

Should Our Organization Take a Chance on Tweets?

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Abstract

Staying abreast of social media and networking tools, and evaluating whether they can aid a volunteer organization, are daunting tasks. Social media may all sound like a panacea, but what are the realities of fully embracing these new technologies and are there repercussions for not bringing our volunteer programs into the contemporary technological era? The authors present questions, concerns, strengths, and challenges for volunteer-driven programs and their managers and administrators in an era of social media networking.

Key Words:

social media, networking, technology

Introduction

Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Wikipedia, YouTube, blogging . . . keeping up with the evolving list of social media and networking tools is a daunting task for any volunteer resource manager (VRM). More important than just navigating these new technological tools is figuring out whether utilizing what's out there is a good fit for enhancing volunteer-driven programs and organizations. For more than two decades, experts in the field of volunteer resource management have written about contemporary trends in volunteerism and volunteer resource management, including technology, and their impacts upon volunteer programs and volunteer participation (Allen, 2006; Cravens, 2006; Merrill, 2002; Safrit & Merrill, 2002). These

references to emerging technology helped form best practices for utilizing distance learning to support volunteer orientation and training; created cutting edge positions to allow for virtual participation; and, focused VRMs upon updating recruitment strategies to take advantage of new and emerging technologies. Yet few VRMs have been fully prepared for the impact of new social media on volunteer programs.

Contemporary authors suggest that new media provide a venue for scholarly discussion, relationship building, and popularization of research (O'Conner, Balasubramanian, Routedge, & Smith, 2010; Skipper, 2006; Walker, 2006). Social networking outlets provide volunteer groups an additional platform from which to organize programs, share ideas, motivate

individuals, and mobilize efforts that may supplement rather than supplant traditional outreach methods. It may all sound like a panacea, but what are the realities of fully embracing these new technologies, and are there repercussions for not bringing volunteer programs into the contemporary technological era of social networking?

Defining social media involves combining two distinct concepts. “Social” refers to the interaction of humans, while “media” is basically a technology where data or information are stored or delivered (Carton, 2009). Thus, social media are simply technologies that facilitate conversations, and by extension, a social network is a community of individuals or organizations linked increasingly through technology to facilitate conversations. In response to *Salmonella* outbreaks in Washington State associated with queso fresco, Bell, Hillers and Thomas (1999) developed a volunteer program utilizing existing social networks of the affected community, which was largely Hispanic. The researchers created a food safety practices program that was to be delivered through individuals trusted in the Hispanic community – abeulas, or older grandmother-like Hispanic women. The flow of information from abeulas, a trusted source with compelling information, to the rest of the community is analogous to the online social networks that can be fostered and developed by other volunteer groups.

As we work with high school and college students and recruit volunteers who have grown up adept at using digital technology as part of their day-to-day lifestyle, we must acknowledge that their skills, aptitudes, and attitudes differ from those of our more “mature” colleagues (Betts & Glogoff, 2005; Clark & Clark, 2009). Volunteering doesn’t happen in a vacuum and there are unknown implications for volunteer programs and the profession of

volunteer resource management as we apply the strengths and challenges of social media to our volunteers and our organizations (Ellis, 2004),

Pros and Cons of Using Social Media Networks

As with any contemporary trend, there are advantages and disadvantages to consider. We would suggest the following strengths and challenges for using social media in volunteer-based programs; however, as these media continue to evolve, new strengths and challenges will continue to evolve as well.

Strengths

- 1) Social media create opportunities for instant communication and dissemination of program information to and among volunteers. This instant access may be as simple as a tweet to update volunteers about a changed work location, a Facebook posting to remind volunteers about what to bring with them to a worksite, or a blog entry to share information to help recruit additional volunteers for a specific event.
- 2) Immediate responses and feedback with the ability to create synchronous and asynchronous dialogue are easily achieved through social media. Utilizing these tools to post volunteer success stories, share photos, praise volunteers, and announce future opportunities based upon positive experiences can enhance engagement internally and externally to a volunteer group. These are also mechanisms that volunteers may use to share individual ideas and attitudes about their experiences as a volunteer with your organization.
- 3) Text, images, and sound are easily combined using social media to create interesting messages involving printed words, visual imagery, and sound. Including photos and graphics can help to build curiosity, help support volunteer response, and help to tell the organization’s

story to the public in support of future projects and activities. Research reveals that the use of stories and verbal narratives is more effective in providing information than prescriptive messages or numerical statistics alone (Lordley, 2007; Morgan, Cole, Struttman, & Piercy, 2002; Paivio, 1978).

4) Utilizing social media appeals to younger audiences for volunteer recruitment and engagement purposes. Research suggests that younger volunteers are drawn to causes rather than organizations (Kanter & Fine, 2010), and that providing information via social media reaches these potential volunteers more effectively than print or other marketing outlets. Effectively pitching the organization, its mission, and the specific service options available via social media contributes to a more immediate response among younger generations.

5) Emerging technology is designed for effective management regardless of individual VRM technical capacity; in other words, most social media are user-friendly and easily learned. As with anything, practice and training will help to develop greater aptitude and more effective utilization, but the technology is not so intimidating as to push new users away.

Challenges

1) Risk management and liability issues are identified almost daily in association with various social media, including everything from breaches in database controls, to posting photos without media releases, to tagging Facebook photos for links to other pages, and the list goes on. Those in the legal profession will tell you that even as new risks are identified and strategies developed to manage them, new risks surface. Do the risks of using social media outweigh the benefits? Conventional wisdom seems to be in favor of using the technology; just ask the over 500 million users of Facebook (Facebook, 2010).

2) Social media must first be “social.” It implies that human time is invested to share information and ideas, and to insure there is a consistent flow to keep connected. Is it detrimental for an organization to indicate that there are Facebook, Twitter and other social sites affiliated with that organization, yet to not invest the time and energy needed to keep those sites populated with information and activities? Are blogs where information hasn’t been posted in more than two months really relevant to volunteers?

3) Utilizing technology as a sole outreach method may create challenges for volunteers who are not comfortable with technology from a social media perspective. There are still individuals who are not ready to post personal information in a platform where they are unsure who the audience is.

Summary and Conclusions

Social media is the new way to connect to a global community. Volunteer programs and organizations that find ways to capitalize on these new communication strategies will thrive in further engaging volunteers, while those who do not find ways to adapt will be left behind. As we consider how best to support our volunteer-driven organizations and our individual volunteers related to use of social media, there are some questions we would pose to leaders in the field to continue the dialogue we have initiated in this article.

1) Are we going to chase away potential volunteers who are not comfortable with social media by focusing too much time and energy on developing social media networks?

2) How can we build capacity within our volunteer groups to create social media strategies and support the use of available tools to enhance participation by volunteers?

- 3) If there are digital divides related to both skill and access, how will our volunteer-based organizations continue to support traditional outreach mechanisms while investing in new social media?
- 4) How much information should be made public about our organizations and/or our volunteers?
- 5) What types of policies and standards should be applied to volunteers and/or paid staff in our organizations regarding their use of social media? Should these policies and standards extend to their personal social public information as well as their professional postings?

As with any contemporary trend, time will reveal myriad uses and the very open-source, sharing nature of the Internet will provide a place to further discuss best practices, barriers and successes related to using social media in volunteer-based programs.

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