

Social Profit: Why Non-profit organisations should harness the power of social media to increase engagement

Tracey Clark
Curtin University
GPO Box U1987
Perth WA 6845
traceyclark87@hotmail.com

Abstract

In 2015, Queensland woman Rochelle Courtenay read an online article about women living in poverty being forced to use toilet paper to manage their periods. Today, Ms Courtney is the public face of a not for profit organisation with a nationwide reach and over 4000 volunteers. In a market flooded by non-profit organisations, each competing for the same funds and volunteers, Ms. Courtenay was able to successfully build a charity organisation with incredible reach and engagement. This paper will argue that the key to Ms Courtenay's success in establishing Share the Dignity was in her smart use of social media to engage her audience.

Keywords

Social media, social networking, non-profit, charity, volunteers, web 2.0

The not for profit sector in Australia and around the world is expanding rapidly, making it ever-more complicated for donors to work out where they want to spend their time and money. In Australia alone, there are more than 56,000 registered charities, and this number grows by approximately 4 percent each year (Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission, 2019). Despite the fact that this number has exploded, there is evidence of a promising subset of non-profits raising large amounts of money through online engagement (Kanter & fine, 2010). Goldkind & McNutt argue that social media and related online tools are allowing non-profit social service organisations to engage with their audience, mobilise volunteers, and drive policy change (2014, p. 56).

In 2015, Queensland woman Rochelle Courtenay read an online article about women living in poverty being forced to use toilet paper to manage their periods. Today, Ms Courtney is the public face of a not for profit organisation with a nationwide reach and over 4000 volunteers. In a market flooded by non-profit

organisations, each competing for the same funds and volunteers, how was it that Ms. Courtenay was able to build her charity so successfully? This paper will argue that the key to Ms Courtenay's success in establishing Share the Dignity was in her smart use of social media to engage her audience. Through an analysis of the current research, and using Share the Dignity as an exemplar, this paper will discuss the ways in which other non-profit organisations can achieve similar success if they harness the power of social media.

Sharing for Dignity

In only four years, Share the Dignity has grown from a single collection drive of sanitary items in Sandgate, Australia, to a nationwide organisation that has so far collected more than 1.7 million items with an impressive equivalent dollar value of more than \$15 million (R. Courtenay, personal communication, March 2019). The organisation now holds collection drives (Dignity Drives) for pads and tampons in April and August, and a Christmas collection of used handbags filled with sanitary items and toiletries in November (It's in the Bag) (How we Help – Our Charitable Activities, 2019). Their most recent project, known as the Pinkbox Dignity Vending Machine, has seen more than 100 specially made vending machines installed in schools, domestic violence shelters, homelessness centres and public spaces to distribute free 'Period Packs', each containing two sanitary pads and four tampons ('Dignity Vending Machines, 2019). They are currently in talks with the education department of each state and territory to begin rolling the machines out in some of the most disadvantaged schools across Australia (R. Courtenay, personal communication, March 2019). They have established corporate partnerships with big names like Woolworths, Bunnings Warehouse and Canon ('Corporate Partnerships', 2019), and more than 4000 active volunteers are registered with the organisation ('Volunteer', 2019).

In 2018, Ms. Courtenay took her push to end period poverty in a new direction, and launched an intense and ultimately successful online campaign to remove the Goods and Services Tax (GST) from the sale of sanitary items in Australia. The application of the tax on sanitary items had been the subject of controversy since it was introduced in 2000, as it effectively classified the products as 'luxury items'. In an interview with ABC news in 2018, Rochelle called out the tax as archaic, and asked "'why are condoms, lubricants and nicotine patches all untaxed, yet female items that we don't have a choice in are taxed?" (Courtenay in

Sweeny, 2018). After approaching then Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull at a press event in the Northern Territory in January 2018, Ms. Courtenay harnessed her social media following to launch an online petition to 'axe the tax' (R. Courtenay, personal communication, March 2019). Within a month, there were 100,000 names attached to the petition, and by the end of 2018, both major parties had backed her proposal to remove the tax, passing an amendment to the GST act that would change the classification of sanitary items from taxable luxury items to untaxed medical supplies ('Axe the Tax Period', 2018). Ms. Courtenay claimed the victory to be the proudest moment of her life (Courtenay, 2018).

