Does it work?
How Social Media and Effective Communication Strategies Can Grow a Nonprofit Organization

Starfish One by One

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1. Introduction and Problem Statement

For nearly twenty-five years, the World Wide Web has transformed the way people interact with one another (Hensel & Deis, 2010). Today, the way information is shared has been revolutionized by the creation of new platforms and online tools that allow users to share content faster and easier than ever before. One important piece of this phenomenon has been the development of social networking sites, which Boyd (2008) defines as those with “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). While there are a wide variety of networking sites available, those with the most users include Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter (Pew Research Center, 2013). Truly, the Internet has developed into a platform that gives organizations the ability to transform their relationship with stakeholders and beneficiaries alike (Margetts, 2007).

Social networking, a broad concept used interchangeably here with the term social media, has increasingly been included in the study of nonprofit management over the past several years. In fact, strategic social networking has become a fundamental tenant of successful nonprofit development (Ready, 2011). “With social media, we’ve moved beyond the era of stand-alone, static web pages. Users increasingly treat these venues as their first stop in gathering data and forming an opinion” (Kane et al., 2009, p. 46). Online communications platforms are changing the way organizations solicit donations, engage stakeholders, recruit volunteers, and even manage partnerships (Herrell, 2012). The days of relying on one-way fundraising efforts have given way to social media’s interactive ability to “raise money, garner new supporters and increase visibility” (Dixon & Keyes, 2013, p. 24). Opportunities for donor engagement are faster
and easier than ever before, “with an average of 250,000 people registering to use Facebook daily, organizations cannot ignore the social networking phenomenon” (Waters et al., 2009).

As a result of the demand for constant communication, an increasing number of organizations—both domestic and international—are concentrating less on traditional donor engagement techniques, such as newspaper ads, to focus on more cost-effective social networking platforms. Today over ninety percent of nonprofits are adopting social media communication strategies (Chang, 2012), with many turning to the Internet to send newsletters and engage stakeholders. This rapid shift to online communications gives organizations the opportunity to “streamline their management functions, interact with volunteers and donors, and educate others about their programs and services” with a few simple clicks and status updates (Waters et al., 2009, p. 103). According to the 2012 Nonprofit Social Network Benchmark Report, survey results from over 3,500 nonprofit organizations show that social networking is quickly becoming an important piece of nonprofit development. The top three factors influencing organizational success were found to be:

- 1) Strategy: 41% of respondents agreed that taking time to develop a social networking strategy was the most important factor to success.
- 2) Prioritization: 37% of respondents agreed that the organization’s executive team prioritized social networking.
- 3) Dedication: 28% of respondents created a new team or added staff specifically for social networking.

Clearly, networking online through social media is a phenomenon that has revolutionized the way organizations operate today. However, despite the low-cost appeal, many in the nonprofit sector struggle to use Facebook and Twitter in a way that brings measurable results.
One such nonprofit looking to improve their online communication strategy is *Starfish One by One*, a small organization based in Evergreen, Colorado. Starfish works to empower young women through education and mentorship programs in rural communities in Guatemala. While the organization does maintain a social media presence, *Starfish* is actively seeking a strategic plan that will provide guidance and direction for the organization’s online communication efforts.

Given the slow rise in organizational-level research on social media use among nonprofits, there remain plenty of unanswered questions as to how organizations should utilize Facebook and Twitter as stakeholder engagement tools (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze the social networking strategy of four successful nonprofit organizations and one university in order to understand how online platforms, such as social media and e-newsletters, can be used as effective marketing tools to increase donations, engage stakeholders, and build partnerships with like-minded organizations. Results from this study will be presented to Starfish One by One and used in future training materials.

2. Literature Review

The following section reviews the literature regarding social media and online communication as it relates to nonprofit development. Particular focus will be paid to research in two separate categories. First, social media’s role in nonprofit management and its ability to improve development efforts will be discussed. Secondly, the limitations and constraints presented to nonprofit managers seeking to adopt social networking tools will also be analyzed.

