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2013 Technology Guide

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Nonprofits Race to Get Ahead of the Explosion in Small Screens

By Nicole Wallace

When Mercy Housing set out to make its Web site easy to navigate on smartphones and tablets, its top priority was to remake the donation page before the critical holiday fundraising season opened.

And with good reason, it turns out. People using mobile devices accounted for 18 percent of the organization's year-end online gifts—nearly one out of every five online contributions—compared with just 2 percent during the same time just a year earlier.

If the organization hadn't made it simpler for those donors to give, the group might have lost out on some of the gifts, says Gail Bransteitter, who oversees communications at Mercy Housing, a Denver-based group. "It's really important to have a mobile-friendly donation page to keep donors from bouncing off your page."

The rise of mobile is no longer an event looming on a distant horizon. It's here.

For the last two years, smartphones have outsold desktop computers. In 2012 Americans read e-mail on their phones more frequently than on their computers. Mobile devices account for almost a quarter of all Web traffic—and the share of traffic from smartphones and tablets is expected to overtake traffic from desktops sometime this year or next.

Option to Pledge

Meanwhile, many charities are devising a game plan to adjust their fundraising and communications to handle the explosion of small screens.

A growing number of nonprofit organizations are designing e-mail messages to be easy to read and respond to on a smartphone.

Some organizations have created streamlined mobile sites that deliver information supporters are likely to want when they're on the go, while others are retooling their sites to adapt automatically to devices of any type or size.

Another sign of the growing importance nonprofits place on the new medium: A handful of organizations, including the Humane Society of the United States and World Vision, have hired mobile directors.

But Katya Andresen, chief operating officer at Network for Good, questions whether nonprofits have done enough.

Network for Good conducted a survey of the charities that use its online-fundraising services and found that the share of Web traffic to those organizations' Web sites from smartphones and tablets ranged from 10 to 35 percent.

"You may say, 'Oh, we're not doing mobile yet,' but unfortunately you may be, in that people are coming and trying to do things from their mobile device," Ms. Andresen says. "The train has sort of left the station, and we need to figure out what to do."

This month Network for Good plans to provide mobile donation pages to each of its charity clients. People who click "donate now" from a smartphone will see a simple page asking whether they want to contribute today or pledge.

Those who give now can enter their donation and credit-card information in a format that works easily on a small screen.

People who choose to pledge will be asked to do just two things: say how much they want to give and provide an e-mail address. Network for Good will then send an e-mail with a link they can use to complete their donation later on a computer or tablet.

Giving supporters the option to pledge is important because of the way people use smartphones, says Ms. Andresen.

Often, she says, people use their phones for short periods of time when they're "out and about," maybe waiting for someone at a restaurant or standing in line at the bank.

"We're easily interrupted," she says. "So offering some kind of intermediate step that doesn't involve doing a whole transaction is a good idea."

Smartphone Giving

Nonprofits will need to try a lot of approaches to figure out the best way to raise money from people using mobile devices, says Craig Oldham, vice president for digital engagement at the American Red Cross.

The Red Cross has a mobile Web site with a carefully designed donation page, but the percentage of people who start but fail to complete the donation process is still significantly higher for people using smartphones than for those using desktop computers.

He attributes the difference to the inherent awkwardness of the transaction: "You're trying to pull out your wallet and type in the credit-card numbers and then flip the card over—and you have your phone in your hand."

Mr. Oldham and others in the nonprofit world are watching with interest as companies like PayPal, Google, and Visa invest millions to develop mobile-payment systems.

"At some point in the future, that combination of mobile-friendly Web sites and donation forms, plus making it easy to actually give, will benefit the sector," says Steve MacLaughlin, director of the Idea Lab at Blackbaud, a fundraising-software company.

Unified Approach

As mobile efforts grow more important, experts caution charities not to consider them separately from other technology.

Because, for example, so many people check Facebook and Twitter using their smartphones, it's important to think about the interplay between mobile and social media.

During election season, the Audubon Society and ConservAmerica ran a campaign, "Because Conservation Doesn't Have a Party," that asked supporters to sign an online pledge urging leaders to stop making the environment a political issue.

The organizations promoted the campaign heavily on social media, and 20 percent of the people who clicked through from Facebook did so using smartphones and tablets.

Lengthy Process

When Amnesty International set out to make its Web site easy to navigate on a mobile device, the organization started with its advocacy and donation forms, in large part because of its big social-media following and the likelihood many of its followers are using smartphones.

"We wanted to make sure that what we are asking folks to do is something that they can easily do," says Shiloh Stark, the organization's interim head of engagement media.

