



## A Low-Tech Guide to High-Tech Communication

by Yee Won Chong

**A FEW YEARS AGO**, the word “communication” in the nonprofit world meant reaching out through the press—TV, radio stations, and newspapers. Today, nonprofits are increasingly aware that communication occurs in a lot more places than the press. More and more, the electronic venue is the medium of choice for telling the world why your organization exists and how people can join you in being part of change that matters.

There are two main reasons for this trend. First, nonprofits have started to embrace the importance of communication in furthering our causes and begun to adopt the practices for doing so more common to for-profits, such as marketing, branding, and public relations.

Second, the rapid growth of Web 2.0 over the last decade has made it easier for people to share information and interact with each other through the World Wide Web. Consumers share ratings across the globe for movies, hotel rooms, even hiking trails. Friends create Web communities through social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace. Blogs cost next to nothing to post and can reach thousands of people. Web 2.0 has left the old, static World Wide Web in the dust.

### (High-Tech) Communication Amplifies Your Message for Fundraising

In her book, *BrandRaising: How NonProfits Raise Visibility and Money Through Smart Communication*, Sarah Durham explains that nonprofits communicate for three goals: fundraising, outreach, and advocacy, with the audiences for these goals often overlapping. The key is how to reach those goals and those audiences most efficiently and effectively.

Attend any fundraising training and you will hear that fundraising is about relationship-building and that the best way to build relationships is in person (or on the phone). Of course, no organization has the time for personal contact with every donor, and some donors may not want the in-person interaction. Others may live too far away to make such relations feasible. Communicating in print is one option. Print and electronic newsletters, for example, are great ways to update your donors about your programs, organizational changes, and progress on what you said you were going to do. It’s basic accountability, letting donors know that their investments are being put to good use, and it increases the chances for more donations in the future.

But the print medium is still mostly a one-way interaction. High-tech communication technology opens up two-way interactions between you and your current and prospective donors. New technology enables you to deliver news to your donors regularly and inexpensively and, equally important, allows donors to communicate with you.

Jumping on the tech bandwagon is cheaper and easier than it used to be, but it can still seem overwhelming. In this article, I take you step-by-step through the basic building blocks, how to combine their features to amplify your message, and how

share your web page, articles, and blog entries with friends via email or social networking sites like Facebook

### **Email Service Provider (ESP)**

Your “enews” emails serve as an update and announcement tool that also direct people back to your website. To get started, send enews once a month.

Do not pack your emails with tons of information—people read the top of the email, then scan as they scroll down or sometimes skip the rest completely. Provide short and excit-

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to use them to increase your fundraising potential. (For more on specific software programs, see “Software to Support Your Fundraising” by Laura Quinn in this issue.)

### **Three Building Blocks to Get You Started**

There are three basic building blocks you will need to get started with electronic communications:

- A website Content Management System (CMS)
- An Email Service Provider (ESP), also known as broadcast email tools and email blast service
- A Social Networking website (the best site to get you going is Facebook)

### **Website Content Management System (CMS)**

Your website is “information central” about you, and your homepage gives the first impression about your organization. It’s important to present your most current work and news on your homepage and keep it updated frequently—at least monthly. Your homepage should also show clear ways for people to join your email list, donate to your work, and become your fan on Facebook.

Navigating your website should be a breeze for the visitor, so it’s important to organize your information well and label the sections clearly (see sidebar, Organizing Your Website Content, on page 8). Remember to always include your website address (URL) in your printed materials—you want people to get used to going to your website.

Turn your website into an interactive platform by adding comment fields to each of your enews articles and blog entries. Have your web programmer and designer include add-on tools, such as ShareThis and AddThis, to make it easier for people to

ing blurbs and images of two to three articles that will grab the reader’s attention and give them a click-through option to read the full articles on your website. Enews targeted to donors should say clearly how their investments in your work made these program successes possible. If you use your emails to announce events, provide links for more information to the Calendar section of your website and include an online RSVP form there.

E-alerts tend to express a sense of urgency, so send them when you have pressing news and actions, such as when you want your readers to sign an online petition, call their legislators, or give money to an emergency need.

E-appeals can be added to your offline fundraising campaigns, for example by sending an e-appeal as a follow-up to your mail appeal. You can also have an electronic-only fundraising campaign by sending a series of e-appeals. With a series, you can update people on your fundraising progress, but be careful not to overdo it. Three to four emails are enough. All your e-appeals should direct people to the Donate page on your website.

### **Social Networking**

Facebook is the most commonly used social networking site in the U.S. Millions of people are using it to connect to their friends locally as well as throughout the country and the world. Increasingly, the for-profit and nonprofit sectors are using Facebook to build their brand and interact with consumers and constituencies. If you do not already have a presence on Facebook, now is a great time to start by signing up at Facebook.com.

To start you will need to sign up for Facebook as an individual. Next, you will need to create a presence for your organiza-

tion on Facebook. For this, there are two tools that often baffle people—“Page” and “Group.”

