Social Media for Fundraising Online

Who is this How To... guide for?

Anyone who needs to know how to use social media within an online fundraising strategy. The guide also presents the things that a fundraiser must do on a regular basis using social media and the tools that best help create a community around that.

Why is this resource necessary?

There is growing interest in using social media tools like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, MySpace and others to connect online donors to worthy causes.

Using social media for fundraising is still fairly new in the UK. However, in recent years a number of interesting case studies of using ‘social media for social good’ have emerged that demonstrate the potential for charities and voluntary organisations to raise significant amounts of money online in this way.

Examples include the hugely successful Twestival initiative, the world’s largest Twitter fundraising drive which raised over $250,000 for charity: water and the adventurous Twitchhiker campaign in which one man set off to see how far he could travel in 30 days relying solely on the hospitality and advice of the Twitter community.

The arts sector is similar to the charity sector in that its funding is increasingly dependent on its ability to connect donors to worthy ‘fund-seeking’ projects.

This resource presents a number of activities organisations can get involved in to start fundraising online.

First, we must begin with a definition of what social media is.
Social Media for Fundraising Online

Social Media: what is it and why is it important for fundraising online?

Social media is currently defined as follows on Wikipedia:

“Social media is media designed to be disseminated through social interaction, created using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques.”

This wordy definition goes on to add that the ubiquity of high speed internet access in much of the Western world enables the use of “web-based technologies to transform broadcast media monologues (one to many) into social media dialogues (many to many)”.

This is key.

Social media enables conversations.

Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, MySpace allow people to congregate around ‘interests’ online, empowering content creators to create and nurture online communities around ‘social objects’: online ideas that people can associate their online identities with readily.

‘Showing support for a particular cause’ is one such example of a social object because through donating to or supporting an online fundraising drive, web users express a side of their personalities they do not often show during ‘routine’ social networking activity like Twittering or chatting with friends on Facebook.

User interaction and fundraiser interactivity is critical for successful fundraising online using social media.

Twestival and Twitchhiker were successful because they linked web users with the unique story behind each initiative and invited interaction at every stage.
Twestival’s mechanic for fundraising using social media

Twestival used the mechanic of inviting people around the world to volunteer to organise a Twitter meet up event (aka ‘tweetup’) in their country on a specific day (13th February 2009) with the aim of raising money for charity:water at the event.

Tweetups are meet-up events for people who have never met offline but have connected online through the Twitter micro-blogging service.

Volunteers from over 200 countries rallied around the idea, organising events ranging from charity auctions to a gumball rally that covered 700 miles.

Lesson learnt from Twestival:
Giving people full autonomy in organising their events resulted in the emergence of a network of influential and well connected volunteer fundraisers around the world who successfully attract local support for a global cause.

Twitchhiker’s mechanic for fundraising using social media

Twitchhiker invited people to donate to the cause as they were kept updated on the whereabouts of Paul Smith, the blogger and Guardian journalist behind the project. Paul Smith used Twitter and the Twitchhiker blog to keep people updated throughout his 30 day journey.

Lesson learnt from Twitchhiker:
By sharing regular updates of his progress, Paul was able to encourage the thousands of people who identified with his personal story to support him to achieve with his challenge of raising $5,000 for charity:water.

In both examples above, clear requests for donations to the charity were made during the course of interacting with people and sharing information on the campaign. In this way, the fundraisers were able to convince people to part with their money and thus add funds to the campaign’s running total.
Social Media for Fundraising Online

Mashable’s Summer of Social Good mechanic for fundraising using social media

Tech blog Mashable’s Summer of Social Good campaign used online fundraising mechanics ranging from a company donating $1.50 per retweet of posts up to 2,000 to donating $1 per view for video views up to $10,000 for a particular video.

Lesson learnt from the Summer of Good campaign:
By connecting corporations with the idea of ‘sponsoring social media activity’, fundraisers were able to redeem large amounts pledged by companies to the cause.

The things that a fundraiser must do on a regular basis using social media

The writer of this guide is currently leading an ambitious round-the-world charity fundraising project called 7 Wonders in 7 Days which aims to raise £777,000 for 7 charities by visiting the 7 new wonders of the world in 7 days in October 2010.

The project, inspired by a grandmother’s death from complications arising from Alzheimer’s aims to raise £777,000 for the following 7 charities:

Alzheimer’s Research Trust, Diabetes UK, Open Doors, British Red Cross, In support of Sport Relief 2010, Feed The Minds, Young Minds.

Though the project is largely at its early planning stages, several things are already emerging as being critical to its success.

These include having a clearly defined goal, being flexible when planning dates and activities and communicating regularly with the online audience.

The aim of this next section is to guide others in the UK embarking on such fundraising activity using social media towards a successful project outcome.
It is imperative you have a clear campaign goal.

Although Twestival didn’t quite reach its $1 million target, it was successful in raising over $250,000 for charity:water because it had articulated its ambitious goal at the start of the campaign.

Whatever your target is, make sure your campaign goal is clear. It makes it much easier to communicate that goal on a number of platforms on a regular basis as is the case with using social media for fundraising.

Involve your audience from the beginning

Interest was generated in the project within days of launching the 7 Wonders in 7 Days blog because the wider web audience was invited to help plan a workable itinerary for seeing the 7 new wonders of the world in 7 days.

Similarly, the Twestival and Twitchhiker campaigns launched with requests for help from the audience from the very beginning.