Making the transition to mobile is a process, and nonprofit organizations shouldn't underestimate the time and effort it will take to link their new mobile solutions to existing systems, like their fundraising database, says Lisa Dabney, development director at the Atlanta Ballet.

Last spring the ballet unveiled a new Web site designed to adapt automatically to devices of any type or size.

But it's still difficult for someone using a smartphone to buy a ticket to a performance.

The software that connects the Web site to the ballet's fundraising and ticketing system isn't mobile-friendly, something the organization expects to change when it upgrades to the next version of the software this summer.

Says Ms. Dabney: "Right now only the true, die-hard Atlanta Ballet patrons who already know their customer number, who've already navigated from the desktop, are the ones who may on occasion use their cellphones or their tablets."

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Charities Take Different Paths to Attracting Mobile Viewers

By Nicole Wallace

Breastcancer.org got lots more attention from supporters once it made its Web site easy to read and maneuver on a smartphone.

Before the redesign, 94 percent of people who visited the site on a smartphone left after seeing just one page. Now only 5 percent do.

"That was a big win," says Michele McLaughlin Zwiebel, the charity's director of programs and content.

The breast-cancer group used a combination of approaches to make its site easy to navigate. It created a separate mobile site, designed specifically for smartphones and small tablets, which provides information about breast cancer and treatment options.

But for the site's active discussion boards, the organization adopted a practice called responsive design, which allows a single Web site to display material in different ways based on the size of the viewer's screen.

For example, a site might appear as a single column or hide some content when viewed on a smartphone but have a two- or three-column layout when viewed on a desktop computer or a large tablet.

Like the breast-cancer group, more charities want to make their Web sites mobile-friendly, but they are divided on the best approach.

More Devices

A growing number of nonprofits are choosing responsive design, despite its greater complexity and almost always higher price tag.

The proliferation of mobile devices is driving the increased interest. Even two years ago, it was still a “two-device world”—smartphones and desktops, says Jordan Silton, a technology consultant at Search Discovery who works with the Atlanta Ballet.

But since then the landscape has changed, with the introduction of tablets in several sizes and mobile phones with larger screens. “What the responsive-design layout has allowed us to do is create a Web site that accommodates not only big desktop computers and small mobile phones but everything in between,” he says.

Responsive design was appealing to Mercy Housing, in Denver, because with a limited number of employees focused on technology, it would have been difficult to maintain and update two sites, says Gail Bransteitter, who oversees communications.

Simple Is Best

But not everyone is convinced that responsive design is the way to go.

“A lot of times people are betting big on responsive design because it sounds like a magical pill that will solve everyone’s problems,” says John Overy, director of mobile technology at World Vision. “But it’s harder to implement than a lot of people believe.”

World Vision has a mobile Web site that features material the group thinks visitors are most likely to want. People use tablets and smartphones very differently, so it doesn’t make sense to provide the same information on both devices, says Mr. Overy.

He says someone on a tablet is likely to be relaxing on the couch at night, checking e-mail and exploring the Web, while a person using a mobile phone tends to be more task-oriented and on the go.

“You’re probably waiting for your child while they’re at soccer practice or you’re in line,” says Mr. Overy. “It tends to be much more snackable.”

The American Cancer Society also has a separate mobile site. David Balcom, managing director of digital platforms, worries that responsive design loads more slowly because the file has to include the coding for three screen sizes.

Mr. Balcom says he designs for the mobile user first, something he thinks benefits everyone who comes to the organization’s site.

“It trains us to be simple: What’s the most amount of information we can fit into a small screen?” he says.

“Oftentimes that promotes conversations of simplicity and of elegance. And I think that is a great way to start, rather than start with a giant screen and then have to throw things out for mobile.

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Text Messages Help Charity Raise Money

By Nicole Wallace

A Chicago marathon gave World Vision the chance to use text messaging to fire up runners and increase fundraising at the same time.

Of the more than 1,000 people who signed up to run the marathon to raise money for the charity, roughly 200 got lively, inspiring text messages every week for nearly five months. Those runners were 25 percent more likely to make it to the starting line, and they raised 50 percent more money.

Pleased with the results, the group has expanded the text program to athletes preparing for other races.

Authentic and Accessible

The messages were successful largely because they were authentic and accessible, says John Overy, the organization's director of mobile technology. The tone and voice of the texts were very different from the international-development group's typical communications, he says: "The voice was very easygoing. It was very informal."

Several of the weekly messages were designed to elicit a response.

