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Some items to consider for discussion:

How can/should your organization use social networks?

- Recruiting tool for
 - Volunteers
 - Staff
- Donor awareness
- Communicating mission to a wider audience
- Sharing our story in real time
- “Living” testimonials/blogs by
- Living newsletter
- Subscription service for different constituencies
- RSS Feeds
- Blog(s)

What are the options:

- You Tube
- MySpace
- FaceBook
- LinkedIn
- Pulse
- Friendster
- Blogspot.com
- Email signatures
- Podcasts

Overview

- Social networking sites can help your organization increase awareness about an issue, find signatures for a petition, and encourage supporters to take action. Moreover, by building up a network of contacts on a social networking site, nonprofits can leverage the tools' viral abilities to quickly spread messages and alerts to a wide audience beyond their immediate community of supporters.
- One way to keep your community strong is by keeping in frequent contact with your friend network, either profile-to-profile, via private messaging, or in groups. Remember, people join social networking sites to *network*; they want to interact with an actual person from your organization — not form letters. It is this personal, one-on-one communication that can make or break an organization's success on a social network — and also what can make maintaining a presence on one so time-consuming.
- Think of your social networking profile as an online version of the professional networking you might do offline, like attending a conference or a reception. You can connect with peers or potential business contacts, while having the advantage of being able to see their connections — which are not always visible in, say, real life or through exchanging business cards.
- There is considerable crossover among social network users, meaning it may not be necessary to maintain a profile or support a group on every single one. "Choose where you really want to develop your community and where you really want to interact with the people who matter the most to you and your organization," said Heuer. "Spreading attention and energy across all the sites is nearly impossible for one person and you will end up with a diluted presence on each of them rather than a strong presence in one." Bill Snyder, a nonprofit marketing consultant, advised, "Focus. It's better to do one site well than to do many sites poorly."

Member Overlap at Social Networks

(Unique Visitors to start page/login, Sep '07)



	Facebook	Myspace	Bebo	Friendster	Hi5	LinkedIn	Ning	Orkut	Plaxo	Salesforce	Viadeo
Facebook		64%	4%	2%	2%	2%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Myspace	20%		3%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Bebo	25%	65%		2%	3%	1%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Friendster	23%	49%	5%		4%	6%	2%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Hi5	24%	69%	7%	4%		1%	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%
LinkedIn	42%	32%	4%	8%	2%		8%	3%	3%	3%	0%
Ning	35%	44%	6%	6%	1%	19%		2%	2%	1%	0%
Orkut	26%	29%	3%	4%	7%	8%	2%		1%	0%	0%
Plaxo	48%	34%	5%	8%	2%	54%	14%	4%		1%	0%
Salesforce	22%	27%	4%	4%	0%	29%	3%	1%	1%		0%
Viadeo	29%	0%	1%	4%	2%	38%	10%	0%	1%	0%	

- When determining an online presence, don't just choose the most popular sites, or the site that you think matches your demographic; take some time to find the people you are trying to reach and the conversations you are trying to join.
- Assign "persona managers" to manage each network. The advantage of choosing this route is that each persona retains a level of authenticity, individuality, and relevance that is hard to achieve if one person spreads herself across multiple networking sites. Chan notes that having someone who understands the features and interface of each social networking site, the culture of the community, and the appropriate style for communication can make your efforts a lot more effective. The persona managers might operate as a team to share knowledge about each initiative and evaluate each other's progress using metrics. Each member would manage one network presence, but the group would meet regularly to check in and evaluate progress.
- Another way to share the workload while encouraging group participation is to focus efforts on a single network but divide up the administrative work of supporting various groups, causes, or fan pages. This way, one person is not responsible for managing every aspect of a single network.
- "Find the people ... who are incredibly effective at advancing your mission through *real-world* relationships with others," he said. "Encourage them to bring online the same values and passion they exhibit in real life."
- Avoid random or open-ended outreach, which can distract you and waste time. A strategic way to build your network is to use a "friend-of-a-friend" approach. "Build a small base from a network of supporters from people you know — maybe that's staff, board members, past supporters — and ask them to invite people they think should be involved," said Bill Snyder, a nonprofit marketing consultant. "In a sense, it's getting supporters to do the leg work and be active supporters. It's also the very definition of 'social networking.' This may happen, to some extent, on its own, but it will happen a lot faster if you contact your network and ask them to do this."

Six Signs that Social Networking Isn't for You

- 1. You're still trying to get a handle on your basic software infrastructure.**
- 2. Your target audiences aren't using social networking tools**
- 3. You don't have time to experiment with something that might not work.**
- 4. You're not willing to deal with technologies that don't work as well as they could.**
- 5. You're not ready to invest in gaining a real understanding of the medium.**
- 6. You want clear editorial control over your brand and message.**

Opportunities in Social Networking

1. Establishing a simple Web presence.
2. Promoting specific actions or petitions.
3. Consolidating existing, unofficial social networks related to your organization.
4. Informal outreach that blends the personal and professional.
5. Researching VIPs, potential employees, and others.
- 6. Strengthening relationships between people who already know each other.**
- 7. Encourage and respond to constituent feedback quickly.**

Determining Your Social Network Needs

When it comes to social networking, is more always better?

By: Beth Kanter February 5, 2008

More and more people are making decisions and getting information from conversations taking place on social networking sites, online tools that help people connect with others who share similar interests, or with those who are interested in exploring new interests and activities.

