

SOCIAL MEDIA: NOT JUST FOR ENGAGEMENT ANYMORE?

Conventional wisdom has it that social media is a good way for nonprofits to build people's engagement with their cause—but it's not a good way to raise money. Beth Kanter, co-author of *The Networked Nonprofit*, says that's starting to change.

Kanter points to the *2013 eNonprofit Benchmarks Study* put out by The Nonprofit Technology Network and M+R Strategic Services this March. She says, "This year's study showed that the growth of nonprofits' social media audiences has outpaced their email lists. And the big positive headline is that online fundraising is on the rise, with explosive growth in sustaining gifts and a larger audience reached through social media networks like Facebook... We're starting now to see the shift to social networking reaping tangible results, like dollars."

The study shows that nonprofits' online fundraising grew 21% last year, with even stronger results in the environmental sector, where online fundraising grew by 34% and monthly giving by 58%.

These gains in revenue are correlated with a growth in social media audiences. Across sectors, nonprofits saw a 46% median increase in Facebook fans and a 264% increase in Twitter followers. In the same time period, email lists grew by 15%.

Email continues to connect nonprofits to their largest online audiences by a wide margin. The study found that, for every 1,000 email subscribers, *environmental* nonprofits have 136 Facebook fans and 28 Twitter followers. However, results from email outreach are growing weaker. Open rates continue to decline, and response rates have dropped significantly.

As outcomes from email campaigns decline, social media offers new opportunities for outreach—allowing groups to connect with new supporters, reach younger and more diverse audiences, get more feedback from their communities and build relationships that inspire people

to take action, volunteer, donate, and even fundraise on their behalf.

Kanter says that nonprofits can augment fundraising by integrating social media into their multi-channel campaigns—and also by encouraging peer-to-peer fundraising. For example, they can benefit from supporters who donate their birthdays, i.e., asking people in their personal networks to make gifts to the nonprofit. While donations through social media may seem small-scale, Kanter says, this channel of communication and the people it reaches will be increasingly important for fundraising success.

100+ First-Time Donors

Jennifer Jay, communications director for Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy in Michigan, says, "We got started with social media probably the way every other nonprofit does—poorly." They just put up a Facebook page without much of a commitment or plan. Later, she says, "we got really serious about making Facebook part of who we are as a culture and part of our outreach strategy."

Now, the group has more than 2,000 Facebook fans who take part in lively online exchanges. In early spring, a photo of small, round pellets on the snow invited a series of comments about what kind of animal had left them (porcupine). Other posts celebrated the first budding and blooming plants. When the conservancy put up a photo album of a creek restoration, 11 people shared it with their own networks, multiplying its reach.

This vibrant online community has brought real-world results for the conservancy, including a dramatic increase in attendance at their events and a crop of brand new donors.

The group forayed into social media fundraising when a local foundation offered a challenge grant, on the condition that it bring in 100 new donors through Facebook in six weeks. So it asked its Facebook fans to pitch in, asking questions like "Is this beach worth \$5 to you?" The campaign succeeded, with more than 100 first-time donors.

Jay says that the core of their social media strategy is paying close attention—analyzing what gets results with their audience. (Animal poop is often a big hit, she laughs. Gorgeous aerial photos also do well.) She says, “We’re always coming back to the question ‘Why are we using this tool?’—and then asking if we’re getting what we want out of it.”

Right now, she says, their goal is to expand their online community, beginning a new round of engagement. As their following grows, they plan to get more people involved in their events and programs, and eventually to convert more of their Facebook fans into donors.

200 Fans, 20,000 Hits

In New Mexico, the Taos Land Trust also found that Facebook can help it connect with people who are passionate about the land—and that this online network can spread its message far and wide. In February, TLT posted some exciting news, along with a stunning photograph: a deep gorge winding through a plateau before a backdrop of high blue mountains. It’s an iconic view for people who know the area—and the land trust had just succeeded in protecting 2,500 acres there.

Although the land trust has fewer than 200 Facebook fans, so many people circulated the post that it was seen nearly 20,000 times. Nearly 250 people cheered the good news with a “like” and 300 people shared it with their personal networks.

“I have been amazed at the speed and volume of the response we’re getting with such a small following,” says staff member Shemai Rodriguez. Even on less momentous occasions, it’s not unusual for a post to reach 100 people within an hour.

