Investigating the Rationale for Social Media Use by Nashville Nonprofits

by

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Abstract

The advent of social media gave nonprofit organizations the ability to communicate with their audiences in unprecedented ways. Nonprofits were quick to create their own accounts on social media and establish themselves on their chosen platforms. However, the rationale behind this decision is not as simple as initially considered. To understand the rationale, six in-depth interviews were conducted with Nashville-area nonprofit organizations. Then, through a qualitative inductive coding process, the transcripts were analyzed to fully uncover what the rationale behind social media use is. It was discovered that while social media plays an important role in the organizations, the implementation of social media does not align with how social media should be implemented according to foundational public relations theory.

Contents

Introduction

Social media have changed the way organizations communicate with their customers, donors, shareholders, beneficiaries, benefactors, and everyone in between. It is up to the organizations themselves to decide, if, how, and why they utilize the ever-expanding opportunity that is social media. In public relations research, special focus has been placed on nonprofit organizations, particularly regarding social media. And why not? Nonprofit organizations have the most to gain from social media. Afterall, securing money and manpower is a major issue for any nonprofit, and social media accounts are free for everyone and every organization to sign up for. Organizations can simply create an account and assign any number of employees to manage the accounts. Social media are so prolific that over 80% of American adults use Facebook (Perrin and Anderson). It no longer takes a specialist in advertising and marketing to run the platform that is likely to reach hundreds or thousands of people.

For nonprofits who can't afford the services of a professional social media seemed like a dream come true. In fact, it still is in a way. Social media accounts are still free and easy to use. The problem becomes the execution on the platform. It turns out that social media use requires a deft hand to get the most out of it. Public relations research, and particularly the research that happens with nonprofits, focuses on the execution. Academic research of nonprofit social media has been almost entirely focused on whether organizations have not been utilizing two-way symmetric communication—the process of communication that involves the organization and audience interacting with each other—or dialogic principles, which are types of posts that invite a discussion rather than simple information dumps.

It has been important to understand that execution is lacking. Two-way communication and dialogic principles are critical to getting the most out of social media. As Kate Smitko stated, “Strong relationships are what lead to donor engagement...and the participatory culture that grows online as a result of using Twitter can help to initiate and build relationships” (Smitko 633).

Without two-way communication and dialogic principles, social media can become a poor use of time, wasting the precious resources nonprofits so often lack. It would be best to leave social media alone and continue using methods that have already been established and proven to work. Research has often found that nonprofits do not quite make use of two-way communication and dialogic principles. But that is the “how,” and the “how” has taken more than the fair share of the limelight.

For social media usage there is so much more to think about. There is value in taking a step back from the execution. Execution occurs at a point in which the organization has already decided to be on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. In that timeline of decision making, someone decided to first have a social media presence. Someone must have said, “We need to be on social media.” A rationale predicated that decision. A rationale that drives the way social media are used by that organization.

There is a dearth of research that investigates this rationale. When so much of a social media plan relies on this rationale, it seems surprising that there is not much focus on it. Content analysis will provide a lot of useful data, but without understanding the very basis of where the content comes from, implementing changes will not be as impactful as an organization would hope. If a social media plan is a house, the content is the walls, but the rationale is the foundation. If the walls are cracking, start looking at the foundation instead of putting up new drywall. That is what this research does. For six Nashville-area nonprofit organizations, this research looks specifically at the underlying rationale that the organizations have for utilizing social media. Instead of a numbers-based approach, this research focuses on the decision making behind using social media. It considers the human element. The part of the communication process that cannot be quantified.

Research Question

There is an abundance of research that examines the social media use by nonprofits. From content analysis to measuring various metrics, the social media output of nonprofit organizations is under a microscope. However, very little research has taken a step back from the "how" of social media use to answer the "why." This research has taken that step back to investigate that underlying rationale, and poses the question, "What is the rationale of Nashville-area nonprofits use for social media?" By taking a step back and looking at the foundational aspects of social media strategy, a look into an often ignored or forgotten aspect of social media use can be explored. There is so much to explore in the "why" that research beyond nonprofit organizations can utilize. By exploring the rationale for social media use, new research, both professional and academic, can build off this study into less-explored territory.