Social networking sites promise to offer an array of benefits to nonprofits as well, from allowing them to keep abreast of trends and generate awareness to helping them raise money and connect with new supporters. As these tools continue to grow in popularity and expand beyond their traditional under-20 demographic, your nonprofit may be tempted to create a presence on one or more of the ever-growing roster of social networking sites.

Yet when it comes to social networking, is more always better? As [Should Your Organization Use Social Networking Sites?](#) points out, these tools aren't for every organization. Yet if you've determined that your nonprofit would benefit from having a presence on one social networking site, would you find even more success on two or more sites? If so, how should you go about choosing these sites?

Below, we'll discuss what it means to maintain a presence on one or more online social networks, and help you evaluate what sort of presence makes sense for your organization. We'll also show you a few tips for selecting the tools that can give you the most return on your investment and ensure a successful online presence for years to come.

Potential Benefits

Social networking sites can help your organization increase awareness about an issue, find signatures for a petition, and encourage supporters to take action. Moreover, by building up a network of contacts on a social networking site, nonprofits can leverage the tools' viral abilities to quickly spread messages and alerts to a wide audience beyond their immediate community of supporters.

This can be especially valuable in times of crisis. A college student backpacking in Southeast Asia started a Facebook group called [Support the Monks' Protest in Burma](#) to draw attention to the pro-democracy protests led by the country's revered Buddhist monks. The group found more than 400,000 supporters from around the world and helped attract attention to the monks' cause.

Not only can social networking sites help your nonprofit widen its general support base, they may **help you find and connect with people who can promote your organization's work or even fundraise on your behalf. If you put time into them, social networking sites give you an opportunity to communicate directly and more meaningfully with**

constituents or potential constituents in a way that is nearly impossible using other mediums such as direct mail, email, or Web sites.

Many nonprofits are drawn to social networking sites with the hope that they will help them raise money. While it is true that fundraising on social networking sites like [Facebook](#) and [MySpace](#) shows promise, this is still in the early stages and for the most part, the payoffs are minimal, barring [a few notable exceptions](#). On the upside, fundraising efforts in these spaces may be considered a strategy for cultivating future potential donors for your organization.

What Maintaining a Presence Entails

Maintaining your social networking profile is like maintaining a mini Web site. Like a Web site, you need to keep your content fresh, while taking on the additional task of cultivating your contact lists.

One way to keep your community strong is by keeping in frequent contact with your friend network, either profile-to-profile, via private messaging, or in groups. Remember, people join social networking sites to *network*; they want to interact with an actual person from your organization — not form letters. It is this personal, one-on-one communication that can make or break an organization's success on a social network — and also what can make maintaining a presence on one so time-consuming.

Successful social networking requires that you not only maintain existing relationships, but also seek out new contacts. You will need to budget time to scour the social networking site and your friends' friends' contact lists for new potential supporters, a task that requires consistent effort.

How much time are you looking at, then? While some administrative tasks can be delegated to an appropriate volunteer or intern, you should plan to invest about an hour a day per social networking site, especially in the early stages. If you can't invest this time or your time is better spent elsewhere, you may want to hold off on social networking for now.

Options for Nonprofits

While social networking sites have the potential to be a powerful tool in a nonprofit's communications arsenal, they may not be appropriate for every organization. To reap the benefits, your organization should create a strategy for how you will proceed and how you will measure your efforts over time (Number of contacts gained? Signatures on a petition? Funds raised?). You may want to begin with small, careful forays into social networking as an individual user before investing in the medium as an organization. Below, we'll take a look at some types of participation you may wish to consider.

1. No presence.

It can be difficult to benefit from the networking aspects of a social networking site unless you have a presence on it. Yet if you determine that social networking sites are not for you and that your time would be better spent in other areas, this does not mean that you are shut out of social networking sites entirely. While some sites, such as Facebook, deny you to access to their content without a membership, others, such as YouTube and Flickr, are open for anyone to peruse, meaning while non-members can't take advantage of the networking features outlined above, these sites can still be a source of information, content, or even inspiration should you later decide to create a presence on one.

2. Maintain an individual presence.

If you are interested in testing the social networking waters, but aren't ready to commit to full-blown organizational participation, you may wish to set up an *individual* account and profile on a social networking site. (You may have no choice but to do this: on Facebook, for example, only individuals using their real names can set up accounts, meaning you technically cannot set up a profile for, say, Save the Giraffes). The initial setup process, in most cases, won't require anything more technical than filing a Web-based form but for some sites, like MySpace for example, more customized profiles may require CSS expertise.

Once you set up your profile, many sites will ask for permission to scan your email address book. If this search finds people in your address book who are already on the networking site, it automatically adds them to your contacts list or sends out a friend request. This can save you a lot of time searching for colleagues.

Fill out your profile as completely as possible, within your comfort level (most sites ask you to provide your first and last name, organizational affiliation, gender, birthday, hometown, and interests, while some ask more personal questions, such as sexual orientation), including links to your Web site and a photo. Because you are setting up an individual account to represent your organization, keep your profile as professional as possible (meaning no swimsuit shots or other overly personal information.) Treat your social networking profile like a public Web site — or it may [come back to haunt you](#).

Be sure, too, to review the site's privacy policy. You will be sharing personal data, so make sure you understand the [platform's policies](#) when it comes to privacy and data ownership. Some sites reserve the right to share your data with other users, advertisers, or even the government, and to re-use or even modify it as they wish. Facebook, for example, can track and share your activities, giving others access to information including groups you've joined or the comments you've left on other profiles — a potential source of embarrassment if you're not careful.

