<u>Paper</u>: **The Social Media Presence of Non-profit Organizations**

Abstract

Social media technologies have the potential to be powerful knowledge sharing and community building tools for both corporate and non-profit interests. This pilot study explores the social media presence of a group of forty-six Alberta-based non-profit organizations (NPOs) in this information rich space. In this paper we look at the pattern of presence of NPOs using social media and relationships with staffing structures.

Résumé

Les médias sociaux ont la capacité d'être de puissants outils de partage de la connaissance et de rassemblement communautaire pour les organisations à but lucratif et sans but lucratif. Cette étude pilote explore la présence dans les médias sociaux d'un groupe de quarante-six organisations sans but lucratif (OSBL) albertaines dans cet environnement riche en information. La communication portera sur les modèles de présence des OSBL dans les médias sociaux et les liens avec les structures organisationnelles.

Introduction

In the last five years the adoption of social media applications has exploded among diverse communities of Internet users (Ostrow, 2010). Social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook, blogs, RSS, and wikis (Hansen et al., 2011; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010) are now a part of most Internet users' day to day communication (Boyd & Ellison, 2007) and a large number of organizations (e.g., public and academic libraries) have joined these online communities to stay connected to the public and members. These services can be powerful tools for information distribution, sharing, and creation and have an important role to play in the future of knowledge management (KM) theory and practice. Successful KM projects need to carefully consider the needs and activities of their users (Shaw & Edwards, 2005) and implement tools that take advantage of the power of social media. One organizational context where traditionally corporate information management practices such as KM are being adopted is in the non-profit sector where organizations often work with high levels of knowledge capital and large groups of employees and volunteers.

Social Media and the Non-profit Sector

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content." This is a general definition and pertains to a broad range of digital tools (e.g., social networking, blogs, wikis, social tagging, and

bookmarking, etc.) (Hansen et al., 2011) but the key shared factor is that users are able to interact with digital tools and content and may author their own responses and opinions.

NPOs tend to exhibit a highly heterogeneous mix of organizational structures but they do have some basic commonalities including a level of formal organization (e.g., a registered tax number), separation from governments, a non-profit and self-governing structure, and some degree of voluntary participation (Salamon & Anheier, 1992). NPOs are not focused on generating profit by outperforming competitors but are in competition for peoples' attention and money (Gregory and Rathi, 2008) placing a greater emphasis on effective knowledge dissemination with information ideally flowing inexorably outwards into broader social contexts and reaching wider audiences. Effective NPOs must manage their knowledge in a meaningful way (Lemieux and Dalkir, 2006) for effective sharing of information with the general public for the benefit of the society. This is where the power of social media can be a game changer within this community.

One of the reasons the use of social media is appealing to NPOs are the opportunities for building online and real world social networks. While some online social networks strive to represent real-world social groups, others have formed as ways of connecting people with similar interests who may never have met in real life (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Reaching a broad audience with relevant information and providing a way to interact with volunteers directly in a cyclical knowledge sharing and formalizing environment has been an elusive goal for this group. Both international and local (large and small) NPOs aim to harness the social networking aspect of social media because it allows for direct contact with individuals interested in getting involved on-line, off-line, or both, with the organization's activities. Social media provide NPOs with an opportunity to create a dynamic online presence and potentially increase their brand awareness with limited resources while still remaining connected to members, volunteers, and the public on a personal level (Rowley, 2010). Opening up easy lines of communication with the public and engaging one on one with individual followers affords the kind of true grassroots community building that is so highly sought after in this sector.

Social media and non-profit expert Beth Kanter argues that we do not yet have an adequate collection of non-profit case studies that share real-world social media strategies' success stories and cautionary tales (2008, Jan 13). Little is known about how NPOs can use social media successfully to further their goals beyond anecdotal information because the success of these projects is very difficult to measure; there are very few useful metrics to measure public engagement and knowledge transfer. Michael Wu argues that "fan count is only the most superficial characterization of engagement, because it says nothing about the fans' subsequent action and their interactions" (as cited in Askanase, 2011). Getting at this kind of information is very difficult and something many non-profit managers strive for.