Page is the best Facebook tool to build your organizational presence because it allows you as an organization to interact with your “fans.” Page is to an organization what your personal page is to you. It is a good tool to direct people to your website and blog, so be sure to post a link to your Page wall whenever you publish something new on your website, like an article or blog entry. Page is indexed by search engines, so people can find your Page in Google. To create a Page, go to <http://www.facebook.com/home.php#!/pages/create.php>.

In Group the organization acts as a backdrop for individual members to interact with each other, with Group membership limited to 5,000. Group is not indexed by search engines. It is best used for specific set of people, such as an alumni group or book club. To create a Group, go to <http://www.facebook.com/home.php#!/groups/create.php>.

Facebook has two other tools that are also useful for nonprofits: “Causes” and “Events.” Causes allow people to donate

to your organization. You can have multiple Causes linked to your Page, a different cause for each fundraising campaign. For example, Oxfam has a Page that lists updates about all of their work and a Cause specifically to raise funds to respond to the earthquake in Haiti. Events allow individuals to invite their friends to events you organize. This is a great tool to spread the word about fundraising benefits and house parties.

I recommend Facebook because it is a thriving virtual community, costs nothing to use, and has a sophisticated infrastructure already built for you. It is an easy way to tap into the social networks of your fans in a way that you couldn’t a few years ago, allowing your fans to spread the word about you and also to fundraise for you.

### **Making Your Building Blocks Work for You**

Here is how my organization, Western States Center—a group that builds leadership for the progressive movement in the West—puts these building blocks to work. Our program, Uniting Communities, supports organizations of color to be

## **ORGANIZING YOUR WEBSITE CONTENT**

Find a website programmer and designer who understand your vision and the brand aesthetics that represent your organization. Check with other nonprofits whose websites you like to see who they use. You may need to talk to a few website designers to find one who is in alignment with what you want. Once you have someone to work with, you can start organizing the content for your new website. A typical nonprofit website has the following sections:

- 1. About Us.** Your history, mission and vision, staff and board information, and contact information.
- 2. Program(s).** Depending on the nature of your work you may have more than one section (or one web page) for your programs.
- 3. Get Involved and Donate Now.** Online petitions and volunteer recruitment, plus a way for visitors to your site to donate to your work.
- 4. News.** Press coverage of your work or issues you cover, including excerpts from your electronic newsletters and annual reports.
- 5. Resources.** Helpful links and useful documents.
- 6. Calendar.** Particularly useful if you organize many events or need to let people know of actions you are taking.

### **Top Content Management System Functions and Features**

Here are some features I highly recommend:

#### **1. Form Generation**

Form generation allows you to create simple forms right

on your website. Forms can be used to accept RSVPs to an event, collect feedback, and create simple surveys.

#### **2. Donate Link**

Most online donations will come through your website. People should be able to donate right on your site instead of printing a form from your site or being redirected to a third-party website. Sign up for an online donation service that allows you to embed a donation form in your website to maintain the overall design of your site.

#### **3. Mailing List Sign-up**

A sign-up option can appear in several pages in your website and can be linked directly to your Email Service Provider to allow people to be added automatically to your list.

#### **4. Search Box**

A search box makes it easy for people to find what they are looking for within your website.

#### **5. Blog**

A successful blog, perhaps relating information about your ongoing work or its issues, has to have frequent posts—at least once or twice a month. A blog is a great vehicle to post something quickly, between your electronic and print newsletters. It’s also a great way to add personal stories and voices. In addition to having your staff contribute to a blog, invite board members, program participants, volunteers, and allies to blog for you.

#### **6. Comment**

A place where readers can leave comments about your articles and blog posts.

## TIPS ON GETTING STARTED

Here are some tips to make using high-tech tools less overwhelming.

### 1. Explore, test, learn, and repeat

The Web 2.0 world is very dynamic. New sites with fancy tools and features are developed every day. It's true that what is "hot" today may not be "hot" next week. The reverse is true, too. Remember how Yahoo ruled the search engine world? Google entered the arena in the late 1990s and not only now dominates the search engine world but has entered territories no one imagined a little search engine could. There is no final frontier. Be curious and fearless!

### 2. Be OK with mistakes.

Making mistakes is part of the lesson. Perhaps your first attempts to drive traffic to your homepage haven't resulted in many hits. Look around at what other nonprofit sites are doing and learn from your own mistakes and their successes.

### 3. Be prepared to deal with negative feedback, but don't let it stop you.

User-generated content means that people who don't like what you do may write negative comments about you in the public sphere, such as on Facebook or as a blog comment. Don't ignore them, but don't let them stop you from entering this world. Talk to others about how they have handled similar situations. And evaluate the feedback—you may need to do things differently based on it. People who give constructive criticism are invested in your organization's success.

### 4. Start with small goals

Set small goals at first. You don't have to begin with

a comprehensive communications plan for your organization. Small goals can be reaching 500 Facebook fans in two months or moving from quarterly enews to monthly enews. But once you are familiar with these basic building blocks and how they relate to each other, you should work on a communications plan.