Keep in mind that even individual profiles require a significant amount of time to maintain. Once your profile is up, plan on spending 30 to 60 minutes a day to explore the site, check out groups, find friends, and learn how its features work. Katya Andresen's [Five-Minute Guide to](#)

[Social Networking](#) can help you get started. Read your social networking site's and other blogs to stay up-to-date on new features and policy changes. [Mashable](#) is a good source for learning about a variety of different social networking sites; check out my [Social Networking Resources](#) for additional social-networking-focused blogs.

3. Maintain an organizational presence on one site.

After you have become comfortable with your individual profile, you may decide you wish to set up an organizational presence. Bear in mind that this will add to your workflow, as in addition to this new presence, you may need to continue to cultivate and maintain your individual profile as well. On Facebook, for example, you must have an individual profile before you can set up a group or a "fan page" to represent a fictional character, an organization, or a campaign.

Keep in mind, too, that an organizational presence can demand far more time and resources than an individual profile. Think of your organizational presence as an online community. As with a community, you'll need to get know the people who join and participate, keep discussions going, and nurture and support your profile. (See Change.org's [Best Practices](#) for a more detailed description of what this might entail.)

4. Maintain an organizational presence on two or more sites.

Having so much fun on one social networking site that you're tempted to join another? Your decision to set up profiles on more than one social networking site will depend on your available resources. To be effective, you'll need to invest time in exploring the site and maintaining your presence on it. Take the time to analyze the demographic data of the social networking sites and determine which site is the best match for your organization. James O'Malley of the Frogloops Blog suggests taking a close look at [user overlap](#) before deciding whether or not it makes sense to maintain multiple presences. After all, if a third of the people on your current social networking site are also on a site you're considering joining, it may not be worthwhile to invest in a second presence, especially if you've been diligent in finding good contacts on your current site.

Selecting the Right Tool

The first generation of social networks, many of which are still alive and kicking, were about putting your email contact list online and connecting to the contacts of your contacts. LinkedIn and Friendster are examples of this kind of "friend of a friend" network. The generation that followed these were designed around the idea of sharing — people connect to one other through a shared interests in video (YouTube), or photos (Flickr), or other content (Del.icio.us, StumbledUpon, Digg, Twitter).

Recently, a new generation of social networking sites has emerged that combines the friend-of-a-friend networking with social sharing, along with mini-applications created by outside developers that extend the functionality of these sites. These include Facebook and Google's

[Open Social](#), which will allow you to access applications and friend lists across existing social networks such as MySpace, Ning, LinkedIn, and others. In the long term, this will make maintaining a presence on more than one social networking site more efficient for users, and give your organization access to a combined list of friends.

So, where to start? How to choose? Where can you get information to compare the demographics and size for different social networking sites? Wikipedia's [list of social networking Web sites](#) is an excellent free resource, providing up-to-date data on over 100 services that anyone can join.

In general, however, you are most likely to join one of three broad categories of networking sites:

- 1. Generalist Social Networking Sites**

These larger social networking sites — which include Facebook, Myspace — attract a wide, more general audience. Each of these communities targets a slightly different demographic, but also includes many sub-groups where people can network around particular interests. Facebook and MySpace are currently the two most active social networking sites on the Web and are where many nonprofits are setting up profiles, launching causes, or networking. Given their popularity, fast growth, and current size, many of your existing or potential supporters may already be actively using these services, making them a good place to start.

- 2. Niche Audience Social Networking Sites**

These social networking sites are designed to attract a niche audience, be it a particular demographic or topic of interest. More and more niche-audience social networks are cropping up, from [Sobercircle](#) (for people recovering from addictions) to [MyArtInfo](#) (a social network for artists). Niche networks for social activists include services like [Care2](#) and [Gather](#), among others. Niche targeting equals more accuracy in your marketing efforts and possibly a better return on investment. Keep in mind, however, that there are some downsides to pursuing this niche audience. There are many social networking platforms out there right now, and not all will remain viable over the long term. Also, with fewer people in general on these more focused networks, you may not be casting as wide of a net as you would on other sites.

- 3. White-Label Social Networking Applications**

[White-label](#) social networking applications allow you to build your own social networking site with your organization's branding. One popular example of such an application is [Ning](#); for others, see this [list of white-label tools](#) compiled by Web strategist Jeremiah Owyang. Change.org, a social network for nonprofits and causes, also recently announced its version of a white-label network on its site, which, for a monthly hosting fee, offers nonprofits the ability to brand their own social network, integrate it with their Web site and capture data about users. While a white-label system offers more control, it requires you to invest significant time in creating and building an online community.

The bottom line? Choose wisely. If you don't have the time to invest in a social network, move on. Do your homework. Study and compare your target audience to the target audience of the

social networking site you are considering, do some initial exploratory research as an individual user, and then decide whether to invest in an organizational presence from there. Start slow, keeping in mind that it's better to have a deep presence on a single social networking site than to spread your organization too thin across many.

Eight Secrets of Effective Online Networking

Tips, tricks, and tools for using and managing your social networks wisely

By: Beth Kanter
February 8, 2008

Is your organization considering setting up a profile on a social networking site? Are you wondering what tasks are involved, how much time it will take, and how you might streamline your efforts? Maybe your organization has established a presence on MySpace and is now contemplating adding one to Facebook. Perhaps you are wondering how you can juggle multiple profiles and still have time left to do other work.