2.1 Benefits of Social Media: Strategy that Works

Although finding success on social media is elusive for some, there are many nonprofit organizations that have found measurable results from their online efforts. For most, the key to...
successful social networking appears to be strategy and planning (Herrell, 2012). “Solely having a profile will not in itself increase awareness or trigger an influx of participation. Instead careful planning and research will greatly benefit nonprofits as they attempt to develop social networking relationships with their stakeholders” (Waters et al., 2009, p. 102). Clearly, there is a strong difference between simply sending out information and truly creating dialogue that brings measurable results (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). For many nonprofits, the real challenge comes with actually developing a communication strategy, a process that can be daunting for those with limited staff and resources (Chang, 2012).

To formulate a strategy, nonprofit managers should first consider what Stinnett et al. (2012) found about anthropomorphism, or the human-like characteristics that people associate with organizations or businesses. The authors analyzed the impact of anthropomorphism and the humanization of nonprofits as it relates to managing the organization’s reputation and brand, key elements related to social media marketing efforts. The authors found that human perceptions of a nonhuman entity, like a nonprofit, play an important role in building the organization’s brand and personality—a fundamental tool in communication with prospective donors, volunteers, and beneficiaries (Stinnett et al., 2012).

Anthropomorphism relates to how social media fits into the organization’s overall brand personality and communication plan. Once a nonprofit develops its brand, based on the mission and values of the organization, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) recommend organizing messages strategically into three categories: 1) Give Information; 2) Build a Community; 3) Inspire Action. The authors described the categories in the following way: “Information could be seen as a core activity to attract followers; Community-focused messages serve to bind and engage a following of users, and Action-oriented messages serve to mobilize the resources—that is, the
community—that has been developed through informational and community-oriented communication” (Lovejoy & Saxton 2012, p. 350).

Secondly, considering the content and tone of the conversation also appeared to be relevant. Smitko (2012) analyzed the Twitter activity of three organizations, two of which were classified as nonprofit and one private company, in order to determine what themes and strategies emerged in the content of the messages. Through an applied rhetorical framework the study found that elements of persuasion, such as logical reasoning or emotional appeal, were demonstrated in the majority of tweets sent from the three organizations. Writing tweets according to an individual’s credibility of character persuades Twitter users concerned with a specific cause to click the link, retweet the message to their followers, or get involved in the cause (Smitko, 2012). This proved to be a significant tactic as “more than 90 percent of the tweets showed evidence of one of the elements of persuasive appeal” (Smitko, 2012, p. 634).

Individual and group linking, also known as The Social Network Theory, was another prominent tool to engage donors. Mentioning the “@” Twitter account of other individuals or organizations was mentioned in the vast majority of the tweets included in the study, a strategy that proved to increase conversation and ultimately foster relationship growth (Smitko, 2012).

Research also shows that nonprofits should strategically utilize social media platforms to do more than ask for donations or distribute organizational updates. Instead, Dixon and Keyes (2013) argue social media gives organizations the ability to be deliberate when they present supporters with calls for action, which may include arranging and leading individual fundraising events, sharing a specific Facebook post or photo, forwarding the organization’s latest newsletter to an individual’s own network, or getting involved with the nonprofit’s mission by becoming a formal volunteer or intern.
Although forming a strategic social media plan can be time consuming, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) argue it is worth the time, “social media appears to have created opportunities for interpersonal engagement, interactivity and dialogue that are qualitatively different from those offered by traditional websites” (p. 339). Even more, Kane et al. (2009) claims social media is one of the most powerful networking tools available to nonprofit organizations due to the fact that it can mobilize hundreds, if not thousands of people through the influence of just one supporter. “For a nonprofit, this valued supporter could be the small donor— with the big network or degree of social platform savvy—who is able to influence others to give well beyond her own capacity. Where the traditional models might write this person off as having a low lifetime value and not worth an organization’s time and investment, a model that takes influence into account will value that person more highly” (Dixon & Keyes, 2013, p. 28).

2.2 Social Media Constraints for Nonprofit Organizations

Despite the growing number of organizations using online communication tools like Facebook and Twitter, there are still many nonprofit leadership teams that do not fully understand the value or opportunity in strategic communication management (Liu, 2011) and many struggle to see results that justify the organization’s investment of time and resources. Unfortunately for small organizations with limited staff, results beyond gaining more Facebook “likes” or followers on Twitter— such as an increase in donations, expanded volunteer team, or a rise in partnerships— are not coming as quickly compared to organizations with the capacity to hire a dedicated and knowledgeable social media team (Durand & Cici, 2011; West, 2011).