The Study: Objectives and Design

This pilot study explores the social media presence of a diverse group of non-profit organizations, the impact of staffing structure, and the level of activity of these organizations on

social media. This is the first stage of a larger research project addressing the use of social media within non-profit and voluntary sector user communities.

A sample set of forty-six Alberta-based NPOs who are members of a coalition of voluntary sector organizations were selected for this study. This group was chosen because they represent a real world network of NPOs that are highly diverse in their organizational structures, size, funding models, and activities, and because secondary self-reported data was available to describe staff demographics for this group. The original group of sixty-five organizations that make up this coalition was narrowed by selecting only groups that had reported complete staffing demographic data and who have an online presence of at minimum a website for their organization. Organizations with incomplete data were removed for clarity and completeness of results.

This project combined the use of secondary demographic data with a primary investigation of the social media presence of the sample NPOs. A grounded theory approach was utilized to develop a content analysis rubric of the categories of social media used and the activity level for these services. The official and publicly accessible social media accounts of these NPOs were compared with demographic staffing data to determine who among this sample group is using social media, which services are being utilized by this community, and to determine how frequently these services are being updated. The analysis of the social media sites was conducted in July of 2011 and looked at the most recent four months of activity, or the date of the most recent activity if longer than four months.

Findings

This pilot study has shown that there is a level of interest in using social media within this non-profit community and that the majority of organizations (32 out of 46 organizations) use some form of social media as compared to 14 out 46 organizations that did not use social media tools in any form. Of the 32 NPOs that used social media 20 organizations used between 1 and 3 different services (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) and only three NPOs used six or more services. We questioned whether there was a correlation between the use of social media and the number of paid employees and/or the number of volunteer workers in each organization. Based on our current sample size we cannot state a conclusive correlation between them, however there were a few interesting observations made based on this data set. Of the 32 organizations that maintain a social media presence, 22 employ one or more paid employees as compared to 7 of 14 organizations that did not maintain a social media presence. Similarly, at least 26 organizations that have one or more volunteers maintain a social media presence as compared to 10 organizations that have one or more volunteers but have no social media presence. The anecdotal evidence, in absence of a statistically significant sample size, suggests that the combined strength of paid employees and volunteers may lead to increased social media presence in the form of more frequent posts from the organization as well as sustained dialogue with followers or friends within these social media networks. This suggests a complexity of the relationship between the size of the NPOs and their use of social media tools. This finding will be statistically analyzed in the future study that will include a larger sample size.

Our analysis also shows that this sample of NPOs seek a streamlined approach to social media with most groups supporting a presence on between one and three social media services. For example, 27 and 24 organizations maintain accounts on the most popular social networking sites; Facebook and Twitter respectively. Accounts on both Facebook and Twitter were maintained by 23 of the organizations. These two most popular social media services also had the most frequent updates across all organizations with 22 of 27 Facebook users and 17 of 24 Twitter updating at least once per week. Twitter users had a slightly higher rate of infrequent updates with 8 of 24 organizations updating less than once per week while Facebook accounts in this group showed 5 of 27 users updating infrequently to very infrequently. There was no pattern to the frequency of updates across social media accounts within organizations with some groups updating frequently on all accounts while others neglect one over another. This is an interesting finding because, anecdotally, NPOs often struggle with deciding which services to join to avoiding over committing to too many and diluting the quality of their social media presence (Kanter, 2008, Jan 13; 2008, Feb 5; Kanter & Fine, 2010). Despite a large number of different social media tools available, this community of users tends to focus on a small set of most commonly used social media services. This pilot study is the first phase of a future larger project and the detailed results from this research will be shared in the conference presentation.

In conclusion, this study finds that the size of NGOs in this sample group may not have a tremendous impact on the selection of social media tools or how often they are updated but shows that these social media services are used by organizations of all sizes with varying resources to support their work. This can provide smaller NPOs the same kind of access as larger and better funded organizations to the benefits that can be derived from the use of social media tools with the goal of community engagement, information sharing, and organization building.

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