The Evolving Use of Social Media by Funders and Its Role in Prospect Research
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Abstract

The use of social media by funders and its role in prospect research continues to evolve amidst rapidly changing platforms and funding priorities. Navigating the myriad information of funders available through social media demands that grant seekers are conversant in various platforms. In addition, they must simultaneously utilize heightened research skills when identifying pertinent information about giving priorities, processes, and grantees. Though information overload is a reality, social media platforms expand the research toolkits of grant professionals via accessible data that helps build relationships. The intent of this paper, then, is to explore the evolution of social media as a communication strategy when cultivating foundation and corporate donors. These strategies assist grant professionals in both prioritizing and optimizing virtual information on relevant grant opportunities.

Introduction

In today's competitive fundraising environment, the ability to access foundation data on social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn is quickly becoming a necessity. Social media makes it possible for nonprofits, large and small, to engage with foundations of all sizes. Beyond reviewing the evolution of how foundations utilize social media, practical tips enhance the efficacy of prospect research.

Integration of Social Media by Foundations

The Early Years

The first foundation websites were unveiled in 1994, making relevant funder and policy information easier to retrieve (Glasspockets.org, 2015). While social media as a forum has been around for some time, the phrase social media was popularized in early 2004 with the founding of Facebook by Mark Zuckerberg. Today, a growing cadre of users including foundation staff and board members, freely create, share, and curate their own content across many platforms. This openness and capacity for sharing of content and ideas allows progressive foundations to reach larger and more diverse audiences.

Foundation Leaders

According to The Foundation Center's Grantmaker Leadership Panel Report, *Are Foundation Leaders Using Social Media?,* by 2010 the majority of foundation leaders "at least occasionally" used leading social media platforms (2010, p. 1). More specifically, nearly 68 percent of foundation executives utilize YouTube, 59 percent Facebook and 53 percent blogs (Foundation Center, 2010, p. 1). In contrast, a majority of foundation CEOs were regular users of traditional e-newsletters, while nearly half frequently used Listservs. However, "fewer than one-third of foundation chief executives are using Web 2.0 services such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and podcasts on a regular basis" (Foundation Center, 2010, p. 1).

Push for Transparency

Glasspockets contributes to the ongoing dialogue regarding how much and what types of social media foundations utilize in their quest to have "glass pockets." Originally a standalone initiative started in 2010, Glasspockets is now a program of The Foundation Center. Partners include the Center for Effective Philanthropy, the Communications Network, Global Philanthropy Forum, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, and One World Trust (Glasspockets.org, 2015). As early as 2010, the initiative reported that two-thirds of the 100 largest foundations employ online communications to reach grantees and other constituents (Glasspockets.org, 2010).

Future Growth

The design and breadth of foundations' social media presence is expected to intensify throughout the foreseeable future (Glasspockets.org, 2013). According to a recent survey of the platforms most frequently utilized by 1,153 of the largest U.S. foundations, 522 respondents or about 45 percent, use social media, Of these, 65 percent network on Facebook and 40 percent disseminate information through Twitter, while 32 percent post videos on YouTube (Foundation Center, 2013). This data suggests the importance of using various platforms to engage constituents, not unlike commercial brands do to reach consumers. These statistics further reveal a growing trend among foundations in embracing social media as an essential strategy for collaborating with grant seekers and policy makers alike

A report from the Center for Effective Philanthropy, *Grantees' Limited Engagement with Foundations' Social Media*, predicts future growth in the utilization of social media by foundations. The survey includes 34 foundations, with median assets of roughly $370 million, that make individual grant awards of about $17 million annually. The foundations represent a mix of types, including private, community, and health funders (Brock & Buteau, 2012, p. 2). Significantly, the results conclude, "Of the foundations in this research, 71 percent have either posted videos or have a Twitter account, a Facebook

page, or a blog. Slightly more than half have adopted at least three of these four tools" (Brock & Buteau, 2012, p. 3).

The Grant Seeker's Landscape

Increasing competition for limited resources provides inspiration for grant seeking organizations to improve efficiencies and resourcefulness. According to the *Fall 2014 State of Grant Seeking* survey, respondents cited "lack of time and/or staff" as the greatest challenge facing grant professionals (Grant Station, Grant Professionals Association, National Council of Nonprofits, and PhilanTech, 2014, p. 9). Such capacity limitations underscore the importance of utilizing efficient ways of identifying prospective funders and strengthening relationships with them.

Where Research and Social Media Intersect

Foundations integrate multifaceted social media strategies into their communications with grantees, grant seekers, policymakers, and researchers. As the sheer volume of available information grows, research strategies must be streamlined. To improve efficiencies, therefore, grant professionals should prioritize the following types of information when mining the social media presence of foundations:

a. **Case for aligning your organization or cause to a funder.** The breadth of a funder's presence on various platforms provides insights into their funding priorities, community interactions, and current or prospective grantees.

b. **Case for not pursuing a funder**. This same presence offers clues regarding how a funder positions itself in the discussion of a particular issue. It also clarifies how the funder's values align with or differ from those of one's own organization.

c. **Who influences decisions.** Are the influencers primarily the program officers, trustees, and/or staff? Who are the gatekeepers? Do the communications point to other influencers such as the organization's largest donors or even strong alliances with other funders?

d. **Philosophy of giving**. What types of initiatives is the funder supporting? Are those thematic priorities (e.g., early childhood development, housing, environmental sustainability) a match for your organization?

e. **Funder successes and failures**. Has the funder shared news of the successes or failures of grantees? Posts frequently provide clues pertaining to a funder's willingness to support new, untested initiatives or its preference for seasoned programs with proven results.

f. **Funder expertise and resources**. How are the expertise and resources of funders made available to prospective grantees? Information shared via social

media platforms offers clues. For example, searching Twitter using a specific hashtag (#) often yields results.

g. **Subject matter research.** Another benefit of accessing social media as one component of funder research is the identification of useful subject matter research or reports. Examples include but are not limited to survey results, white papers, photos, videos, and other informational resources.

Conclusion

Larger numbers of foundations and grant seeking organizations are integrating social media into the fabric of how they operate. This evolution demonstrates that many foundations view it as a collaborative venue to engage grant seekers and others (Deloitte Consulting LLP and the Foundation Center, 2013). By all indications, foundations are committed to pursuing and strengthening their use of social media. Practical applications include not only communicating good works but also sharing insights into funding priorities and fostering dialog with or educating key constituent groups. As reliance on social media grows, so must the efforts of grant professionals to mine pertinent data from those sites in an efficient and targeted manner.

Biographical Information

Brenda Ray Scott, a Certified Fund Raising Executive (CFRE), brings more than 23 years of experience in philanthropy in a variety of roles and possesses expertise in major and planned gifts development, grant writing, and prospect research. For four years, she has spoken locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally on integrating social media into corporate and foundation funder research. Connect with her on Twitter @adeptdiva where she writes and talks about fundraising or visit her blog at: adeptdivaconsulting.blogspot.com . Contact Brenda at: adept_diva@hotmail.com

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