The first one read, "Need a little running inspiration today? Take 30 seconds to watch this. Then text back and tell us why you run." It included a link to a video that showed past participants talking about their love of the sport and why they support World Vision.

A message later in the series said, "Truth time: How many runs have you completed this week? Text us back with a number."

When runners answered, they got responses tailored to the number of runs they had completed. For example, the message for someone who hadn't run at all was "Training is tough, but you can do it. Jump back into the training plan, and take it one day at a time."

The messages were carefully timed to go out around lunchtime on Fridays.

"It makes a big difference," says Mr. Overy. "Do you receive it on a Friday afternoon during lunchtime when you're ready to head into the weekend? It's going to be much more effective than if you send it on a Monday morning when your life is crazy."

Like many large organizations that respond to natural disasters, World Vision first used text messages in an entirely different way. It asked people to send text messages to contribute \$5 and \$10 gifts to help with immediate needs.

But now the charity focuses much more on text messaging as a way to deepen ties with supporters, says Mr. Overy.

“Someone once told me, ‘John, you’re like the guy who asks the girl to marry him on the first date.’ With text-to-give, you just instantly ask someone to give you money,” he says. “What you really should do is engage with them.”

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A Pop-Art App Teaches People About Andy Warhol

By Nicole Wallace

The Andy Warhol Museum has built a mobile application that lets anyone create a Pop masterpiece—and gain a deeper understanding about how Warhol approached his art.

The Warhol: DIY Pop app guides people through the process the artist undertook to create silk-screen prints of icons like Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and Elvis Presley. They can crop, expose, and paint the images to create their own digital silkscreens and then share the results through e-mail, Twitter, or Facebook.

Educators and curators explain each step of silk-screening, says Joshua Jeffery, manager of digital engagement at the Pittsburgh museum: “We explain what that process is and how Andy would do it.”

Not Easy for Everyone

Response to the application—which is available for iPhone and iPad and has been downloaded more than 100,000 times—has been mixed.

The museum’s research found that the app gets rave reviews from museumgoers, art lovers, and educators. But people who were expecting a simple photo-editing tool are often disappointed, saying things like “I don’t know how to make it look cool.”

But sometimes even the frustrations that critics voice suggest the app is doing its job: teaching the public about the hard work that went into Mr. Warhol’s silkscreens.

“Some folks have actually come back and said, ‘You know, it took me a couple of times, and I finally got something I really like,’” says Mr. Jeffery. “It allows them to say, ‘Oh, you know that Marilyn Monroe silk-screen print that’s on the wall? A lot of thought went into that.’”

Putting the Collection Online

With the high cost of developing apps and the significant percentage that are abandoned soon after being downloaded, nonprofit technology experts debate when it makes sense for charities to build applications and when a mobile-friendly Web site is more appropriate.

While the museum plans to continue creating apps, it is increasingly using responsive Web design to build exhibition Web sites that automatically adapt to the device a visitor is using. Mr. Jeffery says the use of responsive design will change the way the museum determines when an app is the way to go.

This spring, for example, the museum will use responsive design for a new section of its Web site that will provide information about all of the artworks in its collection, which rules out the need to build a collections app.

“Putting the collection online in the way that we’re going to do it will allow us to kill two birds with one stone,” Mr. Jeffery says. “We can have it on the Web for a desktop audience, but we’re also making it more accessible on mobile devices.”

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Apps Help Red Cross Provide Lifesaving Advice

By Nicole Wallace

When officials at the American Red Cross look at smartphones, they see a powerful survival tool for anyone faced with a natural disaster.

In June, the organization started to unveil a series of apps to help people get ready for earthquakes, hurricanes, wildfires, and now tornadoes. It has also released a first-aid application. Together the apps have been

downloaded more than 2 million times, with more than 65 million page views and more than 10 million weather alerts issued.

“The overarching goal is to save a person’s life or a family’s life,” says Dom Tolli, a vice president in the organization’s preparedness, health, and safety-services department.

Making Clear What Matters Most

The disaster apps are designed to provide clear information about the most important steps to take to prepare for an emergency as well as other things users can do if they have time. “What we used to do at the Red Cross is give people a lot of information, not prioritize it, and they had to fish through it,” says Mr. Tolli.

People can test themselves on the material to earn badges in areas such as bleeding or hurricane preparedness and then share their achievement on Facebook or Twitter.

“It surprised us how many people were testing themselves and sending those badges out,” says Mr. Tolli, who notes that users’ social-media posts help promote the apps to people who may not have been aware of them.

