

Friend Raising: How the United Way of Chester County Uses Social Media to Drive Change

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This case study investigates the use of social media by the United Way of Chester County (UWCC) and how social media technologies were implemented within its distinctive organizational structure. UWCC is part of an international network of United Way organizations. Each organization is independently governed; however, each operates within the same loosely configured network. This case study investigates the ways in which social media are utilized in this context and to what degree they contribute to UWCC's organizational capacity, the effectiveness of its particular strategy relative to its size and structure, and identifies significant challenges and opportunities posed by the integration of social media into UWCC's organizational operations. UWCC's gradual integration of social media into its organizational operations and the challenges it has encountered related to resistance from organizational leadership and staff, the implementation of new policies and modes of communication, resource allocation, and the effective creation and distribution of social media content are discussed. Recommendations for the continued development of UWCC's social media strategy are offered, which include integrating social media into the organization's strategic plan and budget, cultivating a social culture, creating a formal social media assessment plan, and utilizing social media to enhance relationships with other local United Ways in Southeast Pennsylvania.

INTRODUCTION

This case study investigates the use of social media by the United Way of Chester County (UWCC) and how social media technologies are being implemented within its distinctive organizational structure. UWCC is part of an international network of United Way organizations. Each organization is independently governed; however, each operates within the same loosely configured network. This case study investigates the ways in which social media have utilized in this context and to what degree it contributes to UWCC's organizational capacity, the effectiveness of its strategy relative to its size and structure, and identifies significant challenges and opportunities posed by the integration of social media into UWCC's organizational operations. UWCC's gradual integration of social media into its organizational operations and the challenges it has encountered related to resistance from organizational leadership and staff, the implementation of new policies and modes of communication, resource allocation, and the effective creation and distribution of social media content are discussed. Recommendations for the continued development of UWCC's social media strategy are offered and include: integrating social media into the organization's strategic plan and budget, cultivating a social culture, creating a formal social media assessment plan, and utilizing social media to enhance relationships with other local United Ways in Southeast Pennsylvania.

Since 2010, UWCC has slowly incorporated several social media platforms into its marketing and communications strategy. Despite initial resistance from the organization's Board of Directors, UWCC has successfully leveraged social media to enhance its reach and impact within Chester County, Pennsylvania. Like many nonprofit organizations, UWCC's experience with social media has been a rewarding, yet challenging endeavor. Organization leadership and staff have encountered challenges related to buy-in from hesitant stakeholders, trial and error implementation of new policies and modes of communication, resource allocation, and the effective creation and distribution of social media content. The organization's gradual integration of social media technologies and related cultural changes has proven instrumental in its relatively smooth transition to a "networked" nonprofit. A discussion of this transition is prefaced by an explanation of the theoretical framework guiding the case study and is followed by recommendations relating to the continued development of UWCC's social media strategy.

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