

Guidance note:

The role of social network services in supporting volunteering

The information in this paper is drawn from *Fresh thinking: An exploration of the role of social network services in supporting volunteering; improving the support for volunteer led volunteering; and developing the role of Volunteering Champions* which is available to download from www.improvingsupport.org.uk/volunteering

Background

The introduction and subsequent growth of online social networking has represented one of the biggest social developments of the past five years, affecting the way that people in the UK and across the globe communicate and interact with each other. In April 2008, OfCom reported that of the 61% of the UK population that regularly use the internet, 71% have a social network profile which they access at least every other day. With a million new households gaining internet access each year, this figure looks set to continue to rise.

Social network services have been described as 'friends of friends' networks and have, for several years, been the toast of new media with their principal strength seen as being the ability to involve tens of millions of users. Wikipedia provides a list of 148 major active social networks it describes as notable and well-known and acknowledges that this list is not exhaustive.

It would appear that the general slow adoption of new technology within the voluntary and community sector is mirrored in the use of social network services, with the vast majority of organisations not using them. From our survey sample we discovered that while less than 25% of volunteer involving organisations are using social network services, the vast majority of these have found them to be successful. Our research demonstrates an untapped potential for the use of social network services to support volunteering. *Fresh thinking* explores the benefits and barriers to using social network services to support volunteering and, through case studies, shows how they can be used as an additional communication and support tool.

In summary, *Fresh thinking* concludes:

- The voluntary and community sector and volunteering movement are not currently capitalising on the potential of the interactive communication opportunities that are available through social network services
- There is a lack of knowledge about the use of social network services within the volunteering movement
- There is an identified desire amongst the volunteering movement for online services in three areas: access to information; the ability to interact with information, be involved in its development and identify sources of support; and the ability to interact with others
- The utilisation of social network services to support volunteering is happening sporadically; each organisation taking their initial steps in social networking faces a steep learning curve - encouraging the sharing of learning about this could prevent each organisation reinventing the wheel and also help each organisation to utilise existing social networking sites, not specifically designed for this purpose, effectively and without compromising issues such as privacy
- We have found some appetite for a bespoke online social network service for our country's volunteering movement

Online guides to using social network services

We have discovered little UK based information on this subject, with most resources being American. Whilst this is generally transferable, care should be taken about use of specific applications within mainstream social network services, as these might only be relevant in America due to different legal and financial frameworks.

General information and advice

- TimeBank's 'Volunteer Genie'

An online guide about volunteer recruitment and marketing, Volunteer Genie is an excellent source of user friendly content containing tips and advice on how to reach and attract potential volunteers. These links contain information about new media and social networking

www.volunteergenie.org.uk/new-media-adventures

www.volunteergenie.org.uk/social-networking-and-online-communities

- Media Trust

The country's premier charity bringing the third sector and the media together to build effective communications for the third sector; they have a range of online guides to help with marketing and communications, including social networking

www.mediatrust.org/training-events/training-resources/online-guides-1/social_networking

www.mediatrust.org/training-events/training-resources/online-guides-1/Sharing%20photos%20online/

www.mediatrust.org/youth-media/interactive-guide/

- Technicavita

A really useful UK website offering tips, case studies and interviews about third sector use of social network services

www.technicavita.org

- Network for Good

American guide that provides easy and affordable online fundraising activities; includes a section on using social networks for fundraising which translates well for UK use (Note: we have found this site slow to load)

www.fundraising123.org/social-networking

- Idealware

American website that reviews software and online services for non profits, useful guide on whether social networking is appropriate for your needs

www.idealware.org/articles/should_you_social_network.php

- TechSoup

American site covering a wide range of technical related guides and reviews for non profits and charities, this feature includes useful tips and advice on getting the most out of social networks, including overcoming some of the challenges and advice on how to get noticed in a crowded marketplace

www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/internet/page5504.cfm

www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/internet/page8075.cfm

- Christine.net
 American venture capitalist with special interest in new technologies; this is a useful list of tips on how to effectively use social networks to campaign
www.christine.net/2007/04/7_tips_for_succ.html

- Wild Apricot
 American website providing advice and information on a wide range of information and communications technology issues for both non profits and commercial organisations; blogs have some very useful guides and insights on using all the main social networks
www.wildapricot.com/blogs/

- Coyote Communications
 American website with a range of articles and resources on technology issues, communications and volunteering; it not only contains useful tips, it also carries the personal thoughts of its creator (Jayne Cravens, a regular contributor on UKVPMs) on this range of topics – so it's not only practical it's also relevant and thought provoking
www.coyotecomunications.com

Network Specific Features/Advice/Tips

- MySpace
 - How to Use MySpace to Raise Awareness
Interviews with three American organisations that provide insights into how they are using MySpace
www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/internet/page6016.cfm
 - Do's for MySpace Success
Tips for using MySpace to raise awareness and promote advocacy
www.gettingattention.org/my_weblog/2006/12/nonprofit_dos_f.html
 - Humane Society case study on MySpace
A profile of how this charity has used MySpace to promote its cause
www.frogloop.com/care2blog/2007/5/7/sunny-the-seal-melts-hearts-on-myspace.html