As more and more organizations jump on the social networking bandwagon, people are seeking ways to make the time spent on these tools as efficient and fruitful as possible. I recently surveyed several nonprofit professionals and social networking mavens about their social networking habits. The tips below, taken from their responses, offer suggestions for effectively managing your profiles and contacts on social networking sites, finding people with relevant interests to your nonprofit or professional goals, working between multiple social networking sites, and getting the most out of social networking tools even if you're not a Web designer or techie.

I. Invest Time in Your Network

While most online social networks cost nothing for your organization to join, **keep in mind that creating a strong online presence on one can require an investment of up to two hours a day, especially in the beginning** when you are learning how to use the site, setting up your profile, and making friends. **If you're unprepared** to make this commitment, you may want to reconsider using these tools at your organization.

If you don't have someone on-staff who can help manage your social networks, you may want to seek outside help. Heather Mansfield, Community Manager at Change.org, suggests finding a social networking intern or an assistant who can **spend a minimum of 10 hours per week managing your site or sites**, noting that many organizations are seeking full-time staffers to do the job. "I am starting to see larger nonprofits creating full-time social networking positions for 40 hours a week," she said.

Keep in mind that there is a fair amount of trial and error with using social networking sites, and your organization may not see results right away. "There is a learning curve; **don't expect immediate results for at least three months**, whatever your objectives may be," advised Alex De Carvalho, Community Manager of multimedia social networking site Scrapblog. **"Take**

the time to build your profile correctly and learn the ropes of what works and what doesn't." Nick Noakes, a director at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, stresses the value of this "no-guilt" exploration time. "It has brought me knowledge and contacts more than a lot of planned things I do," he said.

Some nonprofit professionals, like Beth Dunn of the Cape Cod Arts Foundation, use their after-work hours and their individual (rather than organizational) profiles as a low-risk way to try out new tools. "Keep following what others are doing, and test," said social media expert Chris Brogan. **"If you want, use a 'dummy' user account to make sure your experimenting doesn't leave breadcrumbs that go nowhere for folks who legitimately want to engage with your organization." He also suggests keeping track of your progress. "Don't do random trial and error, [which] isn't as effective as creating learning experiments that give you some information about how to improve your strategy."**

2. Test the Waters with an Individual Profile

If finding someone to be a dedicated or part-time social networker for your organization is unrealistic, you may want to **consider testing the waters with an individual, rather than an organizational, profile.** Whereas creating an organizational presence — such as a group, cause, or fan page — requires a bit more time and planning, setting up an individual profile is fairly simple.

Think of your social networking profile as an online version of the professional networking you might do offline, like attending a conference or a reception. You can connect with peers or potential business contacts, while having the advantage of being able to see their connections — which are not always visible in, say, real life or through exchanging business cards.

"My organization doesn't have a presence on social networking sites yet, and the question of time investment goes to the heart of the fear of doing so — time suck," said Susan Edwards, an employee at a Los Angeles museum. "I do a lot of social networking for myself, however, and am constantly trying to think of ways to feed it back into the institution in a meaningful way."

An individual profile can also be easier to unplug if early exploration proves unfruitful. You can always delete or make your personal account inactive, whereas it can sometimes be harder to delete a failed group.

3. Establish a Routine

As one veteran nonprofit social networker confessed, "If am not careful when I go to a social networking site, I am easily distracted. And I know I'm not at all unique." If you don't **organize your time well, establish a disciplined work routine, or have some specific goals in mind when you visit a social networking site (and particularly if you are managing more than one), you will waste time moving from one site to another.** Sus Nyrop, an

e-learning consultant based in Denmark, recommends knowing when to log out of the site, and keeping your recreational "pokes" (instant messages to friends) to a minimum.

Also, work on your own time. "Don't feel like you need to keep your profile updated every minute or have to add people to your list of friends the moment they ask," said Chris Heuer, a consultant and founder of the Social Media Club. "Unless your job responsibility is Online Community Manager, you don't need to spend your entire work day on MySpace." Most nonprofit online networkers agree on **setting a regular schedule for updating content, 'friending' people, or finding new contacts with similar interests. Those who work on multiple networking sites may plan a maintenance schedule.** "One good practice is to set aside a regular housekeeping date to clear out clutter from your profile," said Nick Booth, a consultant and podcaster based in the United Kingdom, adding that for him, "Wednesday is MySpace day."

"I use my [Outlook calendar](#) to map out the week's posts on my social networking blogs," said HSUS's Lewis. "That has helped tremendously, not only with time management, but in looking at the bigger picture. **It also helps me integrate my activities with everything else my department does (email, Web site, and print) that is so important.**" However, don't adhere to a schedule so religiously that you don't leave room for some flexibility. Said Lewis, **"When something big hits, I'll go immediately to MySpace and blog about it, because that's where our biggest network is. Next, I'll tweak the content for Facebook and post there. Then I'll go to Care2 and on to Gather."**

4. Don't Spread Yourself Too Thin

As [this comparison chart](#) from Compete.com demonstrates, there is **considerable crossover among social network users, meaning it may not be necessary to maintain a profile or support a group on every single one.** "Choose where you really want to develop your community and where you really want to interact with the people who matter the most to you and your organization," said Heuer. "Spreading attention and energy across all the sites is nearly impossible for one person and you will end up with a diluted presence on each of them rather than a strong presence in one." Bill Snyder, a nonprofit marketing consultant, advised, "Focus. It's better to do one site well than to do many sites poorly."

