The Nonprofit Organization's Guide to Social Media

Being active on social media is no longer optional. As organizations compete with both traditional brands and other nonprofit organizations, it's more important than ever to stand out on social channels with a distinctive personality.

It's usually not enough to throw up haphazard posts on Facebook or Twitter and expect supporters to come. Successful social media communications occurs through thoughtful, strategic planning, setting measurable objectives, and committing to consistency.

This guide explores both the reasons for nonprofits to invest in social media and how to make those efforts as successful as possible—no matter how limited or expansive your social media resources.

Why Invest in Social Media?

Social media provides a unique opportunity for nonprofits. It enables organizations to:
- Clarify and increase their brand and mission awareness
- Attract new audiences while engaging current supporters
- Retain and grow donor bases and revenue streams

Why Now?

- Many nonprofits already have a robust social media presence. There is competition for this airspace and the sooner you enter, the faster you can build up a strong presence.
- More than 85 percent of U.S. adults are active on social media networks; it has become *the* primary way for people to communicate and engage with one other and with the causes that are important to them
- There's a changing communications landscape: While traditional nonprofit communications took a "top-down" approach, with things like events, print press, and speaking engagements comprising the bulk of messaging to audiences, today's "bottom-up" approach enables organizations to engage directly with those people who are most critical to them by taking advantage of social media platforms.

Philosophy & Objectives

Having a presence on social media platforms requires a two-way conversation between an organization and its followers. It's not just about pumping out information in a one-way stream, but rather, interacting and having real-time conversations with the public. Establishing your organization's social media philosophy and defining objectives will help guide your brand as you build your posting strategy. It will also enable you to "sell" the importance of social media to key stakeholders.

Your organization's **philosophy** will look/read something like this:

- To protect and enhance the organization's reputation as XYZ organization
- To deliver to constituents the information they crave
- To be a trusted resource and ally for the XYZ community

In order to implement your philosophy, you may create **objectives** like this:

- Raising awareness of the XYZ brand and increasing the value of its social media channels by sharing and reporting on the latest news in the field
- Setting XYZ organization apart from others by highlighting what we do differently from other organizations *doing similar work* (Is it the approach you take? The number of donation dollars that is allocated toward your mission? The caliber of people involved? Make sure *you* know what it is before trying to sell others on it!)
- Putting a tangible human touch on the work our organization is doing
- Turning followers into advocates — getting others to share our messaging, turn followers into donors, and donors into evangelists
- Building relationships with like-minded and influential brands and bloggers
- Encouraging donations and fundraising efforts
- Enabling mobilization, including driving people to read and share website content, having users sign a policy petition, or buying a specific product

Types of Content

The types of content you share on your social media channels are critical. For a large part of your audience, a social impression might be the first connection they have with your organization. It's imperative that their interaction be interesting, engaging, and useful, while remaining true to your brand philosophy.

The content should be varied to keep followers engaged and checking back frequently, while also fulfilling obligations you might have to partners, specific fundraising campaigns, or events. The following are proposed types of content:

Original Content
This should be your biggest source of content. This can be anything from profiles of leaders in your organization/field, blog posts from someone in the organization commenting on a major development in the field, a donor/fundraiser of the week, or even a beautiful photo and quote for a day that's special to your organization (National Cancer Survivors Day, Men's Health Week, or World AIDS Day are some examples).

Think of this content as what sets your organization apart from others who work in your field. These messages should make followers feel personally connected to your organization or cause, highlight some of the important people behind the scenes, and/or help drive audiences back to your site to read more or donate.

Relevant Content
Sharing content that's relevant to your mission, whether it's produced by your organization or not, reinforces your position as a thought leader in the space, one who curates the

content that your audience is interested in. This includes, but isn't limited to, news articles, statistics, infographics, and special event opportunities.

Campaign, Event, and Partner Promotions

Use your social media channels to increase awareness for special campaigns the organization is undertaking, an upcoming event, or highlighting a partnership with another brand.

However, instead of providing a regurgitation of an invite or information that's available on your website, give your social media followers something special. Do you have a prominent speaker lined up for an event? Try sharing a great quote he or she recently said to get people excited. Are you trying to gain more fundraisers for a particular campaign? Give followers some great ideas that have successfully worked for others along with photos. People want to know what's in it for them; it's your job to show them.

Fundraising & Engagement

Nonprofits rely on their donors, and it's always nice to show appreciation. Whether it's an independent donor who raised $5,000 by running a race, a restaurant that's donating a portion of its sales to your organization, or a corporate partner that wrote a check for $100,000, this is an opportunity to highlight how others have supported the organizations—and how followers can, too.

Social Media Guidelines by Network

Just because there are multiple social networking sites does not mean your organization needs to be active on all of them.