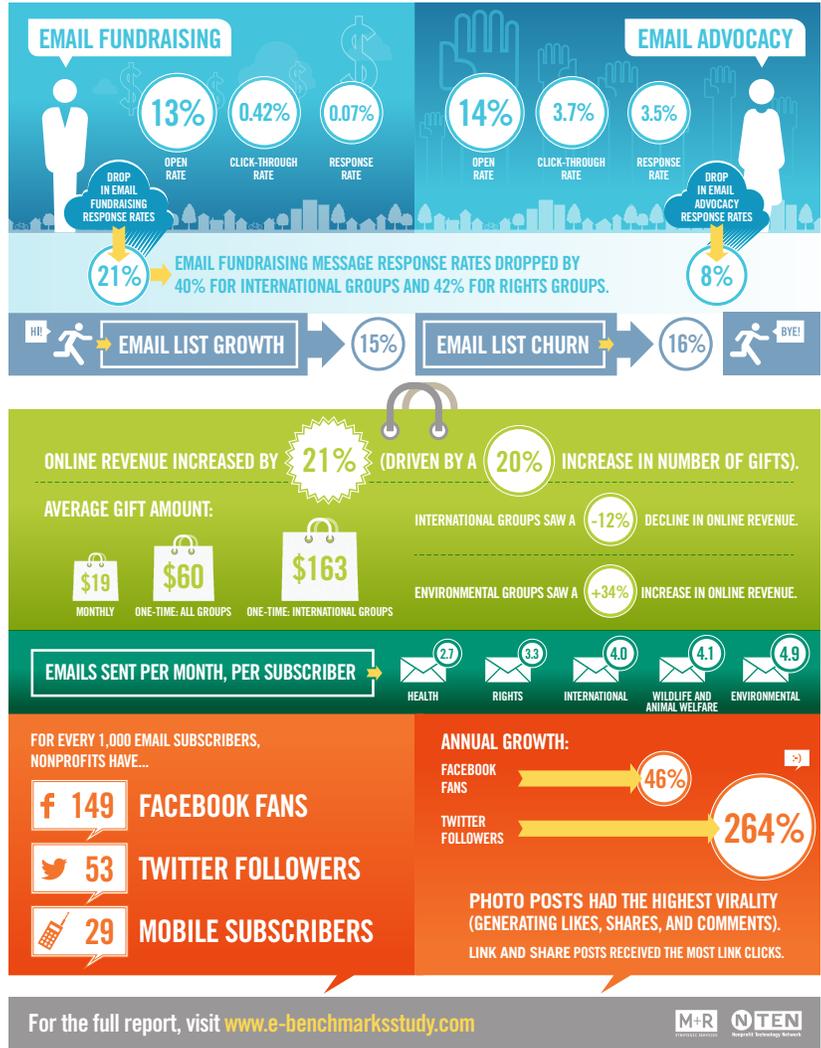
Facebook offers the land trust an opportunity to meet people who care about conservation and get them involved. Right now, Rodriguez says, “The primary goal is absolutely awareness—but the secondary goal will naturally be a higher level of fiscal and land conservation support from the community.”

Starting Small and Looking Forward

Back in Michigan, the Legacy Land Conservancy experimented by partnering with Groupon to raise \$400 from 40 donors who gave \$10 each to sponsor a workshop. The conservancy and Groupon both used their email lists and social media networks to circulate the campaign—and it met its goal in just a few days.

Susan Cooley, the development director, says that this experiment demonstrated to them that social media can bring in small gifts, swiftly, from new donors. But she wouldn’t repeat it the same way. Partnering with

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Groupon allowed them to access an expanded network, but it also came with time-consuming requirements, for a relatively small financial return.

In the short term, she doesn’t see social media as a major fundraising tool. After all, one successful appeal to a major donor could bring in considerably more than their Groupon campaign. But social media still plays a key role in their overall strategy. The main purpose of their social networking, Cooley says, is to inspire people. And over time, those inspired people may become the supporters who sustain the land trust and its work for another generation.

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The 2013 eNonprofit Benchmarks Study analyzed the results of 1.6 billion email messages sent to more than 45 million subscribers; 6.5 million online gifts totaling \$438 million raised; and 7.3 million advocacy actions.