

Face Time

Charities flock to social-networking Web sites to reach out to new people, spark discussion, and help raise money

By Scott Westcott

Nancy Lublin, chief executive of Do Something, a New York charity that encourages young people to volunteer, grasped the power of social-networking sites on the Internet the day she overheard one of the charity's interns griping. The high-school student was frustrated by the bureaucracy involved in getting a project off the ground for her school's community-service club.

"She said, 'I don't get it. When I have ideas, I put them on Facebook and within an hour about 20 gazillion people comment,'" recalls Ms. Lublin.

That comment led to the idea of creating a **Do Something Club** and promoting it on **Facebook** and **MySpace**, two social-networking sites that both have millions of members, many of them younger than 30.

The rules for starting a Do Something Club are simple: Get together at least five people who are committed to a cause, pursue two community-service projects over the course of a school year, and adhere to any rules at the school where club members meet. Within months of posting information on the social-networking sites, the charity had persuaded at least 56 schools to start Do Something Clubs.

"There are nonprofit organizations that for years have dreamed about being in 56 schools," says Ms. Lublin. "This was free. It was organic. And it was effective. These kids are doing amazing things."

Free — and Easy

Do Something is one of a growing number of charities tapping into online social networks like Facebook, MySpace, **YouTube**, and others to increase awareness, build membership, mobilize supporters, find volunteers, and support fund-raising efforts.

Much of the popularity of the sites can be credited to their simplicity — and the fact that individuals and organizations do not have to pay anything to use them. To gain access to the sites, people fill out a short online registration form and within minutes they can create a profile describing themselves and their interests. Photos, music, links to other Web sites, and videos can all be added to a person's or organization's profile. Users can also start a blog and post it on the profile.

People who visit the profiles can link their own information to the ones they like and exchange messages and materials with other individuals and groups that interest them.

Over time, the number of linked profiles grows, increasing the number of people who interact with the person or group.

VolunteerMatch, a group that links volunteers with local charities, for example, has attracted more than 1,000 people who link to its online profile since joining MySpace in July.

"Social networking is a great fit for nonprofits," says Jason Willett, VolunteerMatch's director of communications. "Social networking is here to stay and will continue to evolve. It makes sense for any organization trying to raise awareness and build community."

Creativity Needed

While more and more charities are developing a presence on social-network sites, however, consultants with expertise in online communications say that simply creating a profile is not enough. Time, resources, and creativity need to be committed to get the most from the new medium.

"The best marketing in the world is useless unless you truly have something to say," says Melissa Temme, a spokeswoman for the Salvation Army, in Alexandria, Va.

Last month, Ms. Temme created a MySpace profile called "Mr. Red Kettle" as an online persona for the Salvation Army's longstanding Red Kettle holiday fund-raising drive. Among other postings, the profile includes a link to a video of a Saturday Night Live sketch, in which a Salvation Army volunteer dressed as Santa Claus competes for donations with the entertainer Justin Timberlake, who plays another charity worker asking for money on the street. The video has been viewed more than 800,000 times.

"This is exciting, but the nitty-gritty work has to be done," says Ms. Temme. "If you don't update regularly and have real content, all is for naught."

Explosive Growth

Last year proved to be an explosive one for social-networking sites. YouTube became part of the national lexicon with its \$1.65-billion sale to Google. YouTube says that the videos it posts online are viewed at least 100 million times in a typical day.

More than 14 million people have created profiles on Facebook, a network largely dedicated to high-school and college students, based on statistics on the site.

And by the end of 2006, MySpace had 100 million members and 66 million different viewers each month, according to comScore Media Metrix, a Reston, Va., company that measures Internet audiences.

As of this month, MySpace listed 15,587 nonprofit organizations. The largest is People Helping People, a group of people who want to work together in promoting the common good, which has 17,000 "friends" on MySpace.

It is not only the young who are tapping into social networks, however. More than 50 percent of MySpace members are now older than 35, according to comScore Media Metrix.

On another online community, **Gather**, which its founders liken to "MySpace for grownups, at least half of members are older than 42 and "engaged and informed," says Tom Gerace, the site's chief executive, adding that more than 70 percent of them have college degrees, the type of people who "listen to public radio stations and read The New York Times." Those people, he says, are socially aware and inclined to make charitable contributions.

