread interests (e.g., healthcare, economic development, religion, political, and social issues), a nonprofit organization can be

defined as a voluntary association of a group of individuals bound together to pursue shared missions or goals (Lohmann 1992). In such mission-based organizations members are neither forced to relate nor enticed by the prospect of personal profit or gain, while their operation is facilitated by an endowment of resources. Through their mission-oriented work, nonprofits generate social capital—the attitude and willingness of people to engage in collective activity to address issues on the basis of shared values and beliefs, which in turn reinforce trust, confidence, and commitment of the participants (Hall, 2005).

Although nonprofits vary enormously in scope and scale, ranging from informal grassroots organizations with no assets and employees to multibillion-dollar foundations, they are facing new challenges as technological advances change the way nonprofits carry out their missions. Moreover, external stakeholders increasingly influence nonprofit organizations to adopt new technologies, including social media. The present chapter introduces a qualitative study of 39 nonprofit leaders designed to explore how nonprofits are utilizing the potential of social media to carry out their programs and services. During the study, twelve one-on-one interviews and three focus groups were conducted with nonprofit organization communicators.

## BACKGROUND: NONPROFITS AND WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGIES

### Accountability and Transparency

Topper (2007) encouraged nonprofit organizations to consider all types of social media to help spread the word about their programs. Whether it be through RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds, Twitter updates, or podcasts, increasing the awareness of a nonprofit's activities will ultimately benefit the organization in terms of increased donations, volunteer hours, and participants in their programs and services. "It's pretty simple really. My job is to do anything I can to help educate people about what we do. Technology is helping me reach more people than our newsletter and brochures ever could," said one senior communications officer for a nonprofit research organization participating in the interview.

RSS feeds, podcasting, and making pictures or videos of the nonprofit's events available through sites similar to Flickr or YouTube are still mainly a one-way distribution of information. Albrycht (2004) encourages nonprofits to truly become interactive with their stakeholders by blogging about their successes and failures. Blogs can be useful in spreading word about a nonprofits' programs or services, but they can also be used to address an individual's questions and concerns (Wasserman, 2005).

Increasingly, nonprofit organizations are being challenged to demonstrate their accountability to donors, their operating community, and their clients and program participants. Blogs provide a channel for open communications. Individuals can openly question an organization's practices in front of their virtual peers, and the organization's answer (or lack thereof) is available for everyone to scrutinize. Marken (2005) argues that an organization's blog can provide a powerful strategic and tactical communications tool because it offers an organization the opportunity to respond to inquiries directly. This direct communication works to solidify relationships the organization has established with its stakeholders. When organizations fail to respond to comments or delete them from their blog, they risk damaging the trust they have built with their stakeholders.

Finally, blogs allow individuals to discuss a nonprofit's events in a manner that brings people together. "Last summer, we wanted to hold rallies to draw attention to the harm (a company's) operations were causing to the local watershed. We posted an announcement on our blog and had a lot of replies within 24 hours," explained one of the participants during the focus group discussion.

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