The Red Cross relied on its local chapters for valuable advice. Because tornadoes often accompany hurricanes, for example, chapters in the Southeast suggested including information on both in the hurricane app.

The apps also allow users to create disaster plans that reside on mobile devices so users can access them even if they don’t have cell service.

Says Mr. Tolli: “That’s 2 million relationships we have now where people carry the Red Cross in their pocket.”

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Depressed Teenagers Can Call or Text for Help

By Nicole Wallace

When a coalition in northeastern Minnesota developed a program to prevent young people from committing suicide, it wanted to be sure teenagers would feel comfortable using the service. So it set up text messaging as well as phone lines. And the text-message option is far more popular.

Some months the TXT4LIFE hotline logs 400 text sessions, compared with 12 to 15 phone calls for the entire state. In 2012, the hotline handled 3,842 text sessions with 1,985 young people asking for help.

“We think the reason they don’t call the crisis line is that it’s a little too intimate for them to hear somebody’s voice on the other end,” says Mark Kuppe, chief executive of Canvas Health, one of the nonprofits involved in the project.

When people hear a voice, he says, they automatically make assumptions about what kind of person they’re talking to. “In this, you can picture whoever you want to be the person helping you on the other side, because all you’re getting back is a text.”

Asking Direct Questions

For crisis counselors, the emotional distance of text messaging often means they need to ask direct questions early in the conversation to determine whether the caller is about to try to end his or her life. If the caller is suicidal, counselors attempt to gauge whether he or she has a plan and the means to carry it out.

“We’re asking those questions pretty specifically and then looking at their responses,” says Mr. Kuppe, “because we can’t pick up on any kind of tone inflection, even though people try to use characters or try to use capitals to do inflection in texting.”

The average text session lasts 50 minutes, but with the delays between messages, that translates into 20 to 30 minutes of real conversation. Crisis counselors, who type their responses through a sophisticated software program on a desktop computer, can handle as many as three text-message conversations at a time.

Counselors generally sit in a group as they answer calls and texts and can consult with one another about the best approach to take.

Locating People in Distress

Mobile technology also comes into play as a way to get help to the most troubled callers.

The hotline works hand-in-hand with police and emergency dispatchers. Of the 469 text sessions last year in which the callers identified themselves as suicidal, 50 required emergency interventions. In several cases when callers wouldn't say where they were, the police were able to use the GPS coordinates of the callers' cellphones to determine their location.

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App Seeks to Protect Women From Dangerous Social Situations

By Nicole Wallace

Sometimes preventing rape and other hazards that women face can be as simple as giving someone a graceful way to leave an uncomfortable encounter.

Circle of Six, a mobile application created by an Oakland, Calif., charity, helps young women keep potentially dangerous situations from escalating. The application lets people select six of their most trusted, reliable friends from their contact list. Then with one click, they can send out preprogrammed text messages to those friends that include a map with their precise location, using the phone's GPS capabilities.

Clicking the car icon sends out a "come and get me" message, while the telephone icon issues a request that someone call to give her an excuse to leave a situation that doesn't feel right. An emergency button connects the user to emergency services.

"Let's say you go to a party and maybe you've imbibed a little too much and you can't find a ride home," says Deb Levine, executive director of ISIS, the organization that created the app. "You can actually send a text

message to those six people in your circle with your GPS location that then lets them know you need a ride home.”

Focus on the Audience

Figuring out the right tool to achieve a specific goal can be tricky and requires that nonprofits know their audience, says Ms. Levine. Because, she says, Circle of Six was designed for college-age women, who are likely to own smartphones, developing an app made sense. But that isn't always the case.

“When you're thinking about mobile, a lot of nonprofits lose their heads,” says Ms. Levine. “They get so enamored of the technology itself that they forget a lot of what they know works.”

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Bird-Counting App Helps Charity Collect Data

By Nicole Wallace

The National Audubon Society is adding a decidedly modern twist to the bird counts it's held for the last 113 years.

This spring the charity's Hummingbirds at Home project features a mobile application and a Web site designed for smartphones to let participants log sightings of the endangered birds as they occur.

“Mobile is going to make it more immediate and more relevant,” says Jessica Green, Audubon's vice president for engagement. “They'll be on a hike or a picnic, they'll see a hummingbird, and they can immediately record it in the app.”

A Model for Other Groups

The organization hopes that the observations will offer clues to how global warming, changes in vegetation, and even backyard bird feeders are affecting the birds.

“We're going to use that to shape our policy and our advocacy efforts to make sure that hummingbirds don't disappear completely,” Ms. Green says.