Seb Chan, Manager of Web Services for the Powerhouse Museum in Australia, agrees. "I know there is a real attraction to having presences in multiple networks but I've found little real benefit in doing so *unless* there are significant real-world synergies." Chan points to the example of Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, which worked with a live music event where the bands had a large MySpace fan base.

When determining an online presence, don't just choose the most popular sites, or the site that you think matches your demographic; take some time to find the people you are trying to reach and the conversations you are trying to join. "Go where your network is, and focus on those few places," said Doug Haslam, a social media consultant for Topaz Partners.

5. Share the Workload

Of course, there may be times when it does make sense to have a presence on several sites. **Once Google's [OpenSocial API](#) is implemented, this will become easier because you will be able to access your contacts across networks or via a single hub. In the meantime, you can hire a full-time or part-time staffer to manage your social networks, or parcel out the work among your teammates.**

One advocate of this strategy is Chan, who advises identifying "**persona managers**" to manage each network. The advantage of choosing this route is that each persona retains a level of authenticity, individuality, and relevance that is hard to achieve if one person spreads herself across multiple networking sites. Chan notes that having someone who understands the features and interface of each social networking site, the culture of the community, and the appropriate style for communication can make your efforts a lot more effective. The persona managers might operate as a team to share knowledge about each initiative and evaluate each other's progress using metrics. Each member would manage one network presence, but the group would meet regularly to check in and evaluate progress.

Another way to share the workload while encouraging group participation is to focus efforts on a single network but divide up the administrative work of supporting various groups, causes, or fan pages. This way, one person is not responsible for managing every aspect of a single network.

When recruiting participants, Ian Wilker, a social media consultant, suggests seeking out the same qualities you would look for in a face-to-face networker. **"Find the people ... who are incredibly effective at advancing your mission through *real-world* relationships with others," he said. "Encourage them to bring online the same values and passion they exhibit in real life."**

You can also involve more teammates by inviting staff members to use their personal profiles to represent the organization. Danielle Brigida of the National Wildlife Federation said, "I like to look at social networking as an ecosystem: when you have a number of people picking up different niches, the system is stronger and healthier. Most of the time, you are your best advocate. The more people involved from your organization, the greater the impact, and without a personal touch these social networks become bland very quickly."

Sharing the workload has other advantages as well. Said Cape Cod Arts Foundation's Dunn, "Keeping the organization's social network project tightly compartmentalized within just one person's domain personalizes it too much — if it succeeds, you're all geniuses, but if it fails, then it was just Your Bad Idea. If the board gives your organization the green light, the whole organization needs to get on board with it too."

6. Keep It Personal

"People love having an actual person to connect to from an organization, and two-way communication is what makes social networks so successful," said HSUS's Lewis.

Each organization has its own approach to adding to their list of contacts, or "friending," on social networks. Well-known blogger and social media guru Robert Scoble accepts all friend requests, for example, while social media expert and author Shel Israel prefers to establish a connection first by sending potential contacts a private message. Other organizations approve friends based on their personal, professional, or organizational goals.

Yet keep in mind that the **goal is not necessarily to amass a large number of friends, but to build meaningful relationships.** The task of approving people as friends shouldn't be viewed a mechanical task of simply clicking a button to add them to your list. It is important to get to know the people in your community. What are their interests? Why did they befriend you or join your organization's group? How can you engage them in a conversation about your organization?

One way you can address this is by **assigning the task of befriending others to one person at your organization.** "We have a staff person who is spending a portion of his time managing our MySpace page — identifying, reviewing and accepting friends seems to take a good chunk of time," said Eve Smith, Assistant Director of Interactive Marketing at Easter Seals. "You can't really streamline that work and be an effective relationship builder."

Micah Sifry, Executive Editor of Personal Democracy Forum, observed of über-successful political blog DailyKos, "[It] started as one person's blog, and that person, Markos Moulitsas, spent untold hours building his community. He once told me that in the early days, when he had maybe several hundred regular readers, he knew the names of every single one and would notice when someone hadn't been on the site for a while, and when they returned, he'd greet them personally. **It takes that level of leadership engagement to build a successful [social network] around activism.**"

7. Befriend People Strategically

Sometimes, friends come to you, but other times, you'll **have to do your own outreach to add new friends to your contact list. This is a critical part of the workflow; to reap the benefits of using social networking tools, you need to build your network.**

That said, you want to **avoid random or open-ended outreach**, which can distract you and waste time. A strategic way to build your network is to use a **"friend-of-a-friend" approach.** **"Build a small base from a network of supporters from people you know — maybe that's staff, board members, past supporters — and ask them to invite people they think should be involved,"** said Bill Snyder, a nonprofit marketing consultant. **"In a sense, it's getting supporters to do the leg work and be active supporters. It's also the very definition of 'social networking.' This may happen, to some extent, on its own, but it will happen a lot faster if you contact your network and ask them to do this."**

Also, take some time to explore different groups on the network site; search by keywords, and explore your friends' friend lists. You may be surprised to find several existing groups interested in your cause or organization. "I look for groups that may already be set up by users interested in our mission. It saves me time," said Darren Mullenix, director of operations for Samaritan's Purse. Change.org's Mansfield agrees. "Befriend individuals who have already befriended other nonprofits with similar missions."