- Facebook
 - Using Facebook in your non profit
A useful blog entry on the basics of Facebook, as well as how to use it like an expert
http://michelemartin.typepad.com/thebambooprojectblog/2007/04/some_resources_.html

- Flickr

- How Nonprofits Can Get the Most out of Flickr

A very useful feature about Flickr and what it can do for your organisation; includes information and tips on how to use Flickr in compliance with its community rules and how to take advantage of its many features

www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/internet/page8291.cfm

What volunteering support services and volunteer involving organisations should consider when using social network services

Don't forget that anyone can set up pages and groups on social network services. If you don't, one of your volunteers may well do. You need to consider whether you are happy for there to be messages about your work that you are not aware of or control in the public domain. Whilst you cannot stop these developing, you can set up your own group and page and promote it – a well used group or page will feature higher in search results and will generate additional use, as people like to be part of something popular.

It is important to invest time in planning and maintaining your social network service presence – this needn't take a long time – but will be valuable. Some general tips are¹:

- Make time for your profile

The ease with which profiles can be created on social networking sites often means that they are sometimes created with good intentions and then simply left as the owner of the profile waits for something to happen. This approach seldom works and one of the keys to success in this area involves regularly logging in and letting everyone know about your profile by befriending them and contacting others using the communication tools. Your profile will soon benefit from this activity and gather momentum. Remember that to make social networks work for you requires that you do not neglect your presence on them. If you keep your profile up to date it will continue to attract the attention you require.

- Keep text to a minimum

Large amounts of text seldom work well on any webpage and social network sites are no exception, particularly as all the information you publish tends to be displayed on one page. Restrict your text to small paragraphs.

- Use media

It is possible to add video and sound to your pages so why not create some? Video can easily be added and it is also possible to add an audio message or short podcast via a 'widget' like MySpace's audio player. Photographs are also an effective way of communicating your charity's activity and can often be organised into an eye catching gallery. An easy way to include video is to use YouTube, and guidance on this is given in Appendix 6. If your project makes heavy use of photographs you might want to consider using Flickr, and guidance on this can be found in Appendix 7.

¹ The information in this section is drawn from:

www.advocacynet.org/modules/fck/upload/file/buildingyouricthouse/SocialNetworking.pdf

- Maintain your blog
Blogs are a quick and easy way to inform all visitors and subscribers to your page of your activity. Make sure that you add blogs regularly as a method of keeping your page up to date.
- Make groups and join groups
Many social networking sites feature groups that allow users with similar interests or activities to share information quickly. Join groups or if you can't locate a group catering to your specific field it is easy to set one up and invite your contacts to join. Search for categories like 'Non-Profit & Philanthropic' as well as 'charities' to find groups you may want to join.
- Use the forums
Forums are a great place to pick up tips and advice as well as offer it in return. Charities can often find all kinds of invaluable information from IT advice to fundraising tips from forums and they remain a valuable communication tool.
- Publicise your events
Social network sites often great publicity potential which is especially useful when you need to raise awareness of an event. Use the events features on these sites and invite your contacts to attend. If numbers are an issue it is possible to be sent attendance confirmation messages too.
- Don't forget your own website
With social network sites offering so many tools it can be easy to forget about the importance of your own website. Don't! Main websites are typically a labour of love, a source of much consultation and are often an expensive undertaking. As this is your 'official' statement of your aims and activities, publicise its existence through your social network page and make sure that it always carries up to date information too.

Specifically in terms of volunteering, www.volunteeringgenie.org.uk recommends:

- Spread the message about the volunteering opportunities you have to offer
- Ask your current volunteers to engage in online conversations with others about the volunteer work they do for your organisation
- Give people the tools and information they need to get involved
- Share your volunteering experiences and inspire others to do the same; keep it personal and don't be "official" or overtly plug your organisation

These networks can help you engage 'hard to reach' communities. For example, Shelter has found that homeless people use social networking sites and email as their only constant means of communication.

What Modernising Volunteering is doing on this until March 2011

We believe that social networks and social network models offer huge potential to both volunteers and those that involve and work with them. The sheer numbers of people that actively engage with these networks on a daily basis offer significant opportunities for recruitment and their apparent ease of use offers opportunities for volunteer managers and other staff to easily network with each other and provide peer support.

- We will deliver 9 training seminars across England for staff of volunteering support services and Volunteer Managers on the use of social network services to support volunteering during 2009, and during 2010 we will deliver 9 master classes on this
- Work with Impetus to develop a case for support for the use of social network services to support volunteering
- Prepare and publish a detailed case study on Impetus' experience as they start to use social network services to support volunteering
- Seek to identify/develop and promote/publish further case studies from volunteer involving organisations and volunteering support services on their use of social network services²
- Prepare and publish a detailed case study of the developments we funded and that are being piloted on the Association of Volunteer Managers' website
- We will update this guidance note with any additional learning and publish this online

² If your organisation is using one or more social network services to support volunteering and wish to be involved in this activity, please contact jamie@redfoundation.org