

Chapter 29

Enhancing Organizational Capacity Through the Use of Social Media

Rui Sun

California State University – Dominguez Hills, USA

Hugo Asencio

California State University – Dominguez Hills, USA

Julie Reid

California State University – Dominguez Hills, USA & American Lung Association in Arizona, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines whether and how the use of social media and government funding may enhance the capacity of a nonprofit organization, help fulfill its mission, and facilitate its strategic planning process. Both the organizational capacity and strategic planning literature emphasize the importance of leadership, management, collaboration, and fiscal, technical resources. Using a case study of the American Lung Association in Arizona (ALAA), this chapter finds that government grants and strategic use of social media in nonprofit organizations can lead to increased public awareness of the issues related to their organizational missions, greater fundraising capacity, and enhanced collaboration among their employees.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social media technologies (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) in recent years offers nonprofit organizations access to inexpensive technology that can be incorporated into their organizational systems. This is particularly important for small and medium-sized nonprofits that often lack the funds for acquiring and strategically using technology to increase their organizational capacity, which is fundamental for ensuring effectiveness within nonprofit organizations (Eisinger, 2002). As part of the planning process, nonprofit leaders and managers can be strategic about the use of technology within their organizations.

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Strategically using technology can greatly help nonprofits increase their organizational capacity for fulfilling their missions (Hackler & Saxton, 2007).

Also, the government, through the grants it awards, can play a key role in promoting organizational capacity within nonprofit organizations. Federal, state and local governments may fund nonprofit organizations for the delivery of public services. Often times, they restrict how the funds can be used and monitor the expenses and the performance of the programs (Finkler, Purtell, Calabrese, & Smith, 2013; “How to find grants,” n.d.). In these grants, government grantors may require some specific planning, marketing, and reporting efforts of the organization.

Despite these theoretical discussions, empirical evidence is generally lacking on this topic especially in small and medium-sized nonprofit organizations. Using the case of the American Lung Association in Arizona (ALAA), this chapter seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) Does the use of social media affect the capacity of a nonprofit organization to fulfill its mission? (2) Do government grants affect organizational capacity in any way? The purpose of the study is twofold: first, to find empirical evidence on the role of social media and government funding in organizational capacity building; second, if the evidence is present, to develop a theoretical framework explaining how the use of social media technologies and government grants can help nonprofit organizations build their capacity for accomplishing their goals and fulfilling their missions.

This chapter proceeds as follows. Section two outlines the theoretical framework through which the case of the ALAA is analyzed. Section three describes the data and method used in the study. Section four discusses and analyzes the case of the ALAA, emphasizing the organization’s background, experience with social media utilization, challenges and opportunities in using social media, and solutions and outcomes of its social media use. The chapter concludes with recommendations for practitioners and suggested directions for future research.

CONCEPTUAL/THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Media Use in the Nonprofit Sector

The increased adoption of social media or Web 2.0 technologies (hereafter: social media) in recent years has dramatically shaped the way individuals and organizations communicate. Tim O’Reilly (2005), who is recognized as the creator of the concept Web 2.0 writes:

Web 2.0 is the network as platform, spanning all connected devices; Web 2.0 applications are those that make the most of the intrinsic advantages of that platform: delivering software as a continually-updated service that gets better the more people use it, consuming and remixing data from multiple sources, including individual users, while providing their own data and services in a form that allows remixing by others, creating network effects through an “architecture of participation,” and going beyond the page metaphor of Web 1.0 to deliver rich user experiences (para. 1).

Compared to Web 1.0 technologies used for the passive sharing of content (e.g., traditional web pages), social media allow users to create, update, and exchange content, while at the same time facilitating the development of social networks, all in an interactive way. Examples of social media technologies include: collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), blogs, content communities (e.g., YouTube, Instagram),

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