The Share the Dignity story is one of success, but the methods used to reach the level of engagement required to make such a difference are quite different to traditional modes of communication in the non-profit sector. With the exception of newspaper articles written to publicise their initiatives, Share the Dignity have never formally advertised their cause in mainstream media outlets such as television or radio. Instead, Ms. Courtenay relied on people sharing her message on their social media channels, and focused on building an engaged following across Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (R. Courtenay, personal communication, March 2019). At the time of writing, the organisation now has more than 164,000 Facebook followers (@sharethedignity), 32,700 Instagram fans (@sharethedignityaustralia), and 2,674 followers on Twitter (@sharingdignity). Quinton argues that "having a well thought out social media policy can be immensely powerful for a charity's brand," (2012, p. 28), and it appears that Share the Dignity are well on their way to harnessing such power.

The Rise of Social Media

Prior to the rise in popularity of the World Wide Web as a communication tool, the main way in which people communicated through media was by using public broadcasting such as television or radio, which allowed for anyone with access to be the audience and meaning that "the broadcaster had no direct control over who makes up their audience," (Miller et. al. 2016, p. 2). With the arrival of the Internet and the Web as a communication tool, this began to change. Today, the number of people who use online communication tools rises every day (Kaplin & Ward, 2013, p. 6), and using social media has become a normal part of everyday life (Gazibara et. al. 2013, p. 120).

Social media is a term broadly used to describe the technologies that support user generated interactions and networking (Goldkind & McNutt, 2014, p. 58). Social media platforms are said to facilitate the spread of content through “social interaction between individuals, groups and organisations using web-based technologies,” (Smith & Gallicano, 2015, p. 83). These technologies, Miller et. al. posit, have provided the potential for a level of communication and interaction that previously did not exist (2016, p.1).

Obar et. al. describes social media as “a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0. and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content,” (2012, p. 7). The most popular social media platforms are Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, LinkedIn, and Snapchat (Nielsen, 2017), and 3.4 billion people actively use social media in 2019, a figure that is up 9 percent from the previous year (Kemp, 2019). Gazibara et. al. state that every social media platform is different, and people usually use more than one at a time, (2013, p.119).

Despite concerns around online privacy which were prevalent in the media during 2018 (see Ho, 2018; Huffman, 2018), Facebook continues to be the third most visited website in the world, and active monthly users continue to rise year after year, with a growth of 9.6 percent in 2018 (Kemp, 2019). Closely following Facebook in the popularity stakes are Instagram (894.9 million users) and Twitter (250.8 million users), (Kemp, 2019). The popularity of social media channels is now such that people are spending more time on Facebook and other social networking sites than on Google, and these sites dominate the top five websites ranked by traffic, (Kaplin & Ward, 2013, pp. 1-2).

Social media has been credited with changing the way that societies pass around information across the world (Gazibara et. al., 2013, p. 119). Whilst it’s been noted that the Internet as a whole has played a role in advocacy in the non-profit sector since as early as 1997 (Obar et. al. 2012), social media presents new communication opportunities that are dramatically different to those offered in the Web 1.0 era (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012, p. 337).

Kanter and Fine stress that social media is “not a fad or a trend,” and warn that as the use of social media becomes more ingrained in everyday life, it is fast becoming something that shapes “the way that young people think, connect, engage, and work together,” (2010, p. 5). According to Kanter and Fine, “social media

builds social capital,” and organisations that “build, nurture, strengthen and use this capital,” are better positioned to reap the most benefit from social media as a communication tool (Kanter & Fine, 2010, p. 33). Integrating communication strategies in the non-profit sector that utilise this connectivity will ensure that organisations can continue to reach these young audiences.

Social Media for Change

According to the Nielsen Social Media Report, “social media is one of the biggest opportunities that companies across industries have to connect directly to consumers,” (Nielsen, 2017, p.2), and engagement on social media platforms has been connected to positive public-organisation relationships (Smith & Gallicano, 2015). As previously noted, the non-profit sector is burgeoning, and standing out in the field is a challenge for all organisations who hope to be successful.

Lovejoy and Saxton argue that social media can help in this goal, stating that social media has opened great avenues for communication between organisations and the public (2012, p. 338), and subsequently created opportunities for an interactive dialogue that is qualitatively different to that provided by websites alone (p. 339). As users become more engaged with social media, they expect to find the information they are looking for on their social network sites, (Gazibara et. al. 2013, p. 120). Kaplin and Ward argue that to solve the issues that affect society today, a close examination of how the non-profit sector can evolve needs to take place, (2013, p. 201), and as more forms of social media emerge, it becomes more likely that this medium might be the perfect way for non-profit organisations to engage with their followers.

