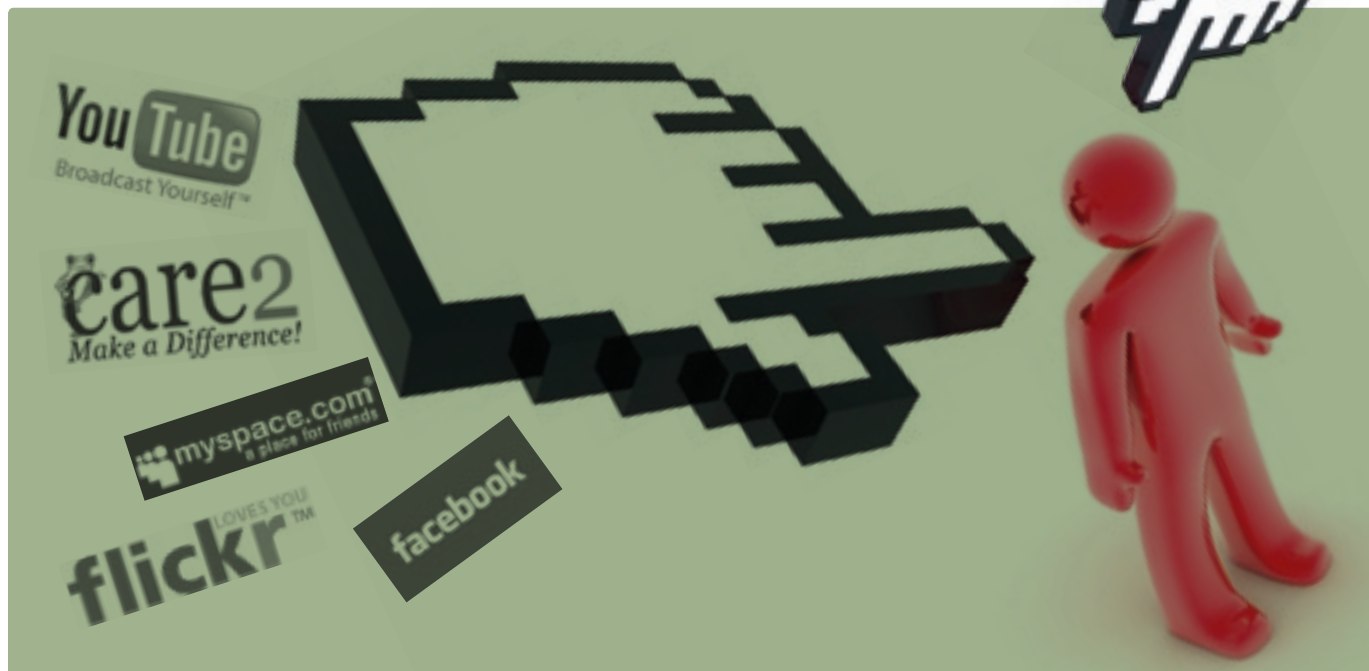


Friends, Trolls, and Superpokes: Is Your Shelter Ready for Social Networking?

Chances are, you're already doing it—and if you're not, someone may be doing it for you

BY CARRIE ALLAN



At a tech conference in March, Ethan Zuckerman, a fellow at the Berkman Center for the Internet and Society at Harvard Law School, told attendees that the Internet was invented so that physicists could share research papers. But Web 2.0, he said, was invented so that people could share cute pictures of their cats.

Unless you're a physicist who happens to be browsing through a copy of *Animal Sheltering*, Zuckerman's theory (while somewhat tongue-in-cheek) should excite you. Web 2.0 is the new way of the Net, and if there's any group of people out there who have plenty of cute cat pictures, it's animal shelter and rescue workers.

If you got lost around the line about Web 2.0, don't fret: Web 2.0 is not some complex new computer code system

or web page design product. It's a term that describes the ways the Internet has changed. Web 2.0 is about collaboration and the ever-increasing interactivity and connectivity of the Web. Even if you don't fully understand what it means (and experts seem to disagree about the precise definition), if you're online on a regular basis, you're probably already part of it.

To put it in the simplest and most reductive way possible, the old Web was all about making information available to a global audience. The new Web is about the audience talking back. It's about conversations, not lectures, and user-generated content is king. If you've watched a video on YouTube, if you've uploaded photos to a website so that faraway friends and family could see them, if you're on sites like Facebook and MySpace, if you've ever posted a blog comment, if you've got online friends you've never met "in

real life," then you're ahead of the game. These are all common practices now, activities that millions of people are taking part in.