If your resources are more limited, it's best to focus on just one or two platforms where your biggest audiences are most active and to produce consistent, high-quality content than try to be everywhere at once. It's also important to note that each network has its own audience and style of content; simply pushing content from one platform to another will *not* be successful (i.e. having Facebook posts automatically populate a Twitter feed).

Facebook Overview

Facebook is an online social utility that connects people and organizations with friends and others who work, study, live, and engage around them. People use Facebook to keep up with friends, to share links, to share photos and videos of themselves and causes important to them, and to learn more about people and organizations.

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# of users: 1.3 billion

This is the best-known and most widely used social networking site. If there's one network to be sending messaging on, Facebook is it!

While organizations have, in the past, been focused on the number of "likes" their page has, Facebook continues to adjust its algorithm in order to decide which posts will end up appearing in viewers' newsfeeds. In other words, just because you post something doesn't mean every one of your followers will see it.

To ensure that the most followers see your messaging, it's important to focus on "engagement," or the number of people that like, comment on or share your individual posts.

Facebook Recommendations

Increase posting frequency on Facebook to reach more people throughout the day. Posting 2-3 times a day, with different types of content, is ideal. Play around with the best times for your audience and keep track of what times and what type of content gets the most engagement. Then, ramp up efforts according to your results.

Engage audiences and reap higher exposure in timelines by using images and links. Posts with images or links rank higher in Facebook's Edgerank algorithm, which means they'll be shown to more people. These types of posts also drive the most engagement (likes, clicks, and shares). Photo albums are an excellent way to showcase events or on-the-ground projects as well; people love looking at and sharing photos, and the more followers interact with your page today, the more likely it is that they'll do so in the future.

Consider investing in Facebook advertising. This allows organizations to target specific demographics in order to increase reach. Depending on your goals, you can promote a specific post to reach your current followers, reach out to followers' friends, or even promote a specific link. Even a modest budget of $5 per day, or a few hundred dollars a month, will allow you to experiment with what's right for your audience.

Twitter Overview

Twitter is a micro-blogging and social utility service that allows its users to send and read messages known as tweets, text-based posts of no more than 140 characters. People use Twitter to share and view news, links, opinions, professional information, personal statuses, and more.
# of users: 255 million

Twitter is one of the best outlets nonprofits have to share relevant content. As Twitter users expect short, useful information, it can be a great way to drive followers to your website, promote older content pieces, and engage with other influencers in the space.

Twitter Recommendations

Plan mix of tweets posted at different times. This will ensure you show up in people's feeds throughout the day. Include:

- Original content written by your organization or content that features someone from the organization (Aim for ~35% of daily tweets).
- Content related to your mission or space but aren't directly related to your organization (Aim for ~25% of daily tweets).
- A mix of retweets from other Twitter users who post interesting, relevant information (or an influencer who mentions your organization), responses to direct tweets, and tweets about any specific campaigns or upcoming events (~40% of daily tweets)

Tweet consistently. This is important since Twitter shows users' feeds in real time, and your message can quickly be relegated to the bottom of people's feeds. More is often better when it comes to Twitter, so aim for 3-5 tweets a day to start (avoid posting several tweets in rapid succession—that can be a major turn off). Use Twitter's analytics tool to find the frequency that resonates best with your followers.

Use Hashtags. They're an easy way for potential new followers to discover your content. Explore which hashtags are popular in your field so you participate in using them. Creating campaign- or event-specific hashtags are also an excellent way to set your brand apart and make it easy to see who's talking about your organization on Twitter.

Live tweet from your organization's events or industry-related conferences. This is another way for followers to discover your feed while establishing your organization as a thought leader. If possible, have someone live tweeting and offering perspective at these events.

Create Twitter Lists These can be very effective ways to organize the users that your organization follows and assign them to specific lists. Using lists means you'll never miss tweets by the influencers in your field, making it easy to engage with them and follow the conversation.

Instagram Overview

Instagram is a real-time photo and video-sharing network that allows users to upload photos and 15-second videos and apply special image filters through an app. The photos can be shared within the Instagram network or throughout other popular social networks.
# of users: 150 million

Created to share beautiful images, an Instagram account allows the organization to reach its followers in a visually focused way. It allows for a behind-the-scenes look at the organization, its events, and day-to-day life in the office. It also allows your nonprofit the opportunity to get creative with storytelling.

There is more flexibility with Instagram as a social media platform (the messaging can be more inspirational and less factually driven), and content should be varied. Suggestions include event promotions and photos (for instance, candid shots of celebrities appearing at a nonprofit-sponsored event), behind-the-scenes shots of what's going on in the office (like a founder being filmed for a commercial, teams prepping for an event, staffers and supporters wearing a certain color), images that invoke the sprit of your organization (images of the people you're helping or your programs being implemented) and even great shots of your nonprofit's home base.

