

Twitter for Social Good

Microblogging offers a way for nonprofits to communicate with supporters and the public quickly and easily via short messages containing text, links or other content such as photos.

Among the various microblogging services that exist, Twitter (www.twitter.com) has pulled ahead as the most popular, with more than three million users sending upwards of one million messages per day (from: <http://press.oreilly.com/pub/pr/2143>).

While many Twitter users are individuals posting about events in their daily lives, “First sip of coffee. Gooood morning!” or “Avoid Rt. 95 north of DC. Traffic is at a standstill,” Twitter users also converse about culture, politics, sports, technology and more. It has attracted thought leaders, company CEOs, non-profits

and politicians (http://www.readwriteweb.com/archives/sumimize_twitter_trends.php) who can, in an instant, reach out and “talk” to thousands (and who knows, someday maybe millions) of people.

Some of these folks are using Twitter to do much more than converse. They are finding ways to put the tool to work in fundraising and grassroots organizing. Two shining examples of Twitter trailblazers are Tweetsgiving and Twitter Vote Report. Let’s take a closer look at these efforts and see what we can learn from them.

Twitter as a Fundraising Tool: Tweetsgiving

In 140 characters or less.

Epic Change rose more than \$11,000 in 48 hours through “Tweetsgiving.” Funds will re-build and expand a school in Tanzania.

The full story.

When Stacey Monk left her for-profit career in 2007 to co-found Epic Change (www.epicchange.org), she was time rich but funding poor. To get the fledgling organization off the ground, she and co-founder Sanjay Patel turned to new media to help them do more with less.

Her positive experiences using new media tools like YouTube, Flickr, and Facebook encouraged her to embrace Twitter, where she posts regularly, follows more than 1,200 people and is being followed by roughly the same number. It was on Twitter where Stacey met Avi Kaplan, a recent college grad and intern who has helped Epic Change with projects like setting up their Facebook profile.

Stacey and Avi began to plan the first ever Tweetsgiving campaign six days before Thanksgiving. Their goal? To raise \$10,000 in 48 hours for a school in Tanzania. The duo rapidly gathered friends and colleagues to provide graphic design and strategy pro bono support. On November 25, Tweetsgiving officially launched (although they had been talking it up and twittering among friends and colleagues) with this tweet:

What are YOU grateful for? Happy #TweetsGiving!
<http://tinyurl.com/4thanks> 11:44 AM Nov 25th from web

The post linked users to a branded website, <http://tweetsgiving.org/> where users could learn more about the campaign and make a donation.

Within two hours, Epic Change had \$1500 in donations. By the campaign’s end on Thanksgiving Day, 336 people had contributed more than \$11,000, surpassing the \$10,000 Tweetsgiving goal.

In a blog post about the campaign (<http://epicchange.org/blog/2008/12/05/why-tweetsgiving-worked-imho/>), Stacey reports that Tweetsgiving did more than raise money. “Only 6 out of 360 donors (< 2%) were previous donors to our cause, and I believe I’ve added about 500 new Twitter followers since Tweetsgiving began,” she writes. “Over 98% of donors were people who had never before donated to Epic Change.”

How Can I Do This?

O.K. Sounds pretty good, right? Tweetsgiving demonstrated that Twitter can be a successful fundraising and list/donor building tool. To replicate Stacey’s success, follow these pointers:

1. **First things first: Build a network on Twitter.** Stacey, Avi, and the others who worked on Tweetsgiving were experienced Twitter users by the time they launched the campaign. They were active in the community and “authentic” voices. Had they jumped into Twitter one day and asked followers for donations the next, you can imagine their appeal would have fallen flat. In short, there are no shortcuts. Incorporating Twitter into your fundraising toolbox demands time and a thoughtful, sincere approach.
2. **Capitalize on Twitter’s strengths.** Tweetsgiving had a short-term, timely appeal, which played on one of Twitter’s greatest strengths—passing news very, very fast. Had the campaign had a longer time span, it’s questionable how many people would have donated immediately or told their friends and family about the campaign. In fact, most donations to the campaign were made in the first and last six hours (see: <http://epicchange.org/blog/2008/12/05/why-tweetsgiving-worked-imho/>)

3. **Keep it light.** Stacey and her team kept Tweetsgiving fun and positive. In her blog, Stacey writes, “[The campaign] was spread by gratitude and hope. If we’d gone negative, I don’t believe the campaign would have been nearly as effective.” Here at Free Range, we can vouch for Stacey’s approach. We’ve worked with many nonprofits to produce and deliver online movies to their members. For these movies to go “viral” and be passed from person to person, it’s critical that they be received like a gift that the recipient enjoys so much, he/she in turn wants to pass it on to someone else. Think of tweets the same way.
4. **Nothing ventured, nothing gained.** Epic Change is reaping the benefits of being an agile, new nonprofit that is willing to take risks with social media. While everyday there is new information about nonprofits using Twitter, chances are the concept of microblogging will be new to many (if not most) folks in your organization. Discovering how the tool can best serve you is a matter of planning for sure, but also of the willingness to try something that may succeed or may fail. Open yourself up to this risk, and you might find extraordinary results as Epic Change did.

Read Stacey and Avi’s complete reflections of the campaign here: <http://epicchange.org/blog/2008/12/05/why-tweetsgiving-worked-imho/> and here: <http://meshugavi.com/2008/12/the-story-beyond-the-stats-in-tweetsgiving>.

Twitter as a Grassroots Organizing Tool

In 140 characters or less.

Bloggers, techies, nonprofits and NPR rallied to develop the first Twitter based election-monitoring system for the 2008 presidential election.