Literature Review

Two-Way Communication and its Importance to Public Relations

In 1984, James Grunig published his book *Managing Public Relations*. In his book, he lays out the fundamentals that any public relations practitioner should follow and he lists the four models of public relations: press agentry, public information, two-way asymmetric, and two-way symmetric. He defines two-way symmetric as mutual understanding with balanced effects, which contains a feedback loop that depicts the organization receiving feedback from the relevant publics (Grunig 22). He notes that this model is contrary to common communication sender-receiver models, saying, “A symmetric model would not call either person or group that is communicating a source or a receiver. The individuals or groups communicating interact, changing so rapidly from source to receiver and back again that it becomes clumsy to talk about source and receiver” (Grunig 24). More importantly, he describes the role of two-way communication for communication professionals as, “practitioners serve as mediators between organizations and their publics. Their goal is a mutual understanding between organizations and their publics … They usually use theories of communication rather than theories of persuasion” (Grunig 22). The summation of these definitions can be stated in one word: dialogue. Rather than simply being a distributor of information, organizations can and should open dialogue with publics to reach goals and objectives more effectively.

With the theory of two-way communication fully established into public relations practice, the importance of utilizing two-way communication in research can be more thoroughly examined. Of key interest to scholars and professionals alike is the relationship newer forms of media, social media in particular, have with two-way communication. In Anne B. Lane and Jennifer Bartlett’s research article titled “Why Dialogic Principles Don’t Make It in Practice—and What We Can Do about It,” they explain that communications researchers place massive significance on two-way communication. The authors first note when two-way communication in research became popular, “In the late 20th century, … as a discrete phenomenon of interest [that] began to emerge in scholarly writing” (Lane and Bartlett). They attribute the increase in two-way communication to Ron Pearson and his 1991 paper titled “Beyond Ethical Relativism in Public Relations: Coorientation Rules and the Idea of Communication Symmetry” by stating that, “Pearson articulated a construct of dialogue that used respectful and truthful two-way communication between organizations and stakeholders…Pearson characterized dialogue as being ethical in its conduct and its outcome. This led him to claim that dialogue as he understood it was ethically superior to other forms of communication” (Lane and Bartlett). Lane and Bartlett continue to say that this stance solidified the “normative status” of these forms of communications that were first laid out by Grunig in 1984 (Lane and Bartlett). After Pearson’s paper was released, more and more scholars adopted his position. This view of dialogue being ethically superior has led to it becoming the standard in public relations practice. In their 2011 article, Theunissen and Wan Noordin stated that dialogue has “become ubiquitous in public relations and writing scholarship” (Theunissen and Wan Noordin 5). Because of the ethical and, more importantly, practical, superiority of dialogue, two-way communication and dialogical communication became intertwined and became the forefront of communication research.

Two-Way Communication Applied to the Internet

In Michael Kent and Maureen Taylor’s article “Building Dialogic Relationships Through the World Wide Web,” they provide a theoretical framework for how two-way communication should be utilized by an organization through the internet. Kent and Taylor lay out five principles for building strong two-way communication integration: the dialogic loop, the usefulness of information, generation of return visits, intuitiveness/ease of the interface, and the rule of conservation of visitors (Kent and Taylor). The first principle, the dialogic loop, is the most relevant to this study. The dialogic loop is, "a feedback loop [that] is an appropriate starting point for dialogic communication…a dialogic loop allows publics to query organizations and, more importantly, it offers organizations the opportunity to respond to questions, concerns, and problems" (Kent and Taylor). This dialogic loop is directly tied to two-way communication as Grunig described it, which makes the dialogic loop so critical to public relations.