Instagram Recommendations

Stay focused. This is one platform where you can really promote your own brand without having to mix in others' content. Take this chance to shine! Share an awesome image of a project your organization is working on. Give followers a sneak peek into your organization's office by sharing a coworker's really cool desk. Take shots of a gorgeous day in the city you're located in. Get people to feel passionate about what you're doing by sharing a "photo quote" that inspires your team.

Use hashtags. It can be a great way to launch small campaigns and encourage followers to use a specific hashtag to raise awareness. It can also help new followers to find you.

Post Consistently. Posting on Instagram at least two times a week will keep your feed fresh. But, as always, more is even better!

YouTube Overview

YouTube is a video hosting and discovery platform, and also serves as the world's second largest search engine. YouTube requires a bit more effort and creativity than the other social media platforms, but it helps an organization become more personable. Having YouTube videos will also be beneficial for SEO. Videos can be a great way to tell your organization's story, to disseminate PSAs or spread cause awareness, or to highlight successes or milestones for the organization. Making a video can be a big investment depending on your resources, but it can go a long way in conveying your organization's message.
# of users: 1 billion per month

YouTube Recommendations

Join the YouTube's Nonprofits program. This will give your organization access to features like annotations that link to your website, exposure on YouTube's nonprofit page, and a branded channel – features that aren't available to non-partners.

Add Calls to Action through Annotations. After users have watched your video, ask them to take action by clicking a link to your site, sharing the video with friends, or watching another related video from your organization. Adding annotations will help you mobilize an already-capitivated audience. Be sure to also include a link back to your site in the video description to increase linkbacks.

Optimize Videos for SEO. To make your video as "discoverable" as possible, tag it with relevant keywords related to your organization and the content. Be sure to write out a full video description that includes important keywords and links back to your website to capture the most search traffic.

Governance and Creating a Code of Conduct

Having a dedicated staff member to work on social media is important for establishing a consistent voice on your social media channels. While other team members can certainly be involved by sharing relevant content or making suggestions to this social media manager, ultimately there should be one person with control over the channels. This person should have the authority to decide what's appropriate for maintaining the brand's image and be able to reach out to key organization stakeholders when approval for sensitive topics is necessary.

Code of Conduct

Use of social media—even within your organization—can become viral. As social media becomes more popular within your organization, people within your organization will want to become more involved with social media. That's great news, but it's important to protect the reputation of your brand and the integrity of your social accounts.

Consider creating a Code of Conduct to help minimize damage. Suggested guidelines are below (use these as a foundation to create your own):

- You are an ambassador of XYZ brand and should strive to represent it, and yourself, in the best way at all times.
- Do not post materials or content that may reflect negatively on the organization, its employees, leaders, researchers, donors or other like-minded organizations.
- If you wish to speak about the organization online within your personal networks, you must identify yourself as an employee of the organization and make clear that you are not speaking on behalf of the organization.
- Confidential information must remain confidential. If you are unsure if information is publicly available, consult with a member of the appropriate team.
- We encourage you to like and share our original content, news articles featuring our employees, or highlights from any of our events. Do not provide medical information, advice, or inaccurate information. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't guess.
- Respect the privacy of your colleagues and be sensitive to the community we serve. The Internet is always watching.

Social Media Writing Tips & Tools

Your organization's social media channels are an opportunity to speak to followers in a more informal, friendly manner while still maintaining a professional, reputable presence. In order to convey this, there are several writing best practices:

- Use first-person writing throughout channels.
- On Twitter, refrain from starting tweets with hashtags or handles, unless specifically responding to someone. If you want this tweet to be seen by your entire network, rather than just that person, use a period before the person's Twitter handle.
- Abbreviate as infrequently as possible. When necessary, use common abbreviations.
- Keep Facebook posts short, averaging no more than 3-5 sentences per post.
- On Twitter, aim for about messages of 100-120 characters, allowing room for other users to respond with their own commentary.
- If including a call to action, make it clear and easy for people to understand.

- Add your logo to original image assets, such as infographics or quotes. That way, as people share, retweet, and regram your content, it's still clear where the piece is originally from — and will encourage new followers to come onboard.

Using Hashtags, Sharing Others' Content, Mentioning Specific Organizations/People

Using hashtags, sharing relevant content, and mentioning specific people or organizations are ways to become involved in larger conversations on social media channels. Here are some guidelines for using these tools:

- Use hashtags for common phrases that your organization works in (#breastcancer, #science, #poverty).
- Refrain from hashtagging #every #single #word — use five hashtags maximum for Twitter; no more than eight on Instagram (add at the end of the text, or in a comment, to keep things clean).
- When sharing another organization or person's content, be sure to give credit by using @TheirName on Facebook and @TheirHandle on Twitter.
- When retweeting content, try to add value to it instead of simply retweeting with no comments added. Simply adding a quick line engages followers more than just pumping out borrowed content ("Great article," "Really useful tips").
- When appropriate, thank followers who have retweeted or shared your content. Engaging directly with users makes them feel appreciated and more likely to engage with your brand again.