"This is a way for organizations to build legitimacy," says Mr. Gerace. "If you get contacted by a friend or colleague who points out a group doing great work, that can be much more effective than trying to reach people with a random mailer that doesn't have the same trust factor."

Playing Online

While thousands of charities are now migrating to social-networking sites, many early adopters were like Do Something, stumbling onto the medium when an intern or volunteer vouched for the power of online social networking in his or her personal life.

That's what happened at the Life Rolls On Foundation, a San Diego charity that serves people with spinal-cord injuries. Two years ago, Josh Billauer, president of the organization, says that one of his employees started filing a report each week chronicling how she spent her work time promoting Life Rolls On through MySpace.com.

"I'd look at the report every week and I'd say, 'I can't believe we are paying this person to play for an hour on MySpace,'" he says. "I soon realized it was time well spent, though. Now I'm the one who spends time on it."

With more than 14,000 online "friends," Life Rolls On now has the second highest membership of any nonprofit group on MySpace.

The organization manages profiles on both MySpace and YouTube by frequently updating its blog and photos and interacting with people who visit its space on the two sites. Life Rolls On also posts videos: One of them features Mr. Billauer's brother, Jesse, a quadriplegic who founded the charity, surfing on a modified surfboard.

"Part of our mission is spreading the word, mobilizing volunteers, and getting people to take action," says Mr. Billauer. "If we need to call a congressman or do advocacy, we can get the word out through our MySpace blog. We also have the ability to leave embedded voice messages in our profile. We use those tools to get people to act.

"Depending on what type of organization you have, I could see it being worth it to have a dedicated person who does nothing but social networking," he says.

Ms. Lublin, of Do Something, realized early on that a top-down approach to communicating on MySpace and Facebook would ring hollow to the young people the organization is trying to engage. "I think I'm pretty cool. I'm 35 and wear Converse every day, but when it comes to this stuff I'm old," she says. "It is much more effective to have a 21-year-old from Ohio doing it from her dorm room."

Which is exactly what Do Something has done with its MySpace and Facebook profiles. Natalia Lavric, an Ohio University student who spent the summer as an intern at Do Something, has kept on managing the organization's social-networking content since returning to her studies.

"MySpace is a way to reach more people than we otherwise could have," says Ms. Lavric. "I signed on one morning and had 300 friend requests with messages asking questions like 'How can I help?' That's incredible."

VolunteerMatch's Mr. Willett says that other charities should consider enlisting a trusted supporter to manage content on a social-networking site.

People can manage a social-networking site from home, and it costs them nothing, he notes: "It's a great opportunity for a virtual volunteer."

Understanding the Culture

Even though social-networking sites offer many potential benefits to charities, nonprofit officials should understand the online networking world before they jump into it, says C. David Gammel, a Silver Spring, Md., consultant who helps organizations use electronic media.

"Any organization interested in leveraging communities on MySpace and Facebook must learn about them firsthand," Mr. Gammel says. "You will come across as clueless and wooden if you try to make a big splash in either place before you really understand their culture of interaction."

He recommends looking at social-networking profiles of other nonprofit organizations, examining how they interact with people online, and reading their blogs to get a sense of the tone and content online.

After some staff members become familiar with the nuances of online communities, he says, a charity is in a better position to adapt as the social-network sites add new technology features and find fresh ways to communicate.

"If you build capacity and knowledge in your staff, you'll be ready for anything," Mr. Gammel says. "MySpace is still huge, but many people are starting to drift toward other things. It can be kind of flavor of the month, so you don't want to invest too heavily in one thing and then get stranded."

Ms. Temme of the Salvation Army became a seasoned MySpace user before she pitched the idea of getting the charity involved in online social networking.

"The fact that I had an understanding of this made it less scary," she says. "For a lot of nonprofit organizations, it's hard to get their hands around social networking. As groups, we tend to focus on how to control things, and you can't always control things in this environment. You can only control what you say. That takes some getting used to."

Ms. Temme is now working with MySpace to get a donation button added to the profile, but she says her main focus is not raising money.

"It's really about the relationship aspect," she says. "We've had a challenging time reaching out to the younger demographic. We'd like to get to know them on their terms so when it comes time to volunteer or make a donation, we come to their minds."