The effort offers a model to other groups that are looking for opportunities to use mobile technology to collect information related to their causes.

Reaching New Supporters

The hummingbird app isn't Audubon's first foray into mobile applications. A series of Audubon field guides has been converted into apps through a partnership with a company called NatureShare. The guides, which nature lovers can use to identify birds, trees, wildflowers, butterflies, and animals, have been downloaded more than 500,000 times.

"They let us reach a new audience," says Ms. Green, "an audience that might not currently be donors or members of Audubon but are still really involved and engaged with birding and conservation."

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U.N. Foundation Offers a Challenge and a Lesson on Global Health

By Scott Westcott

If people could get as addicted to playing games about global health threats as they are to playing Angry Birds, the United Nations Foundation thinks it would have a much better shot at rallying crusaders to its cause.

The foundation is putting that theory to the test as thousands of people have been playing in the Global Good Challenge, a game that encourages smartphone users and others to learn about topics such as the number of children overseas who do not have access to vaccinations.

The organization asked Plyfe, a company that makes games for mobile devices, to incorporate creative ways to teach people about its work around the world.

Players complete "challenges" by watching videos about a United Nations Foundation-supported program, answering trivia questions, or liking its page on Facebook.

The more challenges people complete, the more opportunities they have to win a prize, such as a chance to meet the pop star Lady Gaga or get tickets to the MTV Video Music Awards show.

“The challenges were set up in a way that steadily increased participants’ awareness of an issue,” says Mateen Aini, co-founder of Plyfe. “They would consume content or watch a video and then take a challenge. Through that, they become more vested and get a better understanding why it is important to do something like send mosquito nets to Africa.”

Gathering E-Mail Addresses

Since the foundation started the Global Good Challenge in September, people have completed more than 60,000 challenges and the charity has gathered e-mail addresses from 82 percent of those who have participated. It uses those addresses to send e-mails encouraging supporters to push global health causes but could eventually use them for fundraising appeals.

The games don’t just get players interested in global health issues but also enlist them to spread the word about the cause.

Succeeding in many of the challenges requires people to take action on Twitter, Facebook, and other social networks.

No One-Size-Fits-All

Aaron Sherinian, the foundation’s vice president for communications, says the organization recognizes that it needs to continue to develop new ideas for smartphones and tablets to stay connected to the people it wants to reach.

But, he emphasizes, mobile technology is only one piece of a larger digital strategy.

“There is not a one-size-fits-all app,” he says. “People download different apps for different reasons and use them in different ways. You have to continuously adapt in terms of how you are engaging supporters.”

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Mobile Donors Respond to Traditional-Style Appeals on the Radio

By Raymund Flandez

Avoid Distractions

When Fisher House Foundation began making text-message appeals three years ago, it thought it had a winning approach to getting small, spontaneous gifts.

The charity, which helps military service members, asked professional and college sports teams to show public-service announcements on their scoreboards during games to prompt spectators to text donations.

The idea of reaching tens of thousands of captive sports fans with a simple appeal seemed fail-proof. But the messages didn't register with people more interested in cheering on their favorite team.

The group raised less than \$1,000.

Veterans Day Fundraising

Rather than giving up on the idea, the organization decided to try a different approach.

Fisher House persuaded Clear Channel Communications, a company that owns more than 1,200 radio stations, to broadcast live and recorded audio messages from military veterans speaking about the help they had received from the charity. Following the messages, talk-show hosts and disc jockeys would encourage their listeners to text donations to the organization.

At first, Derek Donovan, the organization's vice president, says he wasn't optimistic that the effort would work any better than the sports-arena appeals.

But he was quickly proved wrong.

Its first radio solicitations—timed to coincide with Veterans Day 2010—prompted nearly 9,000 people to contribute more than \$86,000, or nearly one third of all of the money the charity raised during a campaign that also included telephone and online fundraising.

Since then, more than 800 Clear Channel stations have helped raise more than \$400,000 through text appeals. One station in Richmond, Va., raises more than \$100,000 annually for the group.

A Phone Nearby

The radio appeals succeeded, Mr. Donovan says, because “the audiences on radio are more likely to have a phone handy and be able to make that donation while they’re listening—at home, at work, wherever they may be.” (Fisher House has asked the radio stations to urge listeners not to text donations while they’re driving.)

Mr. Donovan says another lesson is that the personal touch matters: The radio hosts know how to reach out to listeners and gain their trust, he says. “We’re glad our message resonates with people on the radio,” he says. “We’re just grateful that the station managers and the radio hosts like what we do; they’re the ones that really make it happen.”