Furthermore, in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, Chang (2012) argues that while Facebook does offer value to nonprofit organizations, it certainly is not the “fundraising silver bullet” many believe it to be (p. 2). In fact, Racicot (2013) claims “nonprofit organizations that
have a reliance on social media to source inform, and influence new donors are likely to be disappointed” as stories of substantial fundraising increases are more likely the “exception rather than the rule” (p.2)

Additionally, nonprofits lacking a formal social media team are busy managing “higher priorities than the online world of status updates, tweets, pins, and check-ins” (Dixon & Keyes, 2013, p. 24). However, despite less than encouraging results for some, organizations are still flocking to the world of social networking (Waters et al., 2009). Regardless of the outcome, too many nonprofit organizations feel obligated to participate in social media and continue to do so only in “zombie status”—writing infrequent status updates and rarely making changes to the content of the organization’s social media pages (Chang, 2012). Unfortunately, this trend may actually lead to even more bleak results. Research shows that organizations with an inactive and unresponsive online presence will only continue to see results go from bad to worse. As Waters et al. (2009) argues, “most nonprofits lack the resources or time to provide constant attention to a Facebook page”, and therefore often make the mistake of creating a profile that is used irregularly and seemingly abandoned—a practice that may actually “turn off potential supporters” (p. 105).

Research also shows that organizations relying too heavily on social media risk losing donors that are not actively using social networking platforms (Racicot, 2013). Data from the Pew Research Center shows that eighty-three percent of eighteen to twenty-nine year olds are active on social media, while only fifty-two percent of Americans ages fifty to sixty-four are active online (Pew Research Center, 2013). Although this number is increasing, there remain a large percentage of people who are not engaged on social media. As a result, the most successful communication strategies appear to be those that combine offline development efforts with the
influencing power of social media (Dixon & Keyes, 2013). "When social media is grounded in offline activity, it begins to gain otherwise unrealizable momentum" (Racicot, 2013, p. 2).

3. Methodology

The research design for this study involved conducting in-depth interviews with five communications professionals in order to address the following research question: "How are nonprofit organizations utilizing social media platforms as tools for marketing and development?" Four nonprofit organizations were selected for this study. In addition, the Social Media and Communication Specialist at the University of Colorado in Colorado Springs was also included in the study in an effort to get a perspective of a larger organization. Through purposive sampling, the organizations invited to participate were selected by Starfish One by One based on their successful use of social media as demonstrated by an active and thriving online presence. It is also important to note that all of the nonprofit participants represented United States based organizations that provide international services to individuals living in underdeveloped regions of the world. Programs addressed issues such as girls’ education, illiteracy, freedom of speech, and women’s entrepreneurship in developing countries. In total four nonprofit organizations and one social media expert from UCCS participated in the interviews.

Participants represented organizations of varying sizes and budgets, from those with only two paid staff to those with fifteen or more paid employees. The four organizations from the original recruitment list were sent an email that included information about the purpose of the study and an invitation to participate. The individual responsible for social media communication was invited to take part in an interview that would involve questions relating to the organization’s online communication strategy. Two of the nonprofit organizations contacted
did not respond to the invitation, at which point *Starfish One by One* and the principal investigator agreed on alternative selections. The four organizations that participated are listed below along with the individual representing the organization:

- *She's the First*, Christen Brandt, Director of International Operations
- *More Than Me*, Emily Bell, Communications Fellow
- *The Tiziano Project*, David Torstenson, Social Media Manager
- *BeadforLife*, Amy Yanda-Lee, Communications Manager

The communications specialist at each organization was invited to do the interview over the phone with the principal investigator. All of the participants from the organizations listed above agreed to a phone interview. In addition, Philip Denman, the Social Media and Communication Specialist at UCCS participated by completing an in-person interview with the principal investigator on the University of Colorado campus in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Those willing to take part in the study were emailed the informed consent prior to the interview, which explained their identifying information and the information about the organization they represent would be included in the final report presented to *Starfish One by One*. At that point participants were asked to sign the informed consent and either fax or scan it back to the principal investigator.

Each interview began with introductions and a detailed explanation regarding the purpose of the study. In total, twenty-two questions were asked of the participants, which were divided into the following four categories: 1) Social media basics; 2) Fundraising; 3) Electronic communication; 4) Strategy. The specific questions are attached in the appendix. Interviews were analyzed following the completion of data collection. The participant response for each question was compiled into groups in order to determine which communication strategies were
the most prominent. Furthermore, the interviews were broken down by category to determine which organization offered unique responses not mentioned in the other interviews.