The full story.

Since the start of this century, blogs, camera phones, small video recorders, and now Twitter have made it easy for every day citizens to report news. As “citizen journalism” has grown, so has a debate over its pros and cons. When it comes to Twitter, some praise the technology for getting news out faster than any major news source. Last July, when an earthquake hit California, it was tweeted 9 minutes before the AP ran the story (http://blog.twitter.com/2008_07_01_archive.html). Others, however, voice concern that today’s era of dispersed journalism removes critical editing and contextualization that seasoned journalists and major news outlets provide to news consumers.

Twitter Vote Report (<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=96349881>) is a fantastic example of traditional journalists and citizens transcending this debate, bringing their respective strengths together to offer better reporting services.

The story begins with Nancy Scola and Allison Fine, two writers and social media experts, who wrote a blog post calling for Twitter to help combat Election Day voting problems (Read the call at: http://www.techpresident.com/blog/entry/31105/twitter_an_antidote_to_election_day_voting_problems.)

“For far too long,” they wrote, “The job of election protection has fallen largely to lawyers schooled in election law. But there’s an opportunity before us right now and through Election Day for thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of citizens to identify and rectify voting problems in real time.”

Inspired by the call, a nationwide “code jam” session was organized for October 24. (See the jam: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGStmHaf2bM>.) Together, volunteers produced Twitter Vote Report (<http://blog.twittervotereport.com/>), which was ready by Election Day.

During the election, the site kept a running feed of people's experiences voting, featured a Google map displaying live location-based reports, and kept a tally of the longest wait times.

By the end of the election, Twitter Vote Report had collected more than 12,500 individual voter reports. About 9,000 came through Twitter. The rest were delivered via text message, an iPhone application and traditional telephone calls.

Volunteers and NPR worked to review the incoming data, verify reports, and identify trends. NPR then included this information in their election reporting.

How Can I Do This?

Twitter Vote Report is a fantastic demonstration of Twitter's ability to aggregate information from large numbers of people scattered across large geographical areas.

To get insight into what the campaign achieved and what lessons it can teach us about Twitter-based organizing, I spoke with Beka Economopoulos, Founder and Program Director for Not An Alternative (<http://www.notanalternative.net/wordpress/>), a nonprofit political arts organization in Brooklyn, which provided the working space for the Twitter Vote Report code jam session.

Of the many lessons to learn, are these points:

1. **Meet your users where they are. Don't assume Twitter knowledge or limit yourself to this one tool.** Although Twitter is rapidly gaining name recognition, I can almost guarantee it is still an anomaly to most of your members. Beka and the other Twitter Vote Report organizers recognized this. Although they kept Twitter in the name of their campaign, in reality, they gave people four ways to report problems on election day: Twitter, sending SMS text messages, an iPhone application, and two phone lines; one automated and one with human operators. This approach positioned the campaign to involve young, technically savvy voters, and others who may not have felt comfortable using Twitter but wanted to get involved.
2. **Get a little help from your friends.** Twitter Vote Report was produced by a coalition of many partners. As you consider ideas for a campaign involving Twitter, seek help from Twitter enthusiasts. If you have a great idea that promises to bring something new to life or change the way we do something using Twitter, you might find volunteers willing to help you for free in exchange for the experience they gain.

The Twitter Vote Report folks also made it very easy for friends, family, and colleagues to spread the word about the campaign. The site housed press release and email language, concise points about the service, and a collection of downloadable badges that linked to the campaign.
3. **Don't forget people.** Tools like Twitter are only part of a campaign. The other part is people. Twitter Vote Report used Twitter, SMS, an iPhone application and phone calls to collect data. But it took people to sweep the data and make sense of it. Twitter Vote Report partners included seasoned voter protection groups, the media and developers. Together, these groups worked to ensure that aggregated messages were a means of achieving a much greater goal: making our election system better.
4. **Apply learning from one effort to future efforts and measure success with a long-term lens.** Twitter, while relatively new, is, as Beka describes, the product of "Accumulated knowledge and momentum that goes very far back." Even if Twitter Vote Report had not generated thousands of reports, it still would have been a success. It demonstrated what a few dedicated volunteers can achieve in only a few weeks. It reminded us that new media and traditional media can benefit from a symbiotic working relationship. Look for these lessons and the actual code generated from Twitter Vote Report to be built upon in future elections.

For those of you reading who decide to experiment with Twitter: Some of you will enjoy great success right away. Some of you will not, but don't be discouraged. Instead reflect on your efforts and learn lessons from them, improving your Twitter strategy as you go.

Good Twitter Resources

- The Twitter Blog: <http://blog.twitter.com/>
- Beth's Blog: How Nonprofits Can Use Social Media: http://beth.typepad.com/beths_blog/
- Twitter and the Micro-Messaging Revolution: (pricey, but a great primer) <http://radar.oreilly.com/research/twitter-report.html>

Twitter & Fundraising

- A Glimpse at the Future of Twitter Fundraising: <http://www.blogpi.net/a-glimpse-at-the-future-of-twitter-fundraising>
- Is it time for fundraisers to take Twitter more seriously? <http://givinginadigitalworld.wordpress.com/2008/12/05/is-it-time-for-fundraisers-to-take-twitter-more-seriously/>

Twitter as a News Feed

- Twitter saga ends in jailed translator going free: <http://www.cnn.com/2008/TECH/07/10/maree.freed/index.html?iref=newssearch>
- Mumbai news fished from Twitter's rapids: <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2008/12/mumbai-news-fis.html>
- Twitter and the China earthquake: http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/technology/2008/05/twitter_and_the_china_earthqua.html

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