



7-2022

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Recommended Citation

Baumert, William (2022) "Emphasizing the Importance of Long-Term Marketing Strategies for Nonprofits Utilizing Social Media," *Journal of Nonprofit Innovation*: Vol. 2: Iss. 4, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/joni/vol2/iss4/8>

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Emphasizing the Importance of Long-Term Marketing Strategies for Nonprofits Utilizing Social Media

By William Baumert, University of Utah

In order for nonprofit organizations to tackle complex societal issues, support from public or private sectors is generally required. Marketing to these sectors through social media channels is highly beneficial due to the inexpensive and adaptable nature of the platforms, however creating and deploying an effective marketing campaign through these mediums can be challenging. This piece will aim to emphasize important points for nonprofits to consider when creating long-term marketing strategies revolving around social media.

For clarity, during the entirety of this paper, “social media” will be referring to Kaplan and Haenlein’s definition. This defines social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010).

Clarifying Objectives

An aspect of marketing that can be overlooked during the planning process of a marketing strategy is the exact purpose of the project. Outlined by Andreasen’s argument, a typical commercial organization’s goals fall into the category of increasing sales through some mechanism. Unfortunately, nonprofit organizations do not have the luxury of focusing on this narrow application of broader marketing (Andreasen 2012). Defining this difference allows for marketing problems to be understood in a more productive way and strategies to be shaped more accordingly to unique needs.

To understand how these differences can affect a marketing plan, we can imagine a scenario in which a humane society was planning an advertisement campaign to get pets adopted. They consider two advertisements, one claiming “50% off pets!” and the other featuring heartfelt animal biographies. When considering the humane society’s unique goals to raise the quality of life for animals, not to raise a profit, it becomes clear that heartfelt advertisements seem

more appropriate. While an obvious example, getting back to these basics can help when considering things such as target audiences, intended impacts, brand image and tone.

A clear understanding of organizational goals acts as a timeless guide for consistent future projects, posts, and advertisements. Committing this extra attention to detail when creating content will establish themes and expectations about the organization that can be found throughout their online presence, as well as consistent representations of values.

Scalability

In order to create widespread meaningful change, organizational growth must be achieved in pursuit of support and funding. When developing a marketing strategy, it is important to consider where it will place the organization in terms of a clear path forwards. To do this, Nardini et al. suggests, “T-shaped Scaling, a two-stage social impact scaling strategy” (Nardini et al. 2022). The T-shaped scaling strategy suggests that before a nonprofit can scale wide, they must first “scale deep”, into meaningful relationships within their locality. Scaling deep is a “community-based approach to understanding the challenges a community faces and designing innovative local solutions that address the circumstances at the root of those challenges” (Nardini et al. 2022). Once deep understanding is achieved, these insights act as a basis to better approach widespread scaling problems.

An excellent example of how deep connections with a community contribute to widespread scaling is given from an interview (Nardini et al. 2022) with Emma, a Hunger Task Force representative. “When [we] meet everyone brings a resource to share—marketing, intake surveys, measures of program impact—and we encourage partners to borrow and learn from each other. We developed a collaborative network for good rather than a competitive group” (Nardini et al. 2022). When posting, it is important to reflect these cooperative tones. From this example we see how cooperation between different organizations leads to mutually accelerated access to important information and support. “One reason nonprofits see sharing as a valuable investment of their time and resources is because it builds camaraderie through common cause ... sharing experiences within a relationship network builds resilience within the group” (Nardini et al. 2022 cited Jang 2017). By committing resources to ensure that social media posts come from a place that considers the unique concerns of a

community and their people, a nonprofit can cement itself within that community. Positive local perception weighs on the relevance and appropriateness of community engagement. Becoming an integral part of a community allows for a nonprofit to tune into unique local perspectives, gain trust from stakeholders and even develop a respected voice. Once deep roots are established, these strong insights can be used to adapt and change to different localities, clearing a strong path to scale wide and create change in a broader environment.

Maximizing Utility

As commonplace as social media is, it remains wildly complex. A marketing plan that understands and incorporates these complexities has a greater chance of fully utilizing the online space than one that does not. Despite social media's seemingly widespread use by companies, a study by Campbell et al. (2014) showed that, "the nonprofit organizations in our study that were using social media presented a limited view of the actual and potential value of social media for their organizations" (Campbell et al. 2014). Ensuring a thorough understanding of social media when incorporating it into marketing strategies allows for a larger portion of the potential value offered by the platforms to be captured. While these deeper understandings of social media are beneficial, the phrase "understanding social media" is incredibly broad. Rather than focusing on social media as a whole, it is effective to consider specific use cases. Examples of these use cases are outlined by Campbell et al. "fund-raising, advocacy, and performance measurement, to name a few" (Campbell et al. 2014). As discussed earlier, clarification of goals becomes useful here. These cases are unique, and so, should be strategized for uniquely. An organization which is concerned with increasing engagement with stakeholders should create a social media marketing framework that supports specifically this. With the incredible complexities of social media, many nonprofit organizations have failed to engage with the medium in meaningful ways. "Researchers have found that most nonprofit organizations use Facebook and Twitter as one-way communication tools to share key information about the organization with key constituents" (Campbell et al. 2014). Many nonprofit organizations utilize social media purely as a means to distribute information, without intention of receiving it back, despite "researchers have identified its broader potential to increase communication and engagement with stakeholders" (Campbell et al. 2014). By understanding the intricacies of social media, nonprofit organizations have the ability to

interact with community members in more meaningful ways. Allowing not only the distribution of information, but the equally important reception.

Conclusion

Nonprofit organizations that enter the social media space with careful considerations in terms of marketing strategies stand to benefit more from the space than those who do not. When developing a marketing strategy that includes social media, it is hugely important to incorporate clear, long-term goals in the decision-making process. With clearly defined goals, all parts of the decision-making process may be guided by them. Additionally, these consistent goals will allow for value-based connections between organizations in the community, scaling deep and gaining insights and resource to scale wide. Furthermore, the full utilization of social media as a tool for specific tasks allows for a deeper flow of information. Nonprofits that can successfully utilize the intricacies of social media benefit from the ability to truly listen to their community.

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