One of the limitations of traditional media outlets such as television or print is the restriction on whose voices are heard, but social media provides opportunities for individuals whose voices were traditionally silenced to be heard (2010, p. 143). It is through these previously unheard voices that non-profits are best able to create empathy with their followers and encourage engagement. The comments section on almost all Facebook and Instagram posts from Share the Dignity seem to reflect this, with recipients of the organisations services often writing about their experience, and others responding empathetically. To further capitalise on this, the organisation features some of the most moving comments in their monthly newsletter – Aunt Flow, with a call to action relating to whatever their current fundraising initiative might be. It should be noted that

menstruation is traditionally a taboo topic in much of society, and although the comment feeds are publicly accessible, many commenters appear to feel quite comfortable sharing details of menstruation that would previously have been hidden from conversation.

In addition to providing a voice to the previously unheard, social media also allows non-profit organisations to mobilise widespread support with very little financial or time outlay (Kanter & Fine, 2010). This was certainly the case with the Share the Dignity campaign to remove the GST from sanitary items; signatures appeared on the online petition rapidly and across every state of Australia in a campaign that have a zero-dollar budget. Kaplin and Ward state that in previous times, “it would have cost organisations so much more time, resources and money to connect directly with people, gather and share stories and resources, mobilise action, and reach people any time, everywhere,” (2013, p. xv).

It is perhaps the power of social media to increase non-profit donations that is most notable though. Kanter and Fine warn that organisations cannot be seen to simply ask for money, “but must establish trust with potential donors first to make fundraising appeals creditable and meaningful to people,” (2010, p. 140). In honour of International Women’s Day in 2019, Share the Dignity put out a call to action for followers to help them raise funds to install sanitary item vending machines into disadvantaged schools in Australia. The campaign featured across the organisation’s social media channels for two months leading up to the event and featured a series of videos that highlighted the plight of girls who do not have access to sanitary items and the effect this has on their education. Each video was less than 40 seconds in length and fit within the guidelines of short and easy to understand messages outline by Kanter and Fine (2010). The campaign ultimately raised over \$100,000, enough to install 10 vending machines.

We’re online, what now?

In this socially connected world, most, if not all, non-profit organisations probably have an online presence of some sort, and in a study by Obar et. al. (2012), all participants noted that they use social media to communicate with the public. However, simply being online is not enough, and organisations need to be smart about how they use the tools presented to them if they want to increase engagement.

Bortree and Seltzer found that almost all advocacy groups in their study felt that having an online presence was enough to facilitate dialogue, but they warn that “these organisations are missing a significant opportunity to build mutually beneficial relationships with stakeholders by failing to effectively utilise the full gambit of dialogic strategies that social networking sites offer,” (2009, p. 318). Lovejoy and Saxton similarly argue that “being on Twitter is not enough – organisations need to know how to use the medium to fully engage stakeholders,” (2012, p. 352).

Non-profit groups need to take a far more hands-on approach and designate someone within the organisation to follow through on social media opportunities by engaging with the followers (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009, p. 319). Kaplin and Ward agree, stating that the importance is in building strong online relationships, (2013, p. 1). Putting the time into building this engagement is not a quick fix, and Kanter and Fine stress that it can take six to eighteen months to build a strong online community of supporters (2010, 139), but when done right the benefits outweigh the time commitment, as demonstrated by the Share the Dignity example.

Kanter and Fine (2010) set out what, in their minds, makes for a successful “networked nonprofit”: Transparency in the form of “annual reports, financial statements and audit reports ... posted online,” (p.135); Simplicity, in the form of “a simple message that is easy to communicate online, particularly on Twitter with its 140 [now 280] character limit,” (p. 136); and Connectivity, in the form of “consistently listening online and sharing and connecting with people on multiple channels,” (p.137). Share the Dignity have successfully utilised each of these steps in their online engagement, which has contributed to their success.

Conclusion

We live in an online world (Kaplin & Ward, p. 2). The average internet user is spending up to three hours a day visiting social media sites (Nielsen, 2017), and the popularity of sites such as Facebook and Instagram continue to grow year on year. It is therefore vital that all organisations find ways to harness this popularity for their own good. For the non-profit sector, where advertising budgets may be small or even non-existent, social media provides a very attractive option indeed, if used effectively. This paper has discussed the ways in which non-profit organisation Share the Dignity has been able to achieve success in their fundraising goals

through the smart use of social media as an engagement tool. The lesson for other organisations is simple; being social media savvy can open up new avenues to connect with donors and volunteers, and could very well be the difference between achieving fundraising targets or becoming lost in the overload of non-profits that donors have to choose between.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ms. Rochelle Courtenay from Share the Dignity for her time and assistance during the writing of this paper.

