

Tips, tricks, and tools for using and managing your social networks wisely

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Is your organization considering setting up a profile on a social networking site? Are you wondering what tasks are involved, how much time it will take, and how you might streamline your efforts? Maybe your organization has established a presence on MySpace and is now contemplating adding one to Facebook. Perhaps you are wondering how you can juggle multiple profiles and still have time left to do other work.

As more and more organizations jump on the social networking bandwagon, people are seeking ways to make the time spent on these tools as efficient and fruitful as possible. I recently surveyed several nonprofit professionals and social networking mavens about their social networking habits. The tips below, taken from their responses, offer suggestions for effectively managing your profiles and contacts on social networking sites, finding people with relevant interests to your nonprofit or professional goals, working between multiple social networking sites, and getting the most out of social networking tools even if you're not a Web designer or techie.

1. Invest Time in Your Network

While most online social networks cost nothing for your organization to join, keep in mind that creating a strong online presence on one can require an investment of up to two hours a day, especially in the beginning when you are learning how to use the site, setting up your profile, and making friends. If you're unprepared to make this commitment, you may want to reconsider using these tools at your organization.

If you don't have someone on-staff who can help manage your social networks, you may want to seek outside help. Heather Mansfield, Community Manager at Change.org, suggests finding a social networking intern or an assistant who can spend a minimum of 10 hours per week managing your site or sites, noting that many organizations are seeking full-time staffers to do the job. "I am starting to see larger nonprofits creating full-time social networking positions for 40 hours a week," she said.

Keep in mind that there is a fair amount of trial and error with using social networking sites, and your organization may not see results right away. "There is a learning curve; don't expect immediate results for at least three months, whatever your objectives may be," advised Alex De Carvalho, Community Manager of multimedia social networking site Scrapblog. "Take the time to build your profile correctly and learn the ropes of what works and what doesn't." Nick Noakes, a director at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, stresses the value of this "no-guilt" exploration time. "It has brought me knowledge and contacts more than a lot of planned things I do," he said.

Some nonprofit professionals, like Beth Dunn of the Cape Cod Arts Foundation, use their after-work hours and their individual (rather than organizational) profiles as a low-risk way to try out new tools. "Keep following what others are doing, and test," said social media expert Chris Brogan. "If you want, use a 'dummy' user account to make sure your experimenting doesn't leave breadcrumbs that go nowhere for folks who legitimately want to engage with your organization." He also suggests keeping track of your progress. "Don't do random trial and error, [which] isn't as effective as creating learning experiments that give you some information about how to improve your strategy."

2. Test the Waters with an Individual Profile

If finding someone to be a dedicated or part-time social networker for your organization is unrealistic, you may want to consider testing the waters with an individual, rather than an organizational, profile. Whereas creating an organizational presence — such as a group, cause, or fan page — requires a bit more time and planning, setting up an individual profile is fairly simple.

Think of your social networking profile as an online version of the professional networking you might do offline, like attending a conference or a reception. You can connect with peers or potential business contacts, while having the advantage of being able to see their connections — which are not always visible in, say, real life or through exchanging business cards.

"My organization doesn't have a presence on social networking sites yet, and the question of time investment goes to the heart of the fear of doing so — time suck," said Susan Edwards, an employee at a Los Angeles museum. "I do a lot of social networking for myself, however, and am constantly trying to think of ways to feed it back into the institution in a meaningful way."

An individual profile can also be easier to unplug if early exploration proves unfruitful. You can always delete or make your personal account inactive, whereas it can sometimes be harder to delete a failed group.

3. Establish a Routine

As one veteran nonprofit social networker confessed, "If am not careful when I go to a social networking site, I am easily distracted. And I know I'm not at all unique." If you don't organize your time well, establish a disciplined work routine, or have some specific goals in mind when you visit a social networking site (and particularly if you are managing more than one), you will waste time moving from one site to another. Sus Nyrop, an e-learning consultant based in Denmark, recommends knowing when to log out of the site, and keeping your recreational "pokes" (instant messages to friends) to a minimum.

Also, work on your own time. "Don't feel like you need to keep your profile updated every minute or have to add people to your list of friends the moment they ask," said Chris Heuer, a consultant and founder of the Social Media Club. "Unless your job responsibility is Online Community Manager, you don't need to spend your entire work day on MySpace." Most nonprofit online networkers agree on setting a regular schedule for updating content, 'friending' people, or finding new contacts with similar interests. Those who work on multiple networking sites may plan a maintenance schedule. "One good practice is to set aside a regular housekeeping date to clear out clutter from your profile," said Nick Booth, a consultant and podcaster based in the United Kingdom, adding that for him, "Wednesday is MySpace day."

