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No more excuses: Nonprofits give social media a try

Using Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and more, nonprofits old and new are connecting with supporters and others like never before.

by [Edie Gross](#)



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The Humane Society of the United States cared for more than 60,000 animals in 2011. But much of its success lies in its ability to tell the story of just one.

Like Honey, a tan pit bull rescued in July from a Gary, Ind., dog fighting operation.

A 3-minute video created by the Humane Society shows the dog as rescuers found her -- chained and cowering in a box, part of the left side of her mouth torn away.

Posted on the society's YouTube site, the video garnered more than 61,000 views. On the group's Facebook page, hundreds commented, on both the original story and the follow-up detailing Honey's recovery and adoption.

"This story broke my heart and made my day," one supporter wrote.

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"I am so happy for Honey and so grateful to the HSUS for all their incredible work," wrote another. "And to show my appreciation, I just donated so that the amazing work you guys do can continue."

The Humane Society is part of a wave of nonprofit organizations that are harnessing the power of social media. They're using Facebook, Twitter and other digital media to connect with larger audiences, share resources with like-minded groups, inspire volunteers and donors, and encourage public conversations about issues important to them.

Over the past decade, that pool of nonprofits embracing social media has grown exponentially, said Beth Kanter and Allison Fine, authors of "The Networked Nonprofit," a how-to book for organizations wanting to use digital communications.

Newer nonprofits like charity: water and MomsRising have always relied on social networking, Kanter said. It's in their DNA.

But now even older nonprofits -- household names like the Humane Society and the American Red Cross -- are recognizing the benefits of social networking. Their success, in turn, has convinced other organizations to give social media a try, Fine said.

"What we hear a lot is, 'Show me somebody like me doing this,'" said Fine, who hosts a blog at [allisonfine.com](#) and a monthly podcast for The Chronicle of Philanthropy. "And now we can. There are no more excuses."

Nonprofits today have no choice but to engage with social media, she said: "In another year or so, it's going to be as fundamental as using the telephone."

Expanding reach, energizing fans

As the [Humane Society](#) illustrates, even old dogs can learn new tricks when it comes to social media. When the organization was founded in 1954, television was still in its infancy. Blogs, Twitter, video- and photo-sharing websites, and Facebook and MySpace -- if imagined at all -- were the stuff of science fiction.

Now science fact, those digital tools are helping the society expand its reach and energize fans, who can ask questions, share the organization's stories and support its efforts with the click of a button.

"Social media is enabling us to connect with our constituents in an individualized way, which we've never been able to do before," said Carie Lewis, the society's director of emerging media. "Our supporters respond best to ways they can actually make a difference for animals and when we post good news or victories that they've helped make happen."

Questions to consider:

- To what extent does your organization operate with a "fortress mindset"? What would it take to be more open and transparent?
- Leaders interested in engaging social media must first embrace it, even if it means being reverse-mentored by a younger staffer. What skills could your senior leaders learn from staffers?
- Is the two-way nature of social media a threat or an opportunity? What practices, what strategies will prepare your organization to listen well?
- Does your organization offer

For organizations adopting a social media strategy, the first step is often the hardest, Kanter said. For some, it means abandoning a long-held "fortress" mindset -- where communication with the outside world is tightly controlled and rarely two-way -- and becoming a transparent organization that engages in open and honest conversations with both fans and critics.

In the most successful cases, two crucial things happen. First, the organization's top officials embrace the concept of social media, playing around with it themselves to get a feel for it, even if that means having a junior staffer show them the ropes.

"It's about having some humility and being willing to be reverse-mentored," said Kanter, who trains nonprofits to use social media and blogs on the topic at [bethkanter.org](#). "If you can't fly, run. If you can't run, walk. And if you can't walk, crawl. But you've got to keep moving forward. You don't have to do everything. Pick one channel and get comfortable; practice it."

supporters avenues -- digital or not -- to act and make a difference?

Second, the nonprofit develops a strategy, essentially asking, "How can engaging in public conversations through social media support our mission?"

The goals should be realistic and measurable, Kanter said. Maybe the group wants to attract 10 new members, register 10 new voters or add 10 new donors to its rolls. As it works to achieve those goals, the organization should integrate social media with traditional outreach methods. Start a Twitter feed or set up a Facebook page, for example. Then analyze the data for at least a year to 18 months to see if it's working or needs to be tweaked.

Take baby steps

"Just try one small, baby-step experiment," Kanter said. "You can't get overnight results with anything. We live in a really complex world. We don't know if you're going to be successful. The point is to be agile, responsive."

The Humane Society wanted to know whether promoting its cause on social networks could help it better protect animals. So in 2006 it hired Lewis to launch its MySpace page, and a year later it joined Facebook.

Initially, executives feared that social media might be a fad, one that wouldn't contribute to the organization's goals, Lewis said. To get their buy-in, she taught them how to use social media and began regularly presenting social media successes -- like the Honey story -- at board meetings.

"I literally sat down with our CEO and COO and taught them how to use Facebook -- change their privacy settings, how to post, everything," she said in an email. "Now, the joke is that our COO tweets more than our official Twitter account."

The Humane Society now has more than 1 million fans on Facebook and more than 96,000 followers on Twitter. But the organization doesn't measure success in numbers alone. It's more concerned about what people do.