References

- Australian Charities and Not-for-profit Commission. 2019. 'Are there too many charities in Australia?' Australian Government. Available from <https://www.acnc.gov.au/for-public/understanding-charities/are-there-too-many-charities-australia>
- Axe the tax period,' 2019. Share the Dignity. Available from <https://www.sharethedignity.com.au/axethetax/>
- Bortree, D. S. and Seltzer, T. 2009. 'Dialogic strategies and outcomes: an analysis of environmental advocacy groups' Facebook profiles,' *Public Relations Review*, 35, pp. 317-319.
- 'Corporate partnerships,' 2019. Share the Dignity, available from <https://www.sharethedignity.com.au/corporate-partnerships-csr-australia/>
- Courtenay, R. 2018. 'I helped tear down the tampon tax, I know that the fight is not over,' *The Big Smoke*, The Belford Group, available from <https://thebigsmoke.com.au/2018/10/05/i-helped-tear-down-tampon-tax-know-that-the-fight-is-not-over-tax/>
- 'Dignity vending machines,' 2019. Share the Dignity, available from <https://www.sharethedignity.com.au/dignity-vending-machines/>
- Gazibara, D., Jovanovic, M., and Samardzija, A., 2013. 'Social Media Role in Communication Exchange of International Volunteer Experience', *Central European Conference on Information and Intelligent Systems*, 2013.
- Goldkind, L. and McNutt, J. 2014. 'Social Media and Social Change: Nonprofits and Using Social Media Strategies to Meet Advocacy Goals,' pp. 56-72 in Ariza-Montes, J. and Lucia-Casadement, A. (eds.) *ICT Management in Non-Profit Organizations: United States*: IGI Global.
- Ho, V. 2018. 'Facebook's privacy problems: a roundup,' *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media Limited, available from <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/dec/14/facebook-privacy-problems-roundup>
- How we help - our charitable activities,' 2019. Share the Dignity. <https://www.sharethedignity.com.au/charitable-organisations/>

- Huffman, M. 2018. 'Brittan raises new privacy concerns about Facebook,' Consumer Affairs, Consumers Unified, available from <https://www.consumeraffairs.com/news/britain-raises-new-privacy-concerns-about-facebook-120618.html>
- Kanter, B. and Fine, A. 2010. *The Networked Nonprofit: Connecting with social media to drive change*. United States: John Wiley & Sons.
- Kaplin, A. and Ward, S. 2013. *Social Change Anytime Everywhere: How to Implement Online Multichannel Strategies to Spark Advocacy, Raise Money, and Engage Your Community*. United States: John Wiley & Sons.
- Kemp, S. 2019. 'Digital 2019: Global internet use accelerates,' We are Social, available from <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2019/01/digital-2019-global-internet-use-accelerates>
- Lovejoy, K. and Saxton, D. 2012. 'Information, Community, and Action: How Nonprofit Organizations Use Social Media,' *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17, pp. 337-353, doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2012.01576.x
- Miller, D., Costa, D., Haynes, N. McDonald, T., Nicolescu, R. Sinanan, J., Spyer, J. Venkatraman, S. and Wang, X. 2016. 'What is social media,' pp. 1-8 in *How the World Changed Social Media*. United States: UCL Press.
- Nielsen, 2017. *2016 Nielsen social media report: social studies: a look at the social landscape*. United States. Retrieved from <https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/insights/reports/2017/2016-nielsen-social-media-report.html>
- Obar, J., Zube, P. and Lampe, C. 2012. 'Advocacy 2.0: An Analysis of How Advocacy Groups in the United States Perceive and Use Social Media as Tools for Facilitating Civic Engagement and Collective Action,' *Journal of Information Policy*, 2, pp. 1-25.
- Quinton, G. 2012. 'Charities great and small can use social media,' *Third Sector*, 699, p. 28.
- Smith, B., and Gallicano, T. 2015. 'Terms of engagement: Analyzing public engagement with organizations through social media,' *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 53, pp. 82-90. <https://doi-org.dbgw.lis.curtin.edu.au/10.1016/j.chb.2015.05.060>
- Sweeny, L. 2018. 'Tampon tax to go, with states and territories agreeing to remove GST from sanitary products,' ABC News, Australian Broadcasting Commission, available from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-10-03/tampon-tax-to-go-states-and-territories-agree-to-remove-gst/10332490>
- 'Volunteer,' 2019. Share the Dignity, available from <https://www.sharethedignity.com.au/volunteer/>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.