"I use my [Outlook calendar](#) to map out the week's posts on my social networking blogs," said HSUS's Lewis. "That has helped me tremendously, not only with time management, but in looking at the bigger picture. It also helps me integrate my activities with everything else my department does (email, Web site, and print) that is so important." However, don't adhere to a schedule so religiously that you don't leave room for some flexibility. Said Lewis, "When something big hits, I'll go immediately to MySpace and blog about it, because that's where our biggest network is. Next, I'll tweak the content for Facebook and post there. Then I'll go to Care2 and on to Gather."

4. Don't Spread Yourself Too Thin

As [this comparison chart](#) from Compete.com demonstrates, there is considerable crossover among social network users, meaning it may not be necessary to maintain a profile or support a group on every single one. "Choose where you really want to develop your community and where you really want to interact with the people who matter the most to you and your organization," said Heuer. "Spreading attention and energy across all the sites is nearly impossible for one person and you will end up with a diluted presence on each of them rather than a strong presence in one." Bill Snyder, a nonprofit marketing consultant, advised, "Focus. It's better to do one site well than to do many sites poorly."

Seb Chan, Manager of Web Services for the Powerhouse Museum in Australia, agrees. "I know there is a real attraction to having presences in multiple networks but I've found little real benefit in doing so *unless* there are significant real-world synergies." Chan points to the example of Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, which worked with a live music event where the bands had a large MySpace fan base.

When determining an online presence, don't just choose the most popular sites, or the site that you think matches your demographic; take some time to find the people you are trying to reach and the conversations you are trying to join. "Go where your network is, and focus on those few places," said Doug Haslam, a social media consultant for Topaz Partners.

5. Share the Workload

Of course, there may be times when it does make sense to have a presence on several sites. Once Google's [OpenSocial API](#) is implemented, this will become easier because you will be able to access your contacts across networks or via a single hub. In the meantime, you can hire a full-time or part-time staffer to manage your social networks, or parcel out the work among your teammates.

One advocate of this strategy is Chan, who advises identifying "persona managers" to manage each network. The advantage of choosing this route is that each persona retains a level of authenticity, individuality, and relevance that is hard to achieve if one person spreads herself across multiple networking sites. Chan notes that having someone who understands the features and interface of each social networking site, the culture of the community, and the appropriate style for communication can make your efforts a lot more effective. The persona managers might operate as a team to share knowledge about each initiative and evaluate each other's progress using metrics. Each member would manage one network presence, but the group would meet regularly to check in and evaluate progress.

Another way to share the workload while encouraging group participation is to focus efforts on a single network but divide up the administrative work of supporting various groups, causes, or fan pages. This way, one person is not responsible for managing every aspect of a single network.

When recruiting participants, Ian Wilker, a social media consultant, suggests seeking out the same qualities you would look for in a face-to-face networker. "Find the people ... who are incredibly effective at advancing your mission through *real-world* relationships with others," he said. "Encourage them to bring online the same values and passion they exhibit in real life."

You can also involve more teammates by inviting staff members to use their personal profiles to represent the organization. Danielle Brigida of the National Wildlife Federation said, "I like to look at social networking as an ecosystem: when you have a number of people picking up different niches, the system is stronger and healthier. Most of the time, you are your best advocate. The more people involved from your organization, the greater the impact, and without a personal touch these social networks become bland very quickly."

Sharing the workload has other advantages as well. Said Cape Cod Arts Foundation's Dunn, "Keeping the organization's social network project tightly compartmentalized within just one person's domain personalizes it too much — if it succeeds, you're all geniuses, but if it fails, then it was just Your Bad Idea. If the board gives your organization the green light, the whole organization needs to get on board with it too."

6. Keep It Personal

"People love having an actual person to connect to from an organization, and two-way communication is what makes social networks so successful," said HSUS's Lewis.

Each organization has its own approach to adding to their list of contacts, or "friending," on social networks. Well-known blogger and social media guru Robert Scoble accepts all friend requests, for example, while social media expert and author Shel Israel prefers to establish a connection first by sending potential contacts a private message. Other organizations approve friends based on their personal, professional, or organizational goals.

Yet keep in mind that the goal is not necessarily to amass a large number of friends, but to build meaningful relationships. The task of approving people as friends shouldn't be viewed a mechanical task of simply clicking a button to add them to your list. It is important to get to know the people in your community. What are their interests? Why did they befriend you or join your organization's group? How can you engage them in a conversation about your organization?

One way you can address this is by assigning the task of befriending others to one person at your organization. "We have a staff person who is spending a portion of his time managing our MySpace page — identifying, reviewing and accepting friends seems to take a good chunk of time," said Eve Smith, Assistant Director of Interactive Marketing at Easter Seals. "You can't really streamline that work and be an effective relationship builder."

Micah Sifry, Executive Editor of Personal Democracy Forum, observed of über-successful political blog DailyKos, "[It] started as one person's blog, and that person, Markos Moulitsas, spent untold hours building his community. He once told me that in the early days, when he had maybe several hundred regular readers, he knew the names of every single one and would notice when someone hadn't been on the site for a while, and when they returned, he'd greet them personally. It takes that level of leadership engagement to build a successful [social network] around activism."