"In social media, our goals are getting people to take action, fundraising, providing customer service and increasing positive sentiment about the brand online by promoting the good work of the organization," Lewis said. "We energize people by communicating individually with people who write to us and providing our fans a way to participate and make real change for animals."

Social media isn't only about helping the society spread its message. Perhaps more importantly, it also allows the public to communicate directly with the organization -- to question its policies, cheer on its efforts, take action on behalf of animals or even just share photos of their pets on "Mutt Mondays" and "Feline Fridays."

And when controversy arises, social media gives the organization the ability to respond quickly and personally, clearing up misconceptions. In December, public outrage -- much of it mistakenly aimed at the society -- erupted after a local humane society shelter in Arizona euthanized an injured kitten that had been surrendered with the understanding that it would receive medical care.

Angry and even threatening messages were posted on the national organization's Facebook page and Twitter feed. Staff members answered each one, explaining how the Humane Society had no connection to the Arizona shelter and no role in the incident. What's more, the organization's army of supporters often answered the critical posts themselves, sometimes beating staffers to the punch.

You've already lost control

Having an online presence allowed the nonprofit to weigh in on a conversation that otherwise would've taken place without it.

"My advice would be to accept the fear of losing control, because you've already lost control," Lewis said. "People are talking about you already in other venues, so you might as well participate so that your voice can be heard."

One mistake groups often make is launching their social media presence with a fundraising campaign,

Kanter and Fine said. Social media doesn't raise money -- people do.

To get people to the point that they want to donate to an organization requires engagement and relationship building, Kanter said: "You have to make people like you. You can't just go out with your hand out."

Instead, listen first, she said. Use social media to find out what issues are important to your audience. What are they talking about? What are they willing to take action on? What advice do they have for your organization?

"It's not like the priest giving a sermon," Kanter said. "It's a call and response."

Being interested in your constituency builds trust, which can propel people up what Kanter and Fine call the "ladder of engagement." It's a framework with casual supporters at the bottom -- folks who might read an organization's blog and occasionally share information with friends -- and hard-core fans at the top -- those who donate money, recruit other supporters and even organize events on behalf of the cause.

Both kinds of supporters are essential for any effective nonprofit, the authors said. Organizations built entirely on tight-knit relationships often don't expand, because they're cliquish, and organizations built entirely on loose relationships are too weak to accomplish anything. But groups built on both strong and loose ties can move a lot of information through a network more effectively, growing and energizing different sets of people at different times.

MomsRising

The 1.1 million members of [MomsRising](#) are a perfect example. The nonprofit started in May 2006 with a handful of supporters who wanted a more "family-friendly" America, one with paid family leave, quality affordable child care and guaranteed health benefits for children.

Currently, more than 500 bloggers contribute to the organization's website, covering topics ranging from breast-feeding and parenting issues to healthy diets and toxins in children's products. The roughly 3.5 million people who read those posts -- not to mention the nonprofit's Twitter and Facebook messages -- can take a range of actions, from signing petitions to testifying before Congress.

Their efforts have been credited with securing paid family leave in New Jersey and Washington, paid sick leave in Milwaukee, and federal legislation addressing toxic chemicals in children's toys, baby bottles and other products.

At any given time, MomsRising communicates through multiple channels and offers multiple actions that members can take, said Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, co-founder and executive director.

"Our members are so busy that they may have 30 seconds one week and an hour the next week," she said. "It's our job to open up as many avenues as possible for busy people to have an impact, no matter how much time they have."

That same emphasis on relationship building and multiple avenues of participation has been a major factor in [charity: water](#)'s success. Founded only five years ago, the nonprofit has raised \$40 million to support more than 4,200 clean-water projects in 19 countries.

Using [mycharitywater.org](#), an offshoot of the organization's main website, supporters can run their own online fundraising campaigns on behalf of the nonprofit. To get donations, they give up birthdays, sell lemonade, grow beards, host champagne parties or run marathons, posting campaign updates online.

Making our story their story

"Social media allows supporters to take our story and make it *their* story," said Paull Young, the director of digital engagement at charity: water. "That's why social media works so well for us. We can build that grass-roots effort that we think will solve the water crisis."

The group's fundraising is driven by word of mouth, amplified by digital media, Young said. On its website, the organization shares photos, videos, stories and even GPS coordinates for the new wells

donors have sponsored, and it sends updates to more than 1.4 million followers on Twitter and more than 200,000 fans on Facebook.

Though charity: water's website features a "donate" button, its Twitter and Facebook messages usually don't, Young said. Like other digitally savvy nonprofits, charity: water focuses instead on building relationships, especially with those who give time, money and attention. If the relationships are right, he said, the money will come.

"We keep things very positive, very personal," he said. "We don't want them to give out of guilt. We want them to be inspired."

The nonprofit uses a variety of social media to forge personal connections, blogging about supporters' fundraising campaigns and sending shout-outs via Twitter. To celebrate its fifth birthday last year, staffers made 250 videos thanking some of the organization's supporters and posted them on its YouTube page.

As Young said, the money does come, with about 70 percent of donations raised through digital channels. And the real bottom line? Using 100 percent of all donations for water projects, the nonprofit has brought clean water to more than 2 million people so far.

Would charity: water be as effective without using social media?

"We could absolutely do what we do without it, but at the heart of it, charity: water is a digital organization," said Young, who encourages other nonprofits to follow the digital path.

"Take the time to learn the tools," he said. "It's like learning to play the piano. You're only going to work it out when you put your fingers on the keys."