Social media empowers online fundraising because conversations can spark actions very quickly.

For this reason, involving your audience in decisions from the get go can help social media fundraising activity gain momentum in the critical early stages of a project.

Be willing to change tack

Flexibility is key with online fundraising projects. Initial targets may change, ambitious campaign plans may have to cut down to size, whatever you do, don’t give up!

Be willing to change tack and embrace the opportunity to involve your audience in each change.
Social Media for Fundraising Online

It actually leads to unexpected opportunities.

Recent plans to postpone the 7 Wonders in 7 Days trip to from September 2009 to October 2010 to allow more time to involve more people had an unexpected benefit: it would now be possible to create a TV documentary from the trip.

Communication is everything

The success of campaigns like Twestival and Twitchhiker demonstrate the fact that energised and empowered supporters will go to great lengths to help a fundraiser achieve their goals.

Both campaigns used social media tools to communicate the campaign’s goal to a web audience.

Using the communications tools afforded by social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr requires minimal initial training and is in most cases, free.

Recommendations of social media tools to use for fundraising

A successful social media fundraising campaign would include:

- A central blog for updating campaign supporters
- A Twitter account for post short, 140 character-long updates to supporters
- A Facebook page for connecting Facebook users with your campaign
- A YouTube account for sharing videos created during the campaign
- A Flickr account sharing pictures created during the campaign

There are countless more social media platforms out there but a well-managed online fundraising campaign will utilise one or more of the tools mentioned above.
Social Media for Fundraising Online

How much time should one spend on social media when fundraising online?
It is possible to minimise ‘campaign communications’ to a daily Twitter and Facebook update, a weekly blog post and a monthly video on YouTube once a campaign is well into its stride.

Be prepared to spend significantly more time at the start of the campaign growing your supporter base online however.

Use as many ‘mass media’ outlets (press, radio, TV etc) as you have access to. Campaigns should include at least one well-publicised press release to attract the wider public and get the ball rolling.

As you can introduce new forms of social media to the mix: iTunes-listed video podcasts, Audioboo audio snippets etc to keep the campaign fresh and reach people on those platforms.
Social Media for Fundraising Online

To end this guide, I’ve included an excerpt of a really helpful blog post by Hugh MacLeod the artist, blogger and entrepreneur who convinced Thomas Mahon, the Saville row tailor behind the successful bespoke suit range English Cut to start blogging.

MacLeod is illustrating the point that social media can be used to successfully build a ‘global microbrand’. In most cases, those successful with using social media for fundraising have also been successful in using it to create a micro-brand.

Reprinted from GapingVoid.com:

My father remarked to me the other day, “I bet you had no idea in the beginning that the blog would work as well as it did, eh?”

True, I had no idea. But looking back, we had a few things going for us.

1. **A great product.** Thomas is one of the best tailors in the world. His suits REALLY ARE that good. If we were just selling commodified drek, I doubt if anyone would’ve paid much attention.

2. **A unique story.** When he started, Thomas was the only Savile Row tailor writing a blog, and this gave him a unique voice in the blogosphere. This fuelled the interest. Had masses of tailors already been blogging, it would’ve been much harder for his own unique “idea-virus” to spread. The first-mover advantage rule still applies.

3. **Passion & Authority.** Thomas has both in spades. That’s what kept people coming back. That’s what built up trust. That’s what turned his readers into customers. Which is why “Share what you love” is the best advice there is.

4. **Continuity.** He kept at it. He didn’t expect the blog to transform his fortunes overnight. As I’m fond of saying, “Blogs don’t write themselves”. Based on our experience, if you want blogs to transform your business, I’d say give yourself at least a year.
**Social Media for Fundraising Online**

5. **Focus.** It was always about the suits. It was never about what he had for breakfast, Technorati rank or frothy gossip about other bloggers.

6. **Thomas spoke in his own voice.** Thomas is a straightforward, affable fellow, and the voice on the blog is the same as the voice you meet in real life. He never tried to misrepresent himself on his blog, nor try to create some over-glamorized image of his profession. He just told it like it is. And people responded well to that. As he once put it, “We’re so lucky we don’t have to create the brand out of thin air. We just tell the truth and the brand builds itself.”

7. **Sovereignty.** The only people we had to please were the two of us. No bosses or outside investors to keep happy. Bosses and investors like guarantees, but there aren’t any.

8. **We were both broke when we started.** Had we had masses of money at the beginning, we would have had a lot more options on how to get the word out. In all likelihood, these options would have been a lot more expensive and not nearly as effective. Sometimes lack of capital is a definite advantage.

A blog is a great way to build one’s own personal “global microbrand”. As the Job-For-Life no longer exists, as the value of the social “position” erodes and the value of the “project” takes its place, personal brand development becomes far more important to one’s career. Blogs are a good place to start.

Hey, if a Saville Row tailor can do it, what’s your excuse?
Social Media for Fundraising Online

Useful Links and Image Credits

Twestival Logo: http://metro.typepad.com/.a/6a00e5517d263f8833010537206993970b-800wi

Online donations http://www.elimfellowship.org/elim/uploads/Image/online%20donations%20icon.jpg

Summer of Social Good http://www.treehugger.com/20090601-summer-of-social-good.jpg

Having a goal http://playingyouragame.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/goal_setting.jpg

Online Audience http://inexpo.files.wordpress.com/2009/03/audience.jpg

Flexibility http://www.starpotentialsports.com/images/flexibility.jpg