4. Data Presentation

On average interviews lasted forty-six minutes with a range of thirty-six to fifty-eight minutes in duration, including the time it took to obtain informed consent, answer questions, and discuss the purpose of the study. Results have been analyzed according to the categories of 1) Social Media Basics; 2) Fundraising; 3) Electronic communication; 4) Strategy.

4.1 Social Media Basics

All of the participants interviewed stated Facebook and Twitter were the organization’s most commonly used social networking sites, however sites like Instagram, Pinterest, Flickr, YouTube, and LinkedIn were also mentioned as useful online tools. Facebook was credited as the most helpful tool for growth. Amy Yanda-Lee from BeadforLife also mentioned the organization’s use of GOOD, a new networking platform specifically tailored for people interested in humanitarian causes.

In regard to differences between Facebook and Twitter, participants agreed that Twitter is most helpful for sharing quick facts and information, while Facebook is better suited for sharing the organization’s stories and photos. Christen Brandt of She’s the First described it best, “Facebook is the most useful because it’s more genuine interaction. When we post there, it is more likely to get genuine feedback. We are finding that Twitter is great for starting conversations, but Facebook has more potential to create action—both online and offline”. Amy Yanda-Lee of BeadforLife also offered a unique perspective about Facebook’s potential to inspire action, “People think of BeadforLife and they think of Africa, but we want to show
people global poverty doesn’t have to be overwhelming and they can get involved here locally on social media by simply clicking ‘like’ or sharing with their friends”.

On average the nonprofit organizations in the study spend approximately fifteen to twenty hours a week on social media, with BeadforLife emerging as the nonprofit spending the most time developing strategy, analyzing insights and results, and execution. In general, participants spend their time and effort focused on three priorities: 1) Build awareness for the cause; 2) Fundraise; 3) Engage supporters. While no specifics were given relating to how often the organizations meet to discuss social media, it did appear that online communication was intricately woven into each organization’s development efforts. Therefore, discussing social media seemed to be a frequent event, with the exception of the Tiziano Project, who devoted considerably less time and energy to social media compared to the other participants.

Answers varied widely in regard to expanding the organization’s social media reach to include different age groups. Amy Yanda-Lee of BeadforLife mentioned creating four social media campaigns a year, each of which is specifically targeted to a certain population or age group. She went on to say that Instagram is very popular with young adults and the organization is preparing to launch a photo sharing campaign tailored specifically to that demographic. Facebook advertising was also mentioned as another option to expand into different age ranges. Additionally, mentioning strategic hashtags on Twitter can also broaden an organization’s reach. David Torstenson of The Tiziano Project advised using hashtags that are relevant and valuable to your target audience, which will catch the attention of individuals that may not be following the nonprofit’s account.

4.2 Fundraising
Social media appeared to be a valuable piece of every organization’s income generating strategy. In fact, the majority of the participants interviewed mentioned that fundraising campaigns were specifically structured around Facebook and Twitter. *She’s the First*, *BeadforLife*, and *More Than Me* appeared to put the most emphasis on using social media as a vehicle to facilitate both short and long-term development goals—whether that be an increase in likes on Facebook, a special holiday fundraising event, or even promoting a photo contest. One strategy mentioned by Emily Bell of *More Than Me* was to increase the effectiveness of campaigns by using social media to reach out for support with personal messages sent to specific groups, such as personal contacts, partner organizations and staff, faith-based donors, and bloggers—a strategy *More than Me* implemented before winning one million dollars in last year’s American Giving Awards.