7. Befriend People Strategically

Sometimes, friends come to you, but other times, you'll have to do your own outreach to add new friends to your contact list. This is a critical part of the workflow; to reap the benefits of using social networking tools, you need to build your network.

That said, you want to avoid random or open-ended outreach, which can distract you and waste time. A strategic way to build your network is to use a "friend-of-a-friend" approach. "Build a small base from a network of supporters from people you know — maybe that's staff, board members, past supporters — and ask them to invite people they think should be involved," said Bill Snyder, a nonprofit marketing consultant. "In a sense, it's getting supporters to do the leg work and be active supporters. It's also the very definition of 'social networking.' This may happen, to some extent, on its own, but it will happen a lot faster if you contact your network and ask them to do this."

Also, take some time to explore different groups on the network site; search by keywords, and explore your friends' friend lists. You may be surprised to find several existing groups interested in your cause or organization. "I look for groups that may already be set up by users interested in our mission. It saves me time," said Darren Mullenix, director of operations for Samaritan's Purse. Change.org's Mansfield agrees. "Befriend individuals who have already befriended other nonprofits with similar missions."

Technology can also help in this arena. Use the [Who Is This?](#) Firefox add-on to search for people you find online on other social networks, sites, and search engines.

Finally, be sure to give your current supporters opportunities to join your network by letting them know about your organization's presence. Post a social networking badge on your Web site or prominently display your profile URL in your email newsletters.

8. Use a Few Good Time Savers

A variety of tools and tricks can help you streamline your social networking projects and manage your content.

RSS and Mobile Features

Using an RSS reader to read content can be a real time saver over logging on to an individual site, particularly if you are maintaining a presence on multiple networks. Some even allow you to do this on the go. "The sites that have mobile clients or mobile-optimized Web sites make it possible so I can scan updates and post while commuting," said Eugene Chan, IT director for the Community Technology Foundation. "Facebook is especially good in this regard."

RSS can also be used to bring feeds from around the Web to your profile page. "The crucial thing is that the social networking profile must be good, up-to-date, and interesting," said Simon Berry, Executive Director for RuralNet UK. "However, its maintenance has to fit in with everything else we do and mustn't be a separate process stuck on the side. The ability to 'pull in' content from elsewhere using RSS is really important."

Cut Down or Manage Your Bacn

Bacn — email alerts from social networking sites — is a new form of spam. One way to manage this potential nuisance is to set your preferences to block them entirely, or to switch off email alerts when someone friends you or posts to your profile. Besides, if you visit your profile daily, you may not need to receive the email alerts. If you prefer to manage your profile from your inbox, use a filter or rule to direct them into a folder so you can deal with Bacn in batches. If you do want to receive alerts, but not by email, some sites offer the option to receive them as text messages. The point is, have a system.

"When I first started, every time a friend request or message notification arrived in my email box, I'd check it right away," said Lewis. "It became unmanageable. Now, I set a specific time every day to approve friend requests and comments, and message back those that write us. By having a set time every day, I don't allow it to consume my time and I get a lot more done."

Automate Profile Content from Blogs, Web Sites, and Other Sources

Not all of the content that appears on your social networking site needs to be created there; as mentioned before, many sites offer tools to allow you to pull in content from your Web site or blog, or from others around the Web. "Facebook allows you to pull in all your RSS feeds from other services," said David Brazeal, a social media consultant. "When you update your blog, or your podcast, or your Twitter, it's published to your Facebook profile, too."

Many nonprofits are taking advantage of RSS and blog-publishing applications, bookmarklets (tools on your browser that let you easily share links to your social networking profile), and open APIs that allow you to easily republish content from social bookmarking sites, blogs, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube, and even Web sites. Be careful; discovering what technologies work well together still involves a bit of trial and error.

When pulling in content from other sites, be mindful that sites have different cultures and respond to communication styles differently. Lewis, who works on multiple sites, said, "At first, it was a trial and error for all of these networks. I posted the same thing on every one of the networks. I monitored what kind of responses I got, as well as the tone of communication. Then I modified my messaging based on the responses I received. This is how I became familiar with the different crowds and learned how to speak to them more effectively." Kristin Taylor, Social Media Strategist for PBS Interactive, said, "Every social network is different and every user is different — there are levels of privacy, rules of friending, and a certain expectation of transparency. Respect that and you'll be fine."

Keep Up With Policies and New Developments

NWF's Brigida advises nonprofit staffers who work on social networking sites to keep an eye on changes in features or policies that speak to their specific needs. "Read the key blogs that track the social networking site you're on, as well as the official company blog. In addition, monitor peer listservs, like NTEN lists (You can find a short list of social networking blogs and other resources on my [Social Networking Resources Wiki](#).)