And nonprofits—especially nonprofits like animal shelters, with their endless supply of cute cat pictures—are getting in on the trend. Social networking is a way of connecting people via their shared personal connections and shared interests, whether those interests are scuba diving, cooking, or animal welfare.

The evolving interactive technologies of the Web provide a method for shelters and other animal protection groups to build their visibility, raise money, and alert potential supporters about issues that concern them. It's an especially effective way to reach younger audiences. And while social networking can present some challenges, it can be one of the most effective ways to get supporters—

“It’s actually saved a couple of dogs’ lives,” says Webb. “I had a dog we called Buddy here. ... The owners had moved away and left him behind chained up to another dog, and the other dog had died, so Buddy had dragged his corpse around for like two weeks. So he was really traumatized, and I started networking through MySpace and somebody hit me back and said, ‘I know of a Dalmatian rescue in Florida, and here’s their information.’”



especially young people, who won’t be young and poor forever—involved in the issues your organization cares about. Rather than waiting for supporters to come to your events or check out your website, social networking lets your organization into the parts of cyberspace where they already are.

It’s a brave new world, but one worth exploring, says Nicole Edson, development associate at the Oregon Humane Society, which now has a presence on MySpace and Facebook. “We’re just starting to figure out how those strategies will tie into everything else we’re doing,” she says. “But all of the online strategies, workshops, and conferences I’ve been to are talking about

that more and more for engaging the younger donors and meeting them on their own turf.”

Social Networking Sites— Surveying the Crowd

With all the sites out there, though, how do you know where to start?

It helps to check out the big sites and get a grasp of how they function. Some of the major social networking sites are MySpace, Facebook, and Care2 (which allow you to create networks of friends and communicate with them through the online platform), LinkedIn (similar to the previous sites, but with a focus on professional rather than personal connections), Flickr (which allows you to upload and share photographs with other users), and YouTube (which allows you to upload your own videos).

Do you need to be on all of these? It’s your call—but probably not, and certainly not right away. Most experts agree: It’s better to develop your organization’s presence on one site before spreading yourself too thin across the many social websites out there.

So how do you pick your first site? Do your research, advises Beth Kanter, a blogger and social networking guru who’s spent her entire career advising nonprofits.

“You need to become a Jane Goodall of social networks,” says Kanter. “You need to go and find out where your supporters are—not saying that they’re apes or gorillas!—and observe them in their natural environment. It’s as easy as setting up your Facebook profile and then typing in ... ‘dogs’ or whatever and finding out who are the people who are talking about this?”

You may discover that people in your area are more inclined to use one site than another—or you may decide that your organization’s goals for social networking dictate the use of one site over another. For example, if your shelter is in an area with a highly educated, affluent population, Facebook may be a better place to start; the site actually began as a network solely for college students. If you didn’t have an e-mail address that ended

with “.edu,” you couldn’t use the network. Facebook eventually opened up to everyone, but—like a bottle blonde who hasn’t been to the salon in a while—its roots are still showing, and the folks who use it tend to be of the college-educated demographic.

As Internet marketing manager for The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), Carie Lewis has spent years figuring out how best to use a variety of online networks to advance the organization’s cause. Generally speaking, she says, MySpace has proved to be the most helpful when The HSUS wants to get people to take action—to call a congressman in support of a bill or e-mail a company to ask it to reduce animal testing, for example. Facebook has proved to be the better option for fundraising.

And for those just learning the ins and outs of online networking, Facebook has some downsides when it comes to usability. For one thing, the site places more limits on how nonprofits can use its functions. On MySpace, a shelter can register under its own name and still function as an individual user on the site; on Facebook, only an individual can act as an individual. An organization must register as a group or a cause. There are positive aspects to these requirements, but they do make learning to use the site a little bit trickier.

For that reason, Lewis suggests that shelters still feeling their way into social networking will probably find MySpace a better and easier place to get started. “You can do anything on MySpace,” Lewis says. “No matter what your goal is, you can achieve it, because it’s kind of a free-for-all.”

What Do You Want Out of It?