Technology can also help in this arena. Use the [Who Is This?](#) Firefox add-on to search for people you find online on other social networks, sites, and search engines.

Finally, be sure to give your current supporters opportunities to join your network by letting them know about your organization's presence. Post a social networking badge on your Web site or prominently display your profile URL in your email newsletters.

8. Use a Few Good Time Savers

A variety of tools and tricks can help you streamline your social networking projects and manage your content.

RSS and Mobile Features

Using an RSS reader to read content can be a real time saver over logging on to an individual site, particularly if you are maintaining a presence on multiple networks. Some even allow you to do this on the go. "The sites that have mobile clients or mobile-optimized Web sites make it possible so I can scan updates and post while commuting," said Eugene Chan, IT director for the Community Technology Foundation. "Facebook is especially good in this regard."

RSS can also be used to bring feeds from around the Web to your profile page. "The crucial thing is that the social networking profile must be good, up-to-date, and interesting," said Simon Berry, Executive Director for RuralNet UK. "However, its maintenance has to fit in with everything else we do and mustn't be a separate process stuck on the side. The ability to 'pull in' content from elsewhere using RSS is really important."

Cut Down or Manage Your Bacn

Bacn — email alerts from social networking sites — is a new form of spam. One way to manage this potential nuisance is to set your preferences to block them entirely, or to switch off email alerts when someone friends you or posts to your profile. Besides, if you visit your profile daily, you may not need to receive the email alerts. If you prefer to manage your profile from your inbox, use a filter or rule to direct them into a folder so you can deal with Bacn in batches. If you do want to receive alerts, but not by email, some sites offer the option to receive them as text messages. The point is, have a system.

"When I first started, every time a friend request or message notification arrived in my email box, I'd check it right away," said Lewis. "It became unmanageable. Now, I set a specific time

every day to approve friend requests and comments, and message back those that write us. By having a set time every day, I don't allow it to consume my time and I get a lot more done."

Automate Profile Content from Blogs, Web Sites, and Other Sources

Not all of the content that appears on your social networking site needs to be created there; as mentioned before, many sites offer tools to allow you to pull in content from your Web site or blog, or from others around the Web. "Facebook allows you to pull in all your RSS feeds from other services," said David Brazeal, a social media consultant. "When you update your blog, or your podcast, or your Twitter, it's published to your Facebook profile, too."

Many nonprofits are taking advantage of RSS and blog-publishing applications, bookmarklets (tools on your browser that let you easily share links to your social networking profile), and open APIs that allow you to easily republish content from social bookmarking sites, blogs, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and even Web sites. Be careful; discovering what technologies work well together still involves a bit of trial and error.

When pulling in content from other sites, be mindful that sites have different cultures and respond to communication styles differently. Lewis, who works on multiple sites, said, "At first, it was a trial and error for all of these networks. I posted the same thing on every one of the networks. I monitored what kind of responses I got, as well as the tone of communication. Then I modified my messaging based on the responses I received. This is how I became familiar with the different crowds and learned how to speak to them more effectively." Kristin Taylor, Social Media Strategist for PBS Interactive, said, "Every social network is different and every user is different — there are levels of privacy, rules of friending, and a certain expectation of transparency. Respect that and you'll be fine."

MySpace:

MySpace is an extremely popular social networking site that doesn't cater to a specific audience, unlike more targeted platforms such as LinkedIn or Care2. In February 2006, MySpace was the [tenth most visited site](#) on the Internet). Besides offering user blogs and message boards, MySpace has a classified ad section where nonprofits can place job listings for free, and a space where you can announce upcoming events. MySpace lets you create groups or join one of the 10,000-plus groups formed by nonprofit and philanthropic organizations. Unlike other social networking tools, MySpace lets you post videos, making it a good platform for exposing your nonprofit's advocacy films to a larger audience.

LinkedIn:

Unlike many of the best-known social networking sites, LinkedIn focuses primarily on creating and maintaining professional contacts. You can use the site to touch base with former coworkers and classmates, find people employed in the nonprofit sector, and obtain professional references. The site, currently boasting 5.5 million users, supports the creation of groups, and has a dedicated category for nonprofits. LinkedIn offers plenty of resources for hiring employees, consultants, or service providers. What it doesn't offer are discussions or

forums, so if you're looking to chat or talk about a specific topic, you'll have to do that via email or instant messaging or using a different social networking application.

Characteristics of Successful Online Communities

By Andrew Cohen, February 2008

Successful online communities require more than a software package. In this article, we outline the strategies and features that can help you build online message boards, social networks, or other conversation based sites that become vibrant, useful communities.

These days, an organization can create an online community site in minutes. But creating an actual online *community* takes much longer.

There are now dozens of software products and services that will help you create an online community -- many merely requiring you to complete a short registration form. However, success requires more than a software package -- it requires planning. In the physical world, better construction techniques may result in stronger buildings, but they don't ensure crime-free communities, good schools, or thriving businesses. Likewise, online communities require community planning. Before you build, you need to figure out what sort of online activities you wish to support and set appropriate community standards and practices to facilitate them. Success depends on describing a vision for the community that includes a good mix of best practices and features.

In this article, we'll review the key characteristics that are shared by successful online communities. This discussion should help you create a vision for your own community, a plan for your operating style, and an outline of the software features that can support them.

Plan for Success

Before you think about software, do your homework to clarify your community's purpose and composition. If you were building a new residential community, you'd certainly think hard about what sort of people might choose to live there and why.