Ensuring that social media fundraising campaigns are fun and engaging, beyond a simple click-to-donate pitch, was another important tool the participants agreed to be significant. The most effective fundraising efforts mentioned were those that were interactive and collaborative. For *She’s the First*, the key is keeping followers energized, “There is an integrative strategy when it comes to social media fundraising. There is no bullet answer, but if you keep them engaged and excited, donating will be easy for them,” said Christen Brandt. For most, building online partnerships with like-minded organizations is also a process that involves reaching out to engage potential partners. The most commonly used strategy is to begin by contacting organizations doing similar work with a simple invitation to join forces, an approach often used by *BeadforLife* and *She’s the First*. Another option is to focus on cross-promotion, or tagging and sharing posts or photos from potential partners—a tactic implemented by Philip Denman of UCCS.
4.3 Electronic Communications

When it comes to newsletters, the participants offered a wide range of answers. While every organization interviewed distributes newsletters through email, the frequency ranged from bimonthly to once every quarter. One useful strategy used by She's the First is to send out newsletters according to age and involvement in the organization—such as participation in a specific campaign or attendance at a particular event. In general, newsletters were used to distribute important announcements and share information about upcoming events. Highlighting personal photos and videos, or even behind-the-scenes stories that showcase how the organization is using its resources to make an impact was as another important newsletter feature. While newsletters can be an effective platform to request donations, several of the participants mentioned that soliciting funds is not something organizations should do in every newsletter.

The interviews revealed that all of the nonprofit organizations included in the study struggled to improve the effectiveness of their newsletters. However, participants from UCCS, She's the First and The Tiziano Project found the most successful newsletters where those sent to an older demographic—who are more likely to open the email, read through it, and click to donate. Amy Yanda-Lee mentioned that while newsletters are important, BeadforLife also dedicates significant energy to traditional offline communication, such as magazines, newspapers, and faith-based media.

4.4 Strategy

For the majority of participants, strategically using social media meant operating networking platforms in a way that encouraged supporter engagement and feedback. The interviews revealed that an organization’s ability to craft strategic Facebook posts and Twitter
updates determined the level of engagement among followers. Instead of simply talking at supporters, the participants in this study agreed on the importance of structuring posts in a way that inspires dialogue and talks with the network. Engaging in Twitter conversations by using relevant hashtags was also mentioned many times as a tool to gain new followers.

Emily Bell of More than Me emphasized the importance of dedicating time to analyze which Facebook and Twitter posts receive the most feedback and engagement through insights, a tool offered to all Facebook pages. “Organizations need to test out different messaging to see what works and what doesn’t. Having a bit of variety is good, but it is important to pay attention to what your followers really like. For us, it’s pictures. So we try to do that often.” Researching what works is also important for BeadforLife, as Amy Yanda-Lee mentioned the significance of taking time each week to develop strategy and analyze results. Many organizations also mentioned examining their “click-through rates”, or the number of times a posted link is clicked on, as well as the page’s analytics, in order to determine which posts get the most engagement.

The primary Twitter strategies mentioned in this section of the interview reinforced what was already said about the importance of being active in conversations by using relevant hashtags, posting colorful graphics, and maintaining a fluid stream of communication. One helpful strategy to increase an organization’s Twitter activity was to schedule out tweets that can be sent at specific times throughout the day—an automated service utilized by several of the participants in this study. Interestingly, it appears that all of the organizations included in the study post updates on Facebook early in the morning, mid-day, and in the evening hours when the chances of exposure are the highest. Twitter updates from the organizations in this study did not appear to have a particular schedule, yet posts were made continuously throughout the day. It is also important to note one important Twitter tactic mentioned in the interview with
BeadforLife: “We got our founder on Twitter and very soon we plan to have a meeting to get everyone on Twitter—we have a ton of opportunity there, we’re getting tweets from big people and we want to be able to respond to that”, said Amy Yanda-Lee.

Lastly, when asked what online tools help organizations stay up to date with the rapidly changing world of social media, Mashable.com was continually mentioned as a valuable tool and source of guidance.

5. Data Analysis

Results from the interviews suggest social media is becoming an integral piece of nonprofit development, however it is certainly no guarantee for increased donations. Based on participant response, gaining success from online networking sites means viewing social media platforms as viable components of an organization’s marketing strategy. Ultimately, building strong relationships with the organization’s fan base sets the foundation for requesting financial support in the future. In fact, maintaining a supportive and engaged community appeared to be the most effective way to increase donations and build partnerships with like-minded organizations. This study found Facebook to be better suited to sharing photos, personal stories, and videos. On the contrary, messages sent via Twitter should be brief and tailored to a fast-paced environment. While Facebook is a good platform to share organizational updates, Twitter should be seen as an advocacy tool that can be used to engage in conversations relating to the organization’s mission.