So what do you want out of your investment in social networking? Do you want to raise money? Generate awareness of cruelty issues? Or just let people know about the amazing animals you have for adoption?

The ways in which people connect on social networking sites help spread any message further. For example: Say Ashley is on Facebook, and she joins a campaign

to help end puppy mills. Ashley's online profile will announce to anyone reading it that she just joined that campaign—and what's more, everybody she's friends with on Facebook will get a little note informing them about her new passion. And if they're curious, they can learn more and become supporters themselves. That's how many of these sites work: Taking advantage of people's natural curiosity (and voyeurism), social networking sites let you see what your friends are up to and be part of the action.

And shelters that get onto these sites find all kinds of new friends. That's what Michelle Webb, a kennel attendant at the Tupelo-Lee Humane Society in Mississippi, found out when she started posting pictures of adoptable animals to her page on MySpace.

Webb had a personal MySpace page already. It was mostly devoted to her passion for hockey, but she started posting occasional animal pictures and found that they got good responses. She finally decided to make a whole separate page for the shelter itself. Now she and another volunteer regularly post messages and photos to the profiles they run on MySpace for Tupelo-Lee—and she's seen the results.

"It's actually saved a couple of dogs' lives," says Webb. "I had a dog we called Buddy here. ... The owners had moved away and left him behind chained up to another dog, and the other dog had died, so Buddy had dragged his corpse around for like two weeks. So he was really traumatized, and I started networking through MySpace and somebody hit me back and said, 'I know of a Dalmatian rescue in Florida, and here's their information.' Then there was Lady; she was a German shepherd who just needed somebody to take a little extra time, and I posted her story on there, and someone came in and adopted her."

And it's helped the shelter get the word out fast when it needs some extra help, Webb says. "Say the shelter takes in 97 animals in a day, like what happened a couple of weeks ago. I went home and posted a bulletin ... and people started hitting back and asking, 'What type of

dogs were they?' ... There were a couple of people who saw the MySpace bulletin and wanted to come in and take a look at the dogs."

Social networking can make strangers into friends, and friends into advocates. Tashana Salmon saw that firsthand when she started a Facebook page in support of her local shelter in Georgia. A recent college graduate who majored in journalism, Salmon did a story about the Athens-Clarke County shelter while she was in school, and ended up volunteering there when she saw how short-staffed the shelter was.

Salmon was on Facebook already, and hoped to drive up support for the shelter. "I wanted to reach the college community somehow, because not everyone knows that the shelter exists; they're tucked away somewhere where you'd have to be looking for them to find them," she says. "Some days I would go there, and it would just be volunteers, no adopters or anything, and some days it would be just me! So that's when I decided to make the Facebook page."

Her plan worked: At press time, the group had 728 members. And Salmon knows that the shelter's gotten more volunteers and adopters because of the Facebook page. "I'm always updating pictures, and then Facebook tells [my friends] on the little status line that I've updated pictures, and then more people see it, and some people invite their friends—and some people who join, I don't even know them, they just kind of joined it themselves."

This is social networking at its best: When a cause goes viral, it can spread through a community until the word is everywhere, spilling out of the cyberworld and into reality—and helping animals as it spreads.

So What's the Catch?

Spreading the word, reaching adopters, bringing in more money? "Where's the downside to this?" you may well ask.

Guess what? There is no catch. But there *are* a few caveats.

If you've never seen a MySpace or Facebook profile, it may help to imagine it

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Resources

Animal Sheltering Online

animalsheltering.org/socialnetworks

Go here for a slide presentation of Carie Lewis's Expo workshop on social networking.

Techsoup

techsoup.org

Provides technology resources for nonprofits. Check out Brett Bonfield's "Should Your Organization Use Social Networking Sites?" for some advice on figuring out whether you're ready to make the leap.

Beth's Blog: How Nonprofits Can Use Social Media

beth.typepad.com

Beth Kanter's lively blog is a great resource for nonprofits fumbling their way into social networking.

Network for Good

fundraising123.org

Provides training and fundraising services for nonprofits; lots of articles on social networking on the site.

dom thoughts and insults and hate mail and questions and criticisms and porn and spam and, sometimes, porn-spam.

