

Making new friends online: Ideas and insights for getting started with social media

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*Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube, Second Life...*and the list can go on and on. These are the new places where millions of people, including your charity's future donors communicate and interact with each other. According to data published in *Social Media Revolution 2* (a powerful YouTube presentation):

- *facebook added over 200 million users in less than a year;*
- *iPhone applications hit 1 billion in 9 months;*
- *If facebook were a country it would be the world's 3rd largest ahead of the United States and only behind China and India;*
- *We no longer search for the news, the news finds us.*

The question is: How is your charity's news finding new people online? Have you got a presence in social networking sites? If you do, are you simply collecting 'Likes' or 'Followers' or are you turning them into supporters and volunteers?

If you are new to social networking and are wondering where to start here are some ideas to help you step out into the new future of online communications:

- **Chose the right social networks for your cause**

Start by doing some basic research of the social networking sites and online communities. Don't just chose a social networking site simply based on its size. Some online communities may be large and useless to your cause. Others may be smaller but full of people who are really 'in tune' with your charity's cause. Therefore, they might be more interested to get involved in your work than people in large communities.

- **Create a small team of social networking pro's**

Look around your charity or current community of your supporters for people who have experience with social networking and enjoy it. It might be young staff members, a couple of interns, or volunteers. Invite these people

to some brainstorming sessions and pool together ideas of how they can help your charity raise its profile and make new friends online.

- **Determine ‘what you want to be’ in social networking sites**

Select a social network, determine how you want to present your charity in that network (e.g. whether you want to create a group or set separate pages for different aspects of your work, etc). On *facebook*, for instance, you can be a group and/or an event. You can use the event facility to promote different activities your charity might be involved in.

One of our clients who has projects in 11 countries is setting up separate groups on *facebook* for each country so that people who have volunteered or supported a project in that specific country can engage with each other.

First, make sure that you understand how the site works, its basic rules and ways of promoting your cause. Have a look around at the pages or twitter accounts, etc set up by similar charities, see how your competition is engaging with new supporters online.

- **Discover who might be already representing your charity**

The best and easiest way to go about this is to type your charity’s name on the search box of a social networking site. We did this for two clients and discovered that there were already two groups set up in *facebook* by some of their enthusiastic supporters.

Once we discovered these groups we got in touch with the people who had created the groups and got them on board with what the charity was doing. On one occasion the supporter closed the group and invited all the contacts to join the charity’s official group page. On the other case, the charity currently has two groups online with marketing and promotions to both groups.

- **Be an attention grabber!**

Facebook, *MySpace* or *YouTube* are already full to the brim with uninspiring charity profiles or presentations. So to get noticed in such crowded marketplaces you need to grab people’s attention first.

So, if you are creating a profile – make it look good. Make sure you chose a great photo and a catchy name for your group. Upload some good audio visual pieces, powerpoint presentations or photos in your group’s page.

You might choose to run a campaign too - about a topical issue your charity is trying to address and get people to sign up to participate in the campaign. Whatever you do make sure it is interesting and compelling stuff to the audiences you are trying to reach.

- **Be aware that you will not be able to monitor every message**

Whether you like it or not, the current explosion of social networking means that every person who joins an online community can freely express their opinions and views. So, when you get your cause or charity into a social

networking site you will not be able to censor every word or comment that a person in your group might issue.

This doesn't mean that you should not try social networking sites or that people who join your group will do so to criticise you. However, in order to avoid any unpleasant encounters with donors or prospects you might want to publish some basic guidelines for posting comments on the site.

You can also monitor your group more closely by setting up an approval process for comments but, if you chose to do so make sure that the approval process is fast and effective. A rule of thumb is posting or rejecting comments within the same working day.

- **Start developing and posting some 'sticky' and 'viral' content**

Social networks are at their best when people are passing content around and they will only pass yours around if it is moving, memorable and creatively presented. A short *Animoto* presentation a few moving photos and short stories can help to raise your profile online.

Using a site like *Twitter* you can also start posting short updates about your projects, appreciation messages from beneficiaries, nuggets of wisdom or practical advice and much more. You can also direct people's attention to blogs and updates using viral messages and news updates.

Make it your business to look around and see what other people are doing and go back to the drawing board if some of your initial ideas are not working.

- **Find out whether your supporters are already on social networks**

In *Why Christians Give* – a recent survey of evangelical donors in the UK we discovered that 83% of them used Internet at home while 18% are on *facebook* and 2% use *Twitter*.

Do you know how many of your supporters have profiles on *facebook* or *MySpace* or use *Premier Radio's* forums? Include a question about participation in social networking sites and forums in your next supporter survey and see what they like to be part of.

Furthermore, make sure that you include a link to your *facebook* group or other networking groups set up by your charity in different e-mails you send to your support base. Create links to your social networking group from your website also so people can find you easily.

- **Keep your social networking pro's focused on the task**

Like with any other area of fundraising you can not make social networking successful if you do not invest staff time, energy and creativity in this communications channel.

Therefore, make sure that you assign a few staff members and volunteers who thrive on social networking to invite their friends to join your page, to

accept friend requests, to post comments on people's profiles and on your group page, to tweet on your behalf, to post prayers or photos and links to blogs relevant to your work, etc. This is what social networking is all about!

- **Stay connected with your social networking friends**

Many charities create pages or groups on social networking sites and then keep them static. People who joined lose interest and sometimes even go away. All the hard work put in initially can be lost if you don't update your pages with new content or launch new campaigns.

So, use *MySpace* bulletins or *facebook's* notes, send out tweets three or four times a day, get the word out about new projects, success stories, ministry opportunities, post discussion questions and much more.

Make sure you are constantly keeping people interested in your work and giving them various opportunities to get involved with your cause.

- **Turn your social networking 'friends' into supporters**

Once again, like with other areas of fundraising, the ultimate purpose of having a presence in social networking sites is to turn your new online friends into supporters, volunteers or even workers (this is especially the case with mission agencies trying to recruit short term mission workers).

Make sure you regularly post opportunities to get involved in your work on your social networking pages. You might want to send out regular e-mails to people in these groups too with opportunities to donate to your work.

Whatever you decide to do, it really pays to be specific when you ask people in your charity's social networking group to do something for your charity. Say 'thank you' to new supporters or volunteers and always offer feedback about what the money they gave made possible.

Don't forget to ask these new friends whether they would like to hear more from your charity and get their permission to add their details to your mailing list. Using social networking groups can be a very cost effective way to increase your charity's support base and get new donors onboard.

Finally, by using social networking and new media today you will be investing in your charity's future. The fact of the matter is that, many young and even middle age people who use and love social media are your charity's future supporters. So, by introducing them to your cause now and by relating to them in ways they want to be communicated with you will be investing in building donor relationships for life.