Adjusting Grant Best Practices Based on Technology and Social Media
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The grant field continues to evolve as a result of the increased utilization and dependence on technology in the workplace. When I started as a Program Officer at the Michigan Women’s Foundation (www.miwf.org) in 2002, foundations were just beginning to consider the idea of online applications as an alternative to having potential grantees send in 10 or more copies of their proposal and attachments. The amount of recycling that was generated from our office was staggering.

Move forward 12 years, and online grant applications have become an accepted way of doing business for funders at all levels—from the small family foundations through all levels of government. The efficiencies this has created for grant funders, and the thousands of trees that have been saved, are sometimes little comfort to a grant professional struggling against a low character limit. However, the shift is generally accepted as a positive change toward a more efficient system. In response, new best practices have been identified as grant professionals reframe their approach and put a few more tools in their toolbox – or repurpose old tools. They can access tools to quickly assist with character count beyond what is provided by Microsoft Word, have the opportunity to create custom infographics for insertion into their proposals, and are able to upload their large audit files directly to a grantor.

A newer area of technological innovation impacting all grant professionals is the continued growth and shifting toward increased use of social media. However, the potential efficiencies created by social media are not universally accepted. The field of social media has transitioned rapidly from forums and chat rooms to more active channels, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, Vine, and a whole host of others.

I spent a few minutes looking at the different articles from publications ranging from Forbes to Social Media Examiner that deal with the question, “Is Social Media a Waste of Time?” There is a wide variety of opinion about how and when individuals or businesses and nonprofits benefit from social media. Regardless of where you currently fall on the spectrum for your personal use of social media, I believe as a grant professional everyone will agree that you want to fully utilize all tools available when it comes to conducting your grant research. Therefore, I encourage you to consider how social media channels can be a great tool for you as a grant professional.

I like to talk about grant and grant funder research as a jigsaw puzzle. You might be able to put together the outer edge of the puzzle and most of the middle using your more traditional research tools such as the Foundation Directory Online, Foundation Search, Guidestar, Grants.gov, etc. You will also likely still be left with gaps in knowledge compared to what is publically available and what will be learned through establishing a dialogue and potential relationship with a grantor.

Consider the Oishei Foundation (www.oishei.com) in Buffalo, New York. A highly involved foundation in western New York, they produce annual reports and newsletters, have an engaging website, and interact with the community via participation in different committees, forums, and conferences. Recently Paul T. Hogan from the foundation began writing for Nonprofit Quarterly, which is then published on the Nonprofit Quarterly website and shared via their Facebook and Twitter accounts. His pieces, which share his opinion based on his experiences at the Oishei Foundation, share a rare inner view of the philosophy of the Foundation’s staff about their role in philanthropy. The perspective shared, and therefore the understanding gained, by readers provides a chance to read between the lines of the Foundation’s formal materials and see in a more informal personalized medium what the
philosophy of the Foundation is. A wonderful piece or two to add to your grant research puzzle whether you are a potential new grantee or an existing funding partner.

Pause to consider the number of foundations now on Facebook and Social Media. According to Glass Pockets (www.glasspockets.org), a program of the Foundation Center (www.foundationcenter.com), among 522 foundations surveyed, 65% are on Facebook and 40% are on Twitter. These numbers continue to grow and the ways in which foundations are utilizing their presence on social media continues to shift. You can see the full infographic and report about foundation usage of social media here: http://www.glasspockets.org/glasspockets‐gallery/foundations‐and‐social‐media‐infographic. There is significant variance in how foundations utilize and engage via their presence on social media. Some foundations like the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (Twitter handle: @rwjfnews) share new RFPs for their own funding. Other foundations like the Shineman Foundation (Twitter handle: @ShinemanFound) actively participate in nonprofit and fundraiser Twitter chats like #fundchat and #grantchat as a way to engage in the community and encourage best practices. Still others share new reports and articles that are related to their funding priority areas like the New York State Health Foundation (Twitter Handle @nys_health).

The emerging best practice I encourage you to consider is to include social media research for your potential or current funders as part of your grant research puzzle. It will certainly not replace the traditional research tools. However, it will help you create a more complete picture of the funder, including getting a sense of a potential funder’s organizational personality and voice based on their presence, interaction, and information shared via social media. Consider looking for potential funders on social media as a new habit in your research process. This might include links on a Foundation Directory Online record or individual searching on Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube. I think you will be pleasantly surprised by the additional puzzle pieces you are able to put into place as a result of the information you learn about the potential funder – as well as the potential grant revenue generated.