The interviews from this study reveal that strategically and intentionally using social networking platforms can bring substantial growth, although a high level of commitment is required in order to achieve measurable results. BeadforLife and She’s the First emerged as the organizations that put the most strategic planning and analysis into their online communication
efforts. However, all of the organizations included had one specific person, mostly on a part-time basis with the exception of Phillip Denman of UCCS, assigned to handle social media and online communication.

Furthermore, the data here shows Facebook and Twitter should be seen as extensions of the organization’s website and an interactive platform that serves as the nonprofit’s virtual face. By social networking standards, the most successful organizations included in the study were those that implemented creative, interactive, and personal calls for action that placed value on every member of the community. Interestingly, this activity seemed to correlate with an engaged and excited fan base. This demonstrates a significant social media lesson: never underestimate the influencing power of one individual, even if their capacity to donate is low. As seen in the interviews, each member of the organization’s community has the ability to influence a larger network.

The interviews also revealed the importance of creating an identifiable brand personality that donors and potential supporters can easily connect with, which was an important nonprofit marketing tactic mentioned by Stinnett et al. (2012). As mentioned in the interviews, committing to a brand personality that reflects the organization’s mission and values was a key element to the participant’s communication strategy. This tactic proved to build trust among supporters, which also had an influence in the effectiveness of the organization’s newsletters and social media interaction.

6. Recommendations and Conclusion

Based on the results from this study, *Starfish One by One* should evaluate how the organization’s social media presence can be adapted to include more opportunities for stakeholder engagement. The following recommendations listed below are based on results from
this study as well as the literature review. Furthermore, the suggestions will be tailored to the current social media activity of *Starfish One by One*.

6.1 Social Media Basics

While *Starfish* does maintain an active Facebook account, the organization is less invested in Twitter. Therefore, an increase in organizational related postings as well as advocacy and educational messages is recommended. When drafting posts, it is important to remember that Facebook and Twitter are best utilized when posting content that is unique to the specific platform. For *Starfish*, an organization devoted to girls’ education and mentorship, Twitter should be seen as a very useful advocacy tool that can serve to showcase the organization as a prominent voice in the realm of girls’ education—with frequent postings relating to world news and education, Guatemala current events, and facts relevant to girls and women. *Starfish* would also be wise to use the following hashtags when sending messages on Twitter: #girlsed, #guatemala, and #education. This is an effective way to attract and communicate Twitter users who may not be following the organization’s events. Mentioning these hashtags in a Tweet, as well as following or reweeting similar information will help *Starfish* create an identifiable brand that people will learn to trust as a knowledgeable resource dedicated to promoting equality for girls and women. This can also lead to opportunities for partnerships with other like-minded organizations.

Results from the interviews also show big announcements via Facebook are most often distributed in the middle of the week, making effort to avoid Monday or Friday. In order to get the highest level of exposure, *Starfish* should also be posting weekday Facebook updates in one of three time-slots: early morning hours, mid-day/lunch hour, early to mid evening hours. As for Twitter, *Starfish* would do well to schedule approximately five to eight daily tweets, relating to
the content mentioned above, that will post every two to three hours throughout the day and possibly during the night to attract those in different time zones. The organization can do this via Twuffer, which is a free and very user-friendly platform to schedule tweets. Although scheduling tweets is convenient, Starfish also needs to be quick to respond to any mentions, replies, or relevant tweets from others—which will increase conversation on the organization’s Twitter feed.

6.2 Fundraising

The results from this study show that social media is certainly not a fundraising silver bullet. However, Starfish should view sites like Facebook and Twitter as vehicles to communicate with their supporters and challenge them to get involved in a global issue like girls’ education. Based on the feedback from the interviews, Starfish management should encourage creativity within the organization and seek out efforts that go beyond click-to-donate campaigns. Followers that are engaged and excited about Starfish are much more likely to donate.

Therefore, Starfish should consider developing quarterly campaigns, either for the purpose of fundraising or building awareness, that are structured around social media. One initial possibility is to challenge Starfish fans to commit for one month to becoming online ambassadors for change by transforming their individual social media pages into platforms for awareness and advocacy for the organization. For example, Starfish could create images, cover photos, and badges that can be uploaded to an individual’s social media pages. Another tactic to engage a younger fan base may be to create a photo sharing campaign suited for Instagram, a strategy mentioned by BeadforLife as a way to keep the organization’s fan base excited and engaged—an important strategy for growth mentioned in the interviews. Key components
should include calls for action—possibly a photo/video contest that asks the fan base to share how education has played an important role in their life—as well as visuals and graphics that can be easily shared and distributed by individual fans. *Starfish* could also consider launching giving campaigns that are structured around personal holidays, such as Mother’s Day.