Clearly state your objective in creating a community. Then list your likely audiences -- researchers, college students, human rights activists, pet owners, or whomever -- and figure out what they might want out of a community experience. Remember that your community members are not likely to participate merely to support your mission -- what is their core motivation? Are they seeking to share research? Looking for answers to a problem? Do they want to vent about a specific issue? Do they need to plan a project or action together?

Or are they just looking to meet people like themselves? Socializing or networking is a key attribute of nearly all communities. So even if you are planning an extremely goal-oriented community, give people the ability to mingle and get to know each other. For example,

[TechSoup's community](#), a technology resource for nonprofits, has a forum titled "Introduce Yourself."

Remember that your community is not likely to be their only option. Where else might they go to fill their needs? A competitive analysis can help ensure that your community is offering something useful that cannot be found elsewhere -- including within your own network. People have limited time and attention and it may be unreasonable for them to belong to multiple, overlapping communities. Perhaps what you are seeking to create already exists and just needs to be cultivated.

Review the existing sites related to your topic. [Technorati](#), [Google's Blog Search](#), [BlogPulse](#), and other sites can reveal what people are saying about your organization, your top issues, or the key topics of the community you are planning. Also search the "walled garden" spaces such as [Facebook](#), [MySpace](#), and [Ning](#). Sites like these have discussions that are only available to registered users and therefore may not appear in standard search results.

Next, define what a successful community would look like. How many members do you want in the first year? What specific acts of participation are most important to your organization? Common measurements include message postings, event postings, downloads, chat participation, actions taken, and user ratings made. Of course all of these should be cross-referenced with your organizational mission. Don't discount more intangible benefits -- like increased goodwill towards your organization, or more awareness of your cause -- that require more long-term measurement. Think through the metrics that make sense for you, and then write down some targets.

Finally, be sure that you intend to be in it for the long haul. Online communities take time to catch fire. A member's connection with your community grows with each individual small interaction, even those that have no obvious immediate organizational benefit. If you interact with your community members only when you want a favor from them, you may drive people away. Like a friendship, relationships that are only about favors do not stand the test of time.

Once this homework is complete, you are ready to think about how your community will work.

Make People Feel At Home

Successful communities have to put out the welcome mat to create safe, open and fulfilling environments. Establish community norms that encourage open communication rather than stifling it. Set boundaries for acceptable behavior. Treat new members like you would a new family in the neighborhood.

For starters, when someone joins, send the new member a personal message from a community manager or host. It should be personal, short -- a sentence or two -- and sound like it was sent by a human being. Interns and volunteers are a perfect match for this task. Likewise, tools that automatically announce new members to the rest of the community can encourage

others to make connections. Many tools can be configured to display the names and photos of new members in prominent place on the community's main page -- for instance, as [Care2](#) does on its homepage. You could also include them in the community's email newsletters.

Next, don't be a pest by sending too many email notifications. How and when should emails be sent? Allow your members to decide. Some people prefer daily updates, others weekly, and still others prefer to receive messages via a news reader, through [RSS](#). Let the users pick their own preferences. However, opting out of absolutely all emails should be politely discouraged when possible as regular email stimulates online participation.

Making people feel safe is another important part of making people feel at home. Most often, participants are looking to connect with real people, rather than an online pseudonym. Encouraging members to share personal details and interests, or even verifying participants, can help. But people also want to feel comfortable that they are sharing detailed information only with people they recognize and trust. Therefore it is critical that your community offers easy-to-use granular privacy controls that let the user specifically control which personal information is shared and with whom. For example, when a member sends a message to another member, your community should let the user decide whether the message should be a) visible to everyone, b) visible only to the two people and others within their group or c) exclusively visible to the two people alone.

Rule With Benevolence

Once your community members have been welcomed, its time to establish a few ground rules. For starters, never set a hard rule if a guideline will suffice. It may be your kingdom, but your citizens can leave at any time. If you want your community to thrive, consider allowing people to speak freely. Heavy moderating, such as approving every post, stifles conversations. (It also may expose you to more liability, as screening can carry additional legal obligations.) Instead, set clear standards of conduct up front. We can't consider all of the legal and free speech considerations here, but in particular, be sure that your community has clear standards for when messages are to be deleted -- such as use of profanity, slander, breach of privacy, copyright violations, or inappropriate promotions. When users do breach protocol, correct them immediately and firmly, but kindly.

Next, when you are first getting started, seek to limit the number of different gathering places. Many communities initially thrive by focusing attention on a limited number of central message streams such as a central blog, or a main discussion forum. Discourage "ghost town" forums where no one is yet active. Once the main channel is established, then you can then use software to set up more specific discussion areas. Community software metaphors vary, but most offer "channels," "forums," "categories," or "groups" that can support different topical areas, geographic regions, professional associations, or whatever sub-culture will best support your community members. Encourage people to wander into new spaces that address more focused interests without creating redundant areas or places so obscure that they wither and die. If you are not certain what people are interested in, it might be desirable to allow members

to create groups themselves according to their personal interests.

While people don't care for overbearing governance, they often value communities where it's easy to separate the highly useful from less useful postings. More feature-rich community platforms can empower the community members themselves with voting rights to help moderate messages -- rewarding good postings and reporting "inappropriate" postings. Voting can be important if the community is large and there's little chance that your moderators will catch all of the bad behavior on their own.

