

Modernising Volunteering National Support Service

Briefing: Volunteering and social networks

Overview

The introduction and subsequent growth of online social networking has represented one of the biggest social developments of the past 5 years, affecting the way the way that millions of people in the UK and across the globe communicate and interact with each other. From MySpace to Friendster, from Bebo to Facebook the chances are that either you or someone you know has a profile on one of these networks. We are now beginning to see the introduction of bespoke networks as businesses begin to exploit the potential of social networking models to engage with their customers.

But what does this have to do with volunteering? Facebook is increasingly being used by charities and other not for profits to recruit, engage and regularly communicate with donors and other supporters. In addition there are many groups and campaigns that are being driven by individuals with a common interest to address a community issue, often without any organisational infrastructure. The sheer mass of people regularly using social networks to express their interests and passions represents an enormous potential to get them involved in a range of volunteering activities.

Brief introduction to online social networks in the UK

Online social networks are essentially peer to peer networks in which people with similar interests or connections are able to interact with each other via the internet.

The networks provide a more dynamic way for people to interact than email or discussion boards in that they enable them to showcase their hobbies, interests or achievements in a multi media environment, and provide easy ways to find and interact with friends, family or people with similar interests.

Unlike traditional websites, content for social networks is mainly generated and published by the community, from sharing wedding videos and pictures of nights out with friends, to broadcasting corporate achievements or publishing a daily blog, millions of people are now using these platforms to regularly inform each other about their everyday lives.

Social networks first appeared online in the mid 1990s, although the technical platforms that drove them were not as sophisticated as today, the essential functionality of enabling individuals to create personal profiles, have friends lists and communicate with other people with similar interests, was all there. However, these sites were not profitable, were probably ahead of their time and did not survive.

Friends Reunited – a site that enabled former classmates from every school in the country to reconnect with each other - became the first network to hit the main stream in 2003, and since then networks such as MySpace, Facebook, Bebo, Twitter and YouTube, have established themselves as popular brands.

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 (National Office of Statistics 2007), this figure looks set to continue to rise.

Third sector use of social networks

There are growing numbers of charities and other voluntary organisations that are starting to use online social networks to engage with donors and supporters.

These include a small number of organisations that are using some networks – in particular Facebook and MySpace – to recruit and engage with volunteers. For example staff and volunteers at national environmental charity BTCV, actively use Facebook to showcase their work and provide peer support and motivation. National youth charity YouthNet UK uses Facebook to support and communicate with its growing team of virtual volunteers.

In addition there are small number of bespoke social networks that have been established to support social and community needs, both driven by volunteers and by organisations, for example UnLtdWorld (www.unltdworld.com) run by the UnLtd Foundation for Social Entrepreneurs to provide an online environment for people setting up social enterprises.

However little is so far known of the range and extent of these activities and networks and whether those that are currently engaged are benefitting from using these networks to recruit and engage with volunteers.

What the Modernising Volunteering National Support Service plans to do

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.

However, little is known about current practice and whether individuals and organisations that are using social networks are benefitting in a material way. It is therefore difficult to provide support and encourage wider use of these networks or look at bespoke developments.

By March 2009 we will therefore:

- Seek to gain an understanding of the emerging development of the role, value and use of online social networks and social network approaches

- Identify existing exemplars of good practice in the use of social networks
- Pilot a bespoke social network model for volunteer managers, in partnership with the Association of Volunteer Managers
- Prepare a publication that examines these issues in greater depth including case studies, good practice guidelines and recommendations for further action.

Based on this year's work we will pilot identified new ways of support and promote exemplars of current activity in order that social networks and social networking approaches can be utilised for volunteering.

How you can participate in this work

We would welcome your input, you can:

- Complete our online survey at www.improvingsupport.org.uk/volunteering on the 'get involved' page by 8th January 2009
- Let us know what you are already doing by emailing us at nss@redfoundation.org or calling on 0845 299 7162 and choosing option 2
- Sign up for the Modernising Volunteering National Support Service newsletter by emailing volunteering.nss@volunteeringengland.org

We look forward to hearing from you.

Modernising Volunteering National Support Service is a Capacity Builders funded programme to give support providers the resources, evidence and good practice they need to develop front line services – led by Volunteering England, in partnership with v, Red Foundation, CSV and the Nationwide Foundation. More information about this strand of work and how to get involved can be found www.improvingsupport.org.uk/volunteering