### 6.3 Online Communication

Newsletters were an area where all of the participants struggled to see results. However, *She’s the First* and *More Than Me* both mentioned that catering to specific demographics could be a strategic tool in improving a newsletter’s effectiveness. As a result, *Starfish* should consider composing newsletters that are geared towards specific age groups. The results show that older generations are much more likely to open a newsletter, read through it, and even click to donate, while millennials and young groups are unlikely to ever donate in response to a newsletter. If at all possible, *Starfish* could benefit by organizing newsletters into groups based on an individual’s involvement in the organization, age, location, and even gender. Each group then receives a unique newsletter tailored to their specific traits. As a result, moving away from the one-size-fits-all template newsletter may improve click-through rates and potentially increase donations.

### 6.4 Strategy

*Starfish One by One* would be wise to break down their organization’s social media presence into three overarching goals that will serve as the foundation for all online communication: 1) Fan Engagement 2) Advocacy and Education 3) Fundraising. Establishing clear goals that are tailored to *Starfish* will help guide the organization in developing the content of their social media postings. This will also be helpful when *Starfish* considers which new social networking sites, such as Pinterest or GOOD, can serve as valuable contributors to their online communication tools. Also, *Starfish* should not focus on the quantity of postings, but
rather the quality. If the organization has nothing especially relevant or interesting to post, it is best to wait until an important update or photo is ready to be published.

*Starfish* should also consider the importance of their brand personality and what role that plays in their social media activity. As mentioned in the literature review, it is quite common for people to attribute human qualities to nonhuman entities such as nonprofit organizations. Considering this, *Starfish*’s management team could benefit from meeting to discuss how the organization’s social media efforts can create an identifiable brand and personality that will help foster engagement with their target population. Surprisingly, a nonprofit’s voice and perceived personality can play a role in how people engage and interact with the organization. Also, *Starfish* should make sure posts sound as if they are only coming from one individual in order to maintain a consistent tone.

It is also important to note that a nonprofit’s social media success should not be measured by the number of likes or followers. Instead, *Starfish* should focus on the conversation and engagement between the organization and its support network. In order to track clicks, *Starfish* can shorten their links posted in social media updates via [https://bitly.com](https://bitly.com), which will not only shrink lengthy website links (*especially useful for Twitter*), but this site also provides the click-through rate for all postings. Also, as seen in the interviews, organizations using Twitter effectively make sure to always include the @ account of the individual or organization they are speaking about or tweeting to in order to create conversations and build relationships—a tactic also known the Social Network Theory. In order to increase conversation and visibility, each staff member at Starfish should create a Twitter account, a networking strategy specifically recommended by *BeadforLife*. 
Lastly, the most important social media strategy mentioned in every interview was to stay committed. Although social media is time consuming, it does have the power to transform an organization if done strategically. It is recommended that Starfish establish a social media schedule for both Facebook and Twitter, analyze their feedback and results on a weekly basis, and begin developing fundraising and advocacy campaigns specifically tailored for social networking platforms.

Conclusion

Based on the literature review and data from this study, it seems the organizations with the most quantifiable social media success are those that maintain a fluid stream of communication that keeps the fan base continually engaged—a strategy mentioned by Waters et al. (2009). Additionally, it appears that prospective donors are critiquing an organization’s social media platforms in order to determine how active the nonprofit is within the community it works. Nonprofits with the most vibrant, interactive profiles create the impression of being successful and engaged with the fan base. The opposite is also true for organizations that post infrequent updates with static messages, a habit that may actually turn away prospective supporters. This relates to the importance of distributing quality content that supports two-way communication.

Overall, this study shows that simply creating a social media page with occasional updates is never going to deliver a significant impact for a nonprofit organization. In order to achieve success and growth from social media, organizations must view these platforms as legitimate communication and marketing channels that deserve planning, strategy, and analysis. The unprecedented potential for sharing and growth with free tools like Facebook and Twitter should encourage nonprofit managers to include social media in their development plans.
Committed teams must make efforts to ensure the organization invests the resources and time needed to transform their networking platforms into tools that can bring measurable results.