Your organization can deal with the porn-spam. Get yourself a good filter, monitor your online presence, and you'll be OK. The aspect of social networking that scares many nonprofits (and for-profits, for that matter) is the possibility of having their messages hijacked or polluted. The very nature of social networking involves dialogue, and managing communications can be a tricky high-wire act of enabling and allowing comments and ideas that don't exactly match your own without allowing penetration by the crass, hateful, and cynical denizens of cyberspace.

That concern was on the radar for the Oregon Humane Society, says Edson. "What we looked into briefly was if we're going to be able to control the message, control the content, a little bit of etiquette about people leaving comments and that sort of thing," she says. "Part of the whole Web 2.0 thing, when people are able to upload their own content, is you have to be willing to loosen up a little bit, [to think] 'Is it exactly what I would say? No, but because it's honest, it's important.' And unless there's something truly offensive or inappropriate, I pretty much think [we should] let people say what they wanna say."

It can be tough to walk that line, but the whole appeal of these sites is honesty and openness, says Lewis. The folks who hang out on social networks are savvy about spin and sensitive about censorship. You have to be prepared to deal with the occasional negative comment, and Lewis tries to be hands-off about critiques The HSUS gets on its social networking pages. She doesn't remove them; she responds to them.

"When people post stuff about us, we look at it and if it's not profanity, a personal attack, racism or something like that, if it's just someone who opposes us, like saying 'I'm a hunter, and my family are hunters, and I don't agree with you,' we'll let it go on there because we need to be transparent," says Lewis. "We know and everybody else knows that not

everyone agrees with us, and if we just have a wall of comments saying how great we are, people are going to see right through that."

Don't be afraid of negative messaging, Kanter advises, and don't delete messages that are politely critical of the organization's approaches or policies. Organizations "should think of [negative comments] as a gift, because otherwise [the commenter] would be saying that someplace else," she says. "It's also a chance for them to turn around the person's opinion."

Marketing to the Hyper-Savvy

The caveat about messaging applies to the comments and messages of your online friends, but it applies to your own messaging as well. The Internet generation sees through a great deal of material that would once have been considered smart marketing. Once upon a time, marketing meant putting an advertisement in a paper or (if you had the budget for it), cutting a commercial to go on T.V.

But while those avenues are still around and are likely to be part of our lives for the foreseeable future, there's a huge group of people out there who are saturated with marketing and immediately cynical about advertising—and any nonprofit that wants to get into social networking needs to know how to talk the talk. This is not the venue to repost your organization's Web stories or press releases: When you think about social networking, put the emphasis on *social*.

Lewis is a self-described social networking addict. She created a personal page for herself on MySpace when the site was in its early phases, and got heavily involved in the culture of the site. That background has helped her enormously in her job, she says. "Before I even stepped into The HSUS, I was into social networks in my personal life, and that's great because when I'm talking on these social networks to people, I know how to talk to them—because I am one of them," she says.

Social networking sites, Lewis points out, weren't made for nonprofits and corporations to sell their messages; they were made for people to talk to their friends. If

you want to do the former, you better learn to speak in the tone of the latter. Keep it fun, conversational, lively. Save the heavy messages and long stories for your newsletter and organization's website.

Writing for Frogloop, Care2's communications and marketing blog, Oxfam online campaigner Patrick Clerks pointed out that "companies don't make friends. People do. Companies certainly do not leave small notes with little smiley faces for their cousins neighbour. People do. To reach individuals online, you need to be one."

If you can't be one, find someone who can. This social networking thing is huge with those crazy young people! You may well already have a young employee or intern who's on these sites and who may be happy to help your organization start wading into the water. They may already be supporting you there without your knowledge.

Just remember: While most of these sites are free, social networking takes a serious investment of time—something many shelter staff are short on. Before plunging into online social websites, do some research. Figure out what your organization wants from it, and whether it's worth the investment. The connections you can make can be valuable, but you have to make them; they will not appear mystically overnight. Even online, there are no unicorns.

Shelters considering getting into social networking need to have realistic expectations, says Kanter.

"They shouldn't be thinking about blasting out their message. 'Cause it's different, it's about having a conversation. They shouldn't be thinking, 'If I build it, they will come'—no, they won't, because you really have to go out there and make friends with them and join the community. It's like traveling to a strange land: If you really want to experience the culture, you need to go to the cafés and talk to people. ... You're not going to start off making a million dollars, 'cause the money's not there. [Think about] experimentation—you can set up a series of low-risk experiments, so your first initial outcomes are going to be around learning." AS

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