### 5. Don't create it then ignore it.

In the online world your website is the first impression a visitor gets of your organization, so make sure the look is fresh and the content is updated frequently. If you don't, you will defeat the purpose of using these building blocks to communicate about your work. Create a schedule for updating your website, posting information on Facebook, and sending eNewsletters.

### 6. Use the content that you already have...

Use some of the content that you've already created for your printed materials such as newsletters, annual reports, and appeal letters. Add more timely information and a bit of pizzazz like slideshows, video, or audio clips.

### 7. ...but avoid using content from a grant proposal.

Grant proposals are formal, filled with jargon, and loaded with details. Web and email writing has to be more concise and usually more informal. Most people are scanning for information, so you need to grab their attention. Short and to the point works.

### 8. Start with a centralized model

While the fundraising staff should be the central coordinator for this work, that doesn't mean that they have to write all the content. Spread out the writing to other staff. But make sure that someone is tracking the writing assignments and posting the updates.

more inclusive of LGBTQ members of their communities and helps the organizations take a public stand on LGBTQ equality.

Earlier this year we launched *Uniting Communities: The Toolkit*, a handbook with exercises for groups to start the conversation about how LGBTQ issues connect to their current work and case studies that look at strategies for jump-starting these difficult conversations. We wanted the Toolkit to get as much visibility as possible, so we engaged all our communication building blocks.

**Homepage links to the program page.** Right before launching the Toolkit we updated our website home page with a short blurb that links to the *Uniting Communities* program page.

**Program page links to downloadable Toolkit samples and order form.** At the *Uniting Communities* program page, visitors can read about the history and purpose of *Uniting Com-*

*munities* and the Toolkit. That page includes links to download the Toolkit's table of contents and a sample exercise and to order the Toolkit. When someone downloads the sample, we capture their name, email address, and organization.

**Email follow-up.** We send email updates to people who have downloaded the Toolkit samples describing how others are using the Toolkit, asking them to join our monthly enews list, and giving them an opportunity to donate to the project.

**Enews links to our website.** We announced the release of the Toolkit in our monthly enews, with a catchy blurb with a link to the full article on our website. This drives further traffic to our website, with its links to the *Uniting Communities* page.

**Links from our Facebook Page.** We also used our Facebook Page to drive traffic to our website by posting a link and an announcement about the Toolkit article on our Facebook Wall.

Fans can give a “thumbs ups” showing their enthusiasm for the Toolkit, write comments on our Facebook Page about the Toolkit, and even repost on the link to their Page, where their Friends can see this feedback in their Facebook News Feed. The more fans take these actions the more our story appears in News Feeds, expanding the number of people reading about it and being encouraged to become Fans of Western States Center. In the days following the posting on our Page, we saw a higher than usual increase in new Fans.

**Blogging about the Toolkit.** We have invited guest writers to blog on our website about their experiences with the Toolkit. To help drive traffic to the blog, we have posted it to our Facebook page.

**In-person promotion.** In person and at conferences and other events, we hand out flyers about the Toolkit that direct people to the homepage where the Toolkit blurb appears prominently.

**House party fundraising.** We are planning several house parties to fundraise for the Toolkit. House party hosts are sending invitations by postal mail and email. The printed invitation

includes an RSVP card and reply device (invitees who can't attend can still send in a donation). The printed invitation also includes our homepage URL, where there's a link to an online RSVP form for guests who prefer to RSVP online.

The email invitation also has a link to the online RSVP form and to our donation page, with a prompt for people to give even if they cannot come to the event. The RSVP form links to the Toolkit article and the Uniting Communities program page so people can easily get more information.

Some hosts will also use Facebook's Events feature to invite their friends. This feature has the capacity to reach not only the hosts' friends but also friends of their friends. Invitees can RSVP right on Events and they can see who has been invited, who is coming, and who isn't. They can also write on the Events “Wall” about their excitement for the event. Hosts can include a link to an online donation page. You can set the privacy to “closed” or “secret” if you do not want just anyone on Facebook to know about the event. However, don't put too much stock in Facebook for generating turnout for an event. Although Facebook is a convenient tool to reach lots of people, most of your turnout will come from reminder calls, personal emails, and face-to-face contact.

As you can see, there are simple ways to link your print and electronic building blocks so that you can amplify your message. The more you use the same tools your supporters are using, the more likely that your message will reach and engage your audience (see sidebar, Tips on Getting Started, on page 9).

### It Takes Building Blocks to Make a Hill

There is a saying in my home country of Malaysia: “Sedikit-sedikit lama-lama jadi bukit,” which means “Little by little, over time you have a hill.” These building blocks interlink to form a strong structure. You can think of the ways you currently communicate also as building blocks: print newsletters, annual reports, and brochures. By adding new blocks—website, email, Facebook—your blocks build a hill. If you remove one block, the structural integrity of your hill will be compromised. Your hill might still stand, but take out another building block and it might start to crumble. A building block on its own is tiny. Stack them together and you have a solid hill from which you can broadcast your messages more widely. ■

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