With a little creativity, energy, and commitment, Starfish One by One has the potential to use Facebook and Twitter to significantly expand the organization and create a more engaged and excited community of supporters, both online and offline. Combining their commitment to girls’ education with a strategic communication plan will allow Starfish to increase donations through targeted online campaigns, build strong relationships with like-minded organizations, and ultimately grow the organization.

7. References:


8. Appendix

Interview Questions for Does it Work? How Social Media and Effective Communications Strategies Can Grow a Nonprofit Organization by Sarah Vandiver

Social Media Basics:

1. What social networking sites does your organization use? Which do you find the most useful and why?
2. What are the top three goals of your organization's social media networks?
3. How important is social media compared to other development efforts within the organization?
4. How much of the organization’s time is spent on social media per week?
5. Does the organization designate one person to maintain social media networks or is it a team effort?
6. How do you reach your intended audience through social media? How do you expand to different age groups?

Fundraising:

7. How is social networking prioritized into your fundraising goals?
8. Can you give a specific example of how social media has been used to build financial support for the organization?
9. How would you describe your organization’s social media efforts when it comes to fundraising? (Short vs. long-term campaigns, small donations, or larger gifts and matching, or a more general fundraising presence online?)
10. How does the organization use social media to build partnerships with other like-minded organizations?

Electronic Communications:

11. What communication strategy does the organization use to reach an older population that may not be active on social media?
12. Does the organization distribute e-newsletters? If so, how often?
13. Are newsletters used more as a means to update or actively asking for donations in each newsletter?
14. What strategies are used to increase the effectiveness of e-newsletters?
15. Aside from mainstream social media sites, are there any online tools the organization has used to engage stakeholders?
16. Are you able to make a strong connection between the e-news and the social media platforms?

Strategy:

17. How do you measure the success of the organization’s social media efforts?
18. What is the organization’s strategy to gaining new donors through social media?
Course Competency:

Organizational Management and Behavior:

Organizational Management and Behavior was focused on a wide-range of topics, all relating to managing a successful organization, adapting to change, understanding individual behavior, and exploring new opportunities for growth. One of the topics discussed heavily in this course was growing nonprofit organizations through the use of effective communication strategies, specifically social media. Various reading assignments highlighted the complex process of creating a strategic plan for electronic communication. This knowledge was particularly useful in this study because it set the foundation for my understanding of social networking as it related to nonprofit development. Additionally, one of my assignments was to write about millennials' involvement in nonprofit development, which was a topic focused heavily on social media and online networking use among young adults.

Social Entrepreneurship:

Social Entrepreneurship is a course heavily focused on studying innovative strategies that help nonprofit organizations meet and exceed their challenges and development goals. There was much discussion in this course related to creative planning and nonprofit development, which was helpful when studying communication strategies for Starfish One by One. However, the most helpful skill learned in this class was the ability to think creatively in regard to earned income and fundraising campaigns from a nonprofit organization's perspective—particularly an international organization. There was a lot of
discussion in this class about moving away from traditional donor funding models, which was useful when considering how social networking plays a role in generating funds and engaging with stakeholders in a unique and innovative way. My final assignment in this class was to develop my own social enterprise and write specific development goals and strategies for growth. During this process I focused on how social networking can be used to grow a start-up organization with little financial investment. All of the knowledge gained in this course was especially helpful in this capstone project.

Civil Society and Nongovernmental Organizations:

This course had a strong focus on nongovernmental organizations working in developing countries. As a result, reading assignments and discussion topics highlighted the challenges of managing international NGOs. The knowledge gained in this course gave me insight into the challenges and issues facing those managing international nonprofit organizations. For *Starfish One by One*, this is particularly relevant as the organization manages programs in Guatemala, one of the Western hemisphere’s poorest countries. This class set the context for what it means to work in an impoverished society. This was important because it gave me an understanding of the obstacles management teams face in dealing with development efforts in the United States, while also balancing program implementation in the field. It also helped me realize the difficulties in connecting local organizational efforts with larger, global issues like poverty and girls’ education. Again, this course established a foundation for my understanding of international NGOs and also helped me develop the ability to think critically about development efforts for organizations working in developing areas of the world.