

Online Social Networking and NGOs

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Introduction

Since 2003, online social networking sites have experienced explosive growth, becoming a major phenomenon in the new millennium. Online social networking allows people to connect and share information and ideas with others via the Internet. These online communities were created as a means for members to socialize and are often seen as a fun diversion from work. Recently, however, online social networking has become a popular work tool among NGOs (nonprofits, charities, civil society organizations). These organizations are increasingly embracing social networks in order to, among other things, promote awareness, recruit followers, and raise money.

But, are social networks actually effective in carrying out these goals? Which network or networks are best used? These are two essential questions being raised by organizations today. This article seeks to help NGOs answer these questions through a compilation of data, articles, and information collected from a variety of NGO resources.

Overview of Social Networking Sites

According to an April 2009 [Nonprofit Social Network Survey Report](#) sponsored by the Nonprofit Technology Network (NTEN), Common Knowledge, and ThePort, there are two types of social networks that NGOs use:

1. A **house social network** is a networking community that is built on an NGO's own website. Of the 980 respondents, 30.6% have one or more house social networks.¹
2. A **commercial social network** is an online networking community, which is owned and operated by a corporation. This is much more popular as 86.2% of nonprofits use at least one commercial social network.

The following describes the Top 5 commercial social networks that NGOs use, according to the April 2009 Survey Report:

1. **Facebook:** Facebook was created in 2004 and is the most popular of the commercial networks by far, with 74.0% of nonprofits indicating that they use this social networking site. Facebook, Inc. privately owns it and people join networks organized by city, school, and region in order to interact with other members. People can add friends on Facebook, send messages, and post pictures. Originally open only to university and college students, it now allows free access to anyone 13 and older and currently has more than 200 million active users worldwide.

¹ For more information on house social networks and how to create one please refer to <http://commonknow.com/html/white-papers/SocialNetworksForNonprofits.pdf>

2. **YouTube:** Of the 980 nonprofits surveyed, 46.5% use YouTube for social networking. It is a video sharing website created in 2005 where users can upload, share videos, and view them. In 2006 it was bought by Google and now operates as a subsidiary of the company. Unregistered users can watch any of the posted videos, while registered users are allowed to upload an unlimited number. Registered users' accounts are called channels.
3. **Twitter:** This site is a close third as 43.3% of nonprofits indicated they use Twitter. Twitter, created in 2006, is a social networking and blogging site that permits users to send and read other users' updates, which are called tweets. Tweets are posts, no more than 140 words or less, that consist of status reports. Last year, Twitter had about two million users; this year the number has skyrocketed to 32 million users.
4. **LinkedIn:** Unlike the other popular social networking sites, LinkedIn focuses on creating and keeping professional contacts. According to the survey, 32.9% of nonprofits use this site. LinkedIn was launched in 2003 and allows users to search for jobs, has resources for hiring employees, and even has a category dedicated to nonprofits. It spans about 170 industries and has more than 40 million users.
5. **MySpace:** Of the surveyed nonprofits, 26.1% have a network on MySpace. Created in 2003, the website is very interactive, allowing users to create a network of friends, profiles, blogs, groups, music, pictures, and video. In 2006 it was the most popular networking site in the United States but was internationally overtaken by Facebook, its main competitor, in 2008.

While these five networking sites are the most popularly used by NGOs, there are hundreds of other social networking sites with free access. For a more comprehensive list and description of major active social networking websites worldwide, please see the [List of Social Networking Websites](#) on Wikipedia.

How effective are social networking sites for NGOs?

The April 2009 Survey Report found that most nonprofits were attracting only a few thousand supporters and that the money raised from outreaching to people via social networking online is not substantial enough to be meaningful. Only 1.2 percent of nonprofits had received more than \$10,000+ through Facebook. However, these numbers are not so insignificant. For a small nonprofit, reaching out to a couple of thousand people through networking sites is extremely advantageous. Also, for most nonprofits, every little bit of money raised is significant.

Throughout the world, technology innovation has changed and impacted human interaction, behavior, and activity extremely significantly in only the past couple of years. Millions of people, especially the young and the socially active, are now online and the number of people joining social networking websites increases everyday. With increasing numbers of people on these websites, there is a greater chance for NGOs to effectively recruit people this way. In fact, more than half of the nonprofits in the survey said they plan to keep their online networks and increase staffing for special online project throughout the next year.

The following are some more advantages in setting up an online social network:

- They are great for target marketing to find volunteers, employees, and supporters from diverse backgrounds and groups.

- Professional networking sites, such as LinkedIn, allow NGOs to build professional credibility.
- Social networks help similar NGOs connect and work together.
- Blogging websites, such as Twitter, can tell people what the day-to-day operations of the NGO are as well as what major events will be taking place.

Choosing the Right Network and Getting Started

It is difficult, but very important, to choose the right social network for an NGO. There is not one network that is necessarily better than another. However, the more popular a network is, the more likely an NGO is going to reach a lot of people.

The following is a list of websites that are helpful in deciding which online social network to use:

- [Beth's Blog: How Nonprofits Can Use Social Media](#)
- [Mashable: The Social Media Guide](#)
- [10 Ways Twitter Will Change American Business](#) (This article speaks to businesses and corporations but it seems that Twitter can do much of the same things for NGOs as well).
- [Tech Soup: The Technology Place for Nonprofits](#)
- [Nonprofit Organizations and Online Social Networking](#)

Conclusion

People, organizations, and governments worldwide are experiencing new innovations of technology almost everyday. The development of this technology can greatly support NGO work, especially through social media and networking websites. Many websites have been created, and many conferences have already taken place, that address what kind of services and advocacy social media can provide for NGOs. Many NGOs and nonprofits have already created an influential niche of organizations interested in how social media and technology can benefit and impact their work. This article provides many resources that will hopefully help expand this small community into something larger.

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