Responding to Comments, Messages, and Tweets

Because social media is a conversation, your organization is expected to respond at times. These are guidelines for responding to comments and tweets directed at your organization.

- In general, if a positive comment is made on a Facebook post, "like" it. People love being heard and acknowledged!
- If an individual or organization shares your content on Facebook or writes something and references the organization, a quick "Thank you for supporting us!" comment is a clear way to show acknowledgement.
- If someone has shared a personal story, it's nice to thank him or her for sharing.
- If someone sends your organization a private Facebook message that is not spam, they should receive an answer. If it is something the organization can't answer, such as medical advice, they should receive a standard answer about contacting a doctor. When possible, direct these people to appropriate resources to answer their question.

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People following your social media aren't always friendly or supporters. When comments on Facebook are negative, these are best practices to follow:

- If the comment is harmless but just nasty, leave it up; usually, the conversation won't go any farther or other supporters will police. You don't want to engage by replying.
- Use other ways to address common misconceptions. Do you receive many questions about how your organization spends its dollars? Try adding a small efficiency statement somewhere on your Facebook page.
- If a comment spreads misinformation (such as medical advice), leave it up and respond with a standard response from your Communications team.
- You may want to create standard answers for your most frequent questions to make responses more consistent and to save time. Consider posting these as an FAQ section on your social media accounts or your website.
- After an FAQ is established, it's at the manager's discretion whether to remove comments. Generally you will want to remove comments that are rude, nasty to other followers, or unrelated to the topic at hand . You may want to create a statement about your removal policy and post it on your social media accounts to maintain transparency. This allows your page to remain a respectful, supportive community, while providing a warning to followers ahead of time.

Helpful Social Media Tools

There are several tools that can make your social media experience easier and more streamlined. Here are some of our favorites.

Facebook Page Insights
Though Facebook produces it, the Page Insights tools are robust and offer plenty of useful information. You can find out what types of posts are performing well, what time your followers are most engaged, compare specific time periods, and even allow you to compare your growth with similar organizations. Take the time to explore and learn from Insights. For a quick beginner's guide on Insights, this one by [KISSmetrics](#) is helpful.

Hootsuite
Hootsuite is a web-based program that makes it easy to get the most out of Twitter and other social media platforms. In addition to making scheduling tweets (and Facebook posts) in advance, Hootsuite also makes it easy to add different streams to view at a glance. Is there a particular phrase that your organization likes to monitor, such as "childhood leukemia"? You can create a stream that will show all its mentions. You can also stream your own Twitter lists, making it easier to see what influencers in your field are talking about. Additionally, you can monitor more than one account at the same time.

Flipagram

Flipagram is a great way to showcase a collection of photos. It allows you to create short video stories from your photos and even set them to music. You can use the Flipagram videos on Instagram or upload them to Facebook as well. Try it after major events to maximize exposure.

Canva

Canva is a free online platform that allows you to make professional quality images. It's an easy way to make infographics, quote posts, or just add effects like text to images already in your arsenal without pricey products like the Adobe Suite. You can also create Facebook cover photos here.

Nonprofit Tech for Good

This site focuses on valuable, easy-to-understand information, news, and resources, related to technology and online communications, and social fundraising.

PicMonkey

Edit and touch up photos, change dimensions, or make a collage with PicMonkey. You can upgrade for a nominal fee to get access to even more fonts and designs.

Socially Stacked

This blog provides updates on social media trends, changes in the landscape, and more.

Three Top Nonprofit Networks to Watch

Gain inspiration from these organizations who are doing social media right!

charity: water

This Facebook page is full of gorgeous images. Nearly every post is accompanied by a photo, increasing chances that people will engage with them. Additionally, they recognize partners like Cathay Pacific Airways through thoughtful posts that are on-brand with charity: water's mission.

UNICEF USA

UNICEF's Twitter feed has a healthy mix that appeals to people supporting their causes. They highlight an appearance in People magazine, thank fundraisers for supporting the organization, and share information that's relevant for their audiences though not produced by them. They also make great use of images and videos from their organization.

(RED)

RED's Instagram feed does a great job of pairing simple [text imagery](#) with playful [on-the-scenes photos](#) and promotion of signature RED [events](#). A quick scroll through their feed gives you a sense of the work they do and the organization's personality.

For more tips and tricks on social media and all things digital, check out the resources at Whole Whale:

Blog   **Podcast**   **Videos**