

Building participation on charity websites: lessons from the social web.

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Charities depend on the goodwill and participation of thousands of staff, volunteers and supporters. Without these people they are nothing. In this way they are very similar to social media platforms which have experienced stellar growth in recent years. When you boil it down, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube are all the sum total of their users' participation. What can charities learn from these sites to better use digital technology for further harnessing and engaging their supporter base?

How to get involved

Social media platforms are systems designed for participation. The greater and more diverse the participation that is made possible, the more interesting the resulting site is for users. At the same time charities themselves are asking supporters for a variety of involvement: "please give us your time, expertise and advocacy as well as your money". Indeed, research shows that those supporters that give more financially, also want to be more involved in other ways¹. The challenge, therefore, is how can charities best translate this broad ask into digital space, not only to benefit from the increased participation of supporters, but also to deliver greater engagement and sense of community online?

If you don't ask

The first thing to do is to be upfront about the sort of contribution you are looking for by making explicit requests on your website. The next task is to provide a mechanism through which supporters can respond and get help. The social web is about two way conversation. Most charities still use their website to ask for help but don't provide a way for users to participate.

It is through this participation, such as writing comments or uploading photos of fundraising events that supporters can be made visible to each other. And it is here that the real value is created. During recent consultancy work for Guide Dogs for the Blind Association, our user research revealed that content and information is most powerfully delivered in two ways: at a local level and by 'people like me'. For an organisation with over 10,000 volunteers nationwide who deliver services via local branches, delivering content with a local context makes clear sense.

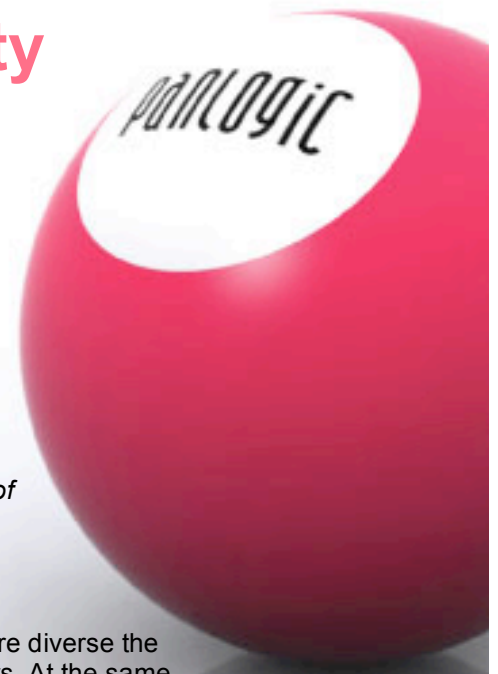
In addition, shared interests also provide a powerful common ground and transcend geography. In the context of a charity, volunteers want to share content with other volunteers, fundraisers with other fundraisers and campaigners with other campaigners. Side benefits also accrue to the casual browser who can dip in and out of all of this, connecting with the proverbial 'real person'.

Social proof

So not only does a community aspect facilitate the sharing of ideas and support, it also proves to others that something interesting is going on. So-called social proof can be effectively communicated through simple design features such as aggregated usage information. Items like, '3,000 supporters have downloaded this application', or '57 comments on this post', provide validation of site content by making others' participation visible.

These features offer proof of the website's effectiveness, but user contributions can also be used to demonstrate the effectiveness of the charity as a whole. The perennial question facing charities, especially those that spend large amounts of money on publicity, is, 'Where does the money go?'. Giving supporters, volunteers and beneficiaries the opportunity to share positive experiences and report successful outcomes of your charity's work is perhaps to create the ultimate social proof.

¹ nfpSynergy 21st Century Donor Report



Cost and control

“But not every supporter experience will be positive,” I hear you cry, “we don’t want to be promoting negative publicity by letting people post what they want.” The issue of giving up some control is one of the two main blocks preventing charities fully embracing social media and they are by no means alone. For many different types of organisation, the dream of rich user participation is always tainted by the fear of opening up their website and something going wrong. The advice given to large corporations is the same for charities: people will talk about you regardless, if you engage you can influence; if you ignore you will lose touch and favour.

Moderation presents a middle way to navigate the tension between open participation and control. This, however, leads us on to the second obstacle: that of cost. Charities are right to identify that maintaining a conversation is a significant task but can be fearful about the ongoing human resource cost of committing to this. For some this is an all or nothing affair: providing users with the opportunity to contribute or feedback without then responding will be seen as an empty gesture. You either do it properly or you don’t do it all.

As social media has demonstrated its effectiveness in delivering authentic commercial brand communication, so it will do so for charities. Conversations are already shifting from those about cost to those about investment and return. And after all, not all social media initiatives require huge investment. Innovative alternatives include equipping online advocates to spread the word, engaging digital volunteers to administer online forums or the harnessing of existing social networks rather than creating new ones.

The social web offers some very exciting opportunities to redefine the concepts of charitable support and participation. We are at the beginning, but the possibilities, as they say, are endless.

5 tips for charities

1. Design your website as a system for supporter participation.
2. Encourage and provide mechanisms for people of like interests to share ideas and connect with one another.
3. Show how many people are taking part to encourage others not to miss out.
4. Your supporters are your best advocates: help them to show the good work your charity is doing.
5. Consider harnessing existing social networks rather than creating new ones.

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