A zero-tolerance policy on spam is essential. If your community allows comments without registration, it is important that you have anti-spam mechanisms in place to prevent automated web robots from clogging up your discussions with self-promotional spam. Common anti-spam approaches include using a [CAPTCHA](#) (where you require the user to "verify their humanity" by typing a string of random characters) or installing [Akismet](#), a spam-filtering service that works with WordPress and other platforms.

When setting up your community, be sure that you've anticipated roles for all of the different ways people wish to participate. More robust community software packages allow varied permission levels for all sorts of types of participants. On one end of the spectrum, your community is likely to have a small, active, group of "Super-Users": people who login daily and account for the vast majority of community activities -- writing, commenting, adding events, posting photos, voting, etc. On the other end of the spectrum will be lurkers or browsers: people who mostly read and perhaps, depending on your configuration, do not even register.

The bulk of your participants will fall between your Super Users and your Lurkers. Given these varied levels of participation, your community platform should enable active members to see and do more as their activity level increases. Likewise, it should make clear the additional benefits that members enjoy at higher level of engagement. For instance, even the most rudimentary community tools typically grant benefits for members who register. Advanced community tools can be configured to automatically knight members with additional privileges as the member's activity level grows. It's worth considering whether these sort of advanced permission capabilities are appropriate for your community.

Encourage Personal Relationships

Nonprofit communities thrive on the same sort of social dynamics that exist in face-to-face interactions, including the desire to collaborate, network, make friends, and even date. People want to be respected and well-liked. User-to-user communication is key. While your organizational objective is to increase your ability to communicate with people, the participants are likely primarily interested in talking to one another.

People value a community most when they are allowed to make it their own. So successful communities thrive on user-contributed content. This includes allowing members to post their

own links, events, announcements, files, photos and other media. Here's a few specific attributes that encourage relationships.

- **Privacy Protection.** Think carefully about how you want to allow people to talk to one another. It is vital that your community is configured to facilitate interpersonal communication, while also honoring people's privacy preferences. As mentioned previously, there should be clear distinctions between private messages (visible to just the sender and recipient), semi-private messages (visible to everyone in a particular group) or public messages (available to the entire community and the world). Robust systems also allow members to set their contact preferences (e.g. "only allow messages from my friends" vs. "allow messages from everyone."). Physical addresses and phone numbers should generally only be shown with user permission. Be extremely cautious with personal data such as exact dates of birth.
- **Rich User Identities.** Communications between members are enhanced when people know more about the person with whom they are communicating. Consider letting users set a photo, declare their personal likes and dislikes, provide links to their other sites and blogs, or add work experience. Some communities also encourage users to complete their profile by giving the member a higher rating for each additional item they add to their profile.
- **Groups and Discussion Lists.** Once your community achieves a critical mass, you'll want to allow members to branch off and create their own discussion forum, email lists or other groups. This allows people to discuss topics that are more specific to their own interest, and also can allow for deeper, more focused conversations within a smaller group of familiar members.
- **Leverage Off-line Events.** Be sure your community has a calendar or event listing for face-to-face events. Even though the internet allows your community members to be anywhere in the world, off-line events strengthen and reinforce their online connections by letting them meet other members in the flesh.

Facilitate Reputation Building

It's human nature to want to be liked and respected. Online communities are no different: successful communities enable members to build their reputation. This could include allowing members to list credentials in their profiles, or openly honoring community leaders. For instance, one simple way to reward active members is to recognize their contributions by showing their number of posts or submitted items in their profile. The [top user](#) in Apple's discussion forums is honored with as having reached "Level 5" with over 100,000 posts!

Higher end software enables you to display the number of posts, uploads, reviews, ratings and other activities for each community member. You can set reward thresholds and distribute virtual ribbons when people reach "gold" status or whatever you choose to name it. For example, [SOAPPHOTO](#), a photographer community site, allow members to earn points for

various activities (logging in, earning votes on submitted photos, etc.) As the user progresses from "bronze" to "diamond" membership status, they [earn new abilities](#) such as uploading more photos, entering more photo contests and voting more often.

Encouraging and rewarding your most active members and leaders is crucial to maturing a community from fledgling to established. Give your leaders power. Pick technology solutions that give them the ability to do more within a designated area -- such as approve comments or post polls. Highly active members should be personally acknowledged through featured interviews or being highlighted as the "community leader of the week." Likewise, members with true expertise should be given a recurring forum. For instance, ASPCA's community holds twice-monthly [chats with a veterinarian](#).

Ranking mechanisms can also help here. Let other users reward leaders' postings by voting up the best and most active members. Ratings are more valuable to members if they are paired with additional privileges or higher quotas. Similarly, contests that offer a tangible reward for winners also stimulate member activity.

Reputation is not only a product of what you do, but who you know. That's why person-to-person "friending," "linking," and "connecting" is a central organizing principle of the commercial social networks such as Facebook, MySpace and [LinkedIn](#). When planning your own community, consider offering features that allow members to build a list of acquaintances to display on their member profiles.

Finally, reputation is built by fundraising prowess. Personalized fundraising is still in its infancy, but if you do have features that allow fundraising, be sure that member's profiles can easily tout how much they raised, for which cause, and from whom.

Software Alone Isn't Success

By now it should be clear that a successful online community requires more than just a software package. The right set of features, standards and best practices needs to be combined with thoughtful management your organization. A successful community strategy begins with planning and ends with a long term commitment to the space you've created

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