Kent and Taylor's research applies specifically to websites, but research conducted by Denise Bortree and Trent Seltzer titled "Dialogic Strategies and Outcomes: An Analysis of Environmental Groups Facebook Profiles" applied the same dialogical principles Kent and Taylor devised to Facebook profiles of various environmental groups. Bortree and Seltzer suggested that a sixth principle is created: organization engagement. "A new strategy, organization engagement, was added that included one item, 'organization comments in dialogic spaces.' This was argued to be a strategy because organizations can post to their own sites in an attempt to encourage dialogue" (Bortree and Seltzer 318). Ultimately, they concluded that organizations were, "not taking advantage of the dialogic strategies offered by social networking" (Bortree and Seltzer 318).

Research was later conducted on the application of dialogical principles on Twitter. Svetlana Rybalko and Trent Seltzer's research titled "Dialogic Communication in 140 Characters or Less: How Fortune 500 Companies Engage Stakeholders Using Twitter" used an adapt and change approach. They found that the principles of the dialogic loop and generation of return visits occurred most often (Rybalko and Seltzer

339). Rybalko and Seltzer classified organizations' Twitter pages as either "dialogic or non-dialogic" based on the activity of the pages. They stated that, "companies with a dialogic orientation to Twitter tended to use the 'generation of return visits' principle less than non-dialogic companies," and that, "companies using Twitter to facilitate dialogue used the 'conservation of visitors' principle to a greater degree than companies using Twitter in a non-dialogic fashion" (Rybalko and Seltzer 339). This finding connected the objectives of the organizations to the strategy used. However, they concluded that Twitter was, "being underutilized by organizations to facilitate dialogic communication" (Rybalko and Seltzer 340).

In almost every piece of research that examines the content of social media posts, the conclusion is the same: there is a lack of two-way communication. Taylor and Kent, in their 2014 article titled "Dialogic Engagement: Clarifying Foundational Concepts," state that, "Most social media engagement articles find engagement via social media to be a one-way communication process from an organization to followers or friends" (Taylor and Kent 386). This is counter to all the foundational principles that academics and professionals believe make for the best usage of social media. As mentioned before, Smitko's article highlights the necessity of two-way communication and dialogic principles. It seems obvious then that nonprofit organizations should be implementing these two-way communication theories, but it seems to be the case that they do not. The reason as to why organizations do not implement two-way communication, however, is not as simple as one may expect.

Constraints Limiting Two-Way Communication in the Nonprofit Sector

With the "what" and "how" of two-way and dialogic communication established, the "why not" must be explained. As noted previously, Rybalko and Seltzer determined that Twitter is not being utilized for dialogic communication. Research has found that the biggest limiting factor is the lack of resources. Rowena L. Briones, Beth Kuch, Brooke Fisher Liu, and Yan Jin explored limitations of communication that the American Red Cross faces in their study titled "Keeping up with the Digital Age: How the American Red Cross Uses Social Media to Build Relationships." In this study, the authors used in-depth interviews with communication professionals at the American Red Cross to, "explore how social media tools were being used to build relationships" (Briones et al. 39). The authors discovered that participants were aware of the value of two-way communication, as they state in their research that, "The interviewees consistently referred to two-way communication loop" (Briones et al. 39). However, the American Red Cross employees were facing limitations from external sources. "The most frequently cited barrier to using social media was resources, specifically time and staff" (Briones et al. 40). There were other barriers that American Red Cross employees faced, such as getting the board of the chapters to "buy-in" or the view that using social media would alienate the older generations who make up the majority of the American Red Cross volunteer base (Briones et al. 40-41).

In the previously discussed research by Lane and Bartlett, the authors conducted seventeen in-depth interviews with communications professionals with "varying levels of experience" (Lane and Bartlett). They concluded mostly the same as Briones et al. did. "One factor that clearly inclined public relations practitioners to undertake dialogue that demonstrated multiple dialogic principles was time" (Lane and Bartlett). Of course, there were other obstacles to proper two-way and dialogic communication. One such obstacle was, "public relations practitioners perceive that organizations and stakeholders come to what could be the dialogic table with preconceptions, agendas, and attitudes towards each other and the process of communication that are antithetical to the conduct of dialogue" (Lane and Bartlett).

Motivations of Nonprofit Social Media Use

Despite the limitations, nonprofits continue to attempt to take advantage of social media. This leaves the question of "why?" to be investigated. Chao Guo and Gregory Saxton explore some of the rationales for using social media in their article titled "Attention Philanthropy—The Good, the Bad, and the Strategy." They start by defining attention philanthropy as, "the challenges, opportunities, and responses associated with the phenomenon in which all players in the philanthropic and charitable sector…are potentially overwhelmed by information overload and a dearth of attention" (Guo and Saxton). Guo and Saxton state that this presents an opportunity for organizations. "Attention philanthropy potentially yields several positive developments for the nonprofit sector" (Guo and Saxton). The authors provide an example of attention philanthropy providing positive results in the TOMS Shoes "One for One" program. After developing a marketing plan that utilizes attention-grabbing content and events such as the "One Day Without Shoes" event, TOMS "established a wide network of supporters crucial to the company's business and philanthropic success" (Guo and Saxton).

Guo and Saxton's research highlights one potential reason for an organization to utilize social media: attention that can be turned into action. Seeking this attention is not the only reason for social media use; however, the research to investigate other possible reasons is sparse. In fact, in the 2014 article, Taylor and Kent call for such research by stating, “To understand external dialogue with publics, one must first understand the internal structures and processes of groups and organizations” (Taylor and Kent 392). My research attempts to fill in this missing piece and answer Taylor and Kent’s call by asking the very specific question, “Why are nonprofits using social media?” and uncovering what those internal structures are.

Methodology

An internet search was conducted to find the websites for nonprofit organizations in the Nashville area. This included surrounding areas such as Smyrna, LaVergne, Antioch, and Murfreesboro. When a potential participant was found, it would be determined if the organization had any social media accounts. If they did not, that organization was disregarded as a potential participant. If it did, the organization’s staff directory would be searched to identify the person who had a title most relevant to managing the social media accounts, titles such as, communications coordinator, social media manager, or director of communication. If someone with a title that was directly related to communication or social media was listed, they would be emailed directly asking if they would be available to participate in my research by answering questions regarding their organization’s use of social media. If no such person with that title existed, a search for the person who would be most in-charge of delegating the task of managing social media, or someone in an executive assistant type role would be made. That person would be emailed and asked to relay the invitation to this study to the person most in charge of the social media accounts. Through email correspondence, six interviews with Nashville-area nonprofits were scheduled for a convenient time and were conducted as scheduled.

To preserve anonymity, as requested by the Institutional Review Board, the organizations are referred to using a description of the organization. Those are as follows: Women's Charity, Food Bank A, Food Bank B, Education A, Education B, and Health Care Organization. The individuals who were spoken with will also be kept anonymous and will be referred to only as the representative of their respective organization, as required by the institutional review board protocols.

The interviews consisted of 15 questions that were created beforehand (see Appendix A). During the interviews, some responses from participants necessitated a follow-up question. These follow-up questions, while not on the pre-compiled list of questions, remained on topic and relevant to the research and aided in answering the research question. The questions first started with a more direct, fact-based nature designed to both establish rapport with the interviewee and establish their background. The questions after that followed a funnel style, where the questions started broadly and then became more specific. The questions were created in collaboration with the thesis advisor.

All but one of the interviews was conducted via telephone. The interview with Education B was done through email. Telephone interviews were recorded and transcribed to retain accuracy of the participants' responses. Those recordings were destroyed upon completion of the transcription process as per IRB protocol.

Qualitative inductive coding was used to analyze the responses given by participants. Inductive coding is best used when, "conducting heuristic or exploratory research" (Yi). The inductive coding process used here is called the open-axial-selective process. It is a process in which the transcripts were read multiple times, and during each read through, common ideas, themes, or keywords were noted. These common ideas, themes, or keywords were then organized into similar categories. Through this process, comparisons can be made between responses from different participants that allow for a more thorough analysis of each organization's rationale for using social media. The coding process could not begin until after the interviews were conducted, thus the need for the process that works best with exploratory research. A qualitative method was the best option for this research as qualitive research, "properly seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings" (Berg 8).

Analysis

After a thorough analysis of the six interviews using inductive coding methods, three major themes emerged that answered the question guiding this research. These categories—strategy, audience, and importance—push all the interviewed organizations toward what they need to sustain their work: donors, volunteers, and awareness. These needs are not new, non-profit organizations have always had a need for them before social media ever existed. The advent of social media simply gave organizations a new way to project their voices and call on others for those needs.

However, social media do introduce a new, scarce resource into the equation: the attention of social media users. As Guo and Saxton state in their article, "Philanthropy and charity work are increasingly driven by attention, a commodity that non-profit organizations must acquire in order to attract—and sustain—their donors, volunteers, and supporters" (Guo and Saxton). This need for attention holds true for every non-profit organization on social media. From the very large multi-million national organizations to the smallest five-figure budget organizations, to compel an audience to action, the audience's attention must first be secured. The organizations interviewed in this study are no exception. They each want to garner donations, volunteers, and awareness, and they use social media to do so. This is entirely expected. However, the thinking behind how these organizations use their social media were previously left unexamined. Using qualitative methodology, for six Nashville-area non-profits, this study answers the question, "What is the rationale for using social media?"

Strategy

Strategies between all six of the interviewed organizations were designed to suit the needs of the organization, as previously discussed. Each organization knew the importance of having a social media strategy, with the representative from the women's charity stating, "I've been to a social media seminar," and attended the, "Business Boutique through Dave Ramsey's organization" (Women's Charity).

However, knowing the value of a formal strategy is not enough. A formal social media strategy must be made to properly drive social media use, and formal strategies are non-existent for almost all the organizations. The lone organization that may have a formal strategy is Education A, which works with a public relations firm. That firm handles all the minutia regarding strategy, and the representative was not sure what, if any, strategy has been implemented. Even if there was a strong, formal social media strategy that had been implemented, the person at the organization most responsible for that is unsure of what the formal strategy is and could not speak in detail about it, stating only, “Our PR firm handles most of the, when do we post, how often, what should the tone be?” (Education A). Food Bank A’s representative even stated outright, “We don’t have a formal written communication strategy” (Food Bank A). This highlights that despite the perceived value of a formal strategy, the organizations do not have one.

In lieu of a formal social media strategy, the organizations have created a very basic strategy that is more akin to a guiding idea, rather than a full strategy. The representative from Food Bank A stated, “We have sort of an informal social media strategy…but I think it’s probably not what people think of when they think of…formally what’s considered a strategy” (Food Bank A). Food Bank A has a guiding idea in its informal strategy but does not cross the threshold into a true formal strategy. Likewise, the representative of Food Bank B stated, “for social strategy, it’s more about educating and creating a community among our service area” (Food Bank B). This is approaching what would be a formal social media strategy but does not quite reach that level. The biggest missing component is actionable objectives. None of the organizations discussed any form of an objective they would like to achieve beyond a simple idea, such as, “conveying our needs” (Women’s Charity) or, “educating the community” (Food Bank B). Formal strategies in public relations call for quantifiable objectives. For example, increasing awareness of our programs at the organization to 50% of Nashville residents by the end of 2019, would be a formal, actionable objective. Objectives like this are critical in public relations. They allow the organization to determine if the strategy that has been implemented is working or not.

Objectives are not the only part of a social media strategy. The content itself carries significant importance. Two representatives discussed the idea of variety of content. The representative of the women's charity stated, "I like to do a variety," and, "not the same things each post in a row" (Women's Charity). Food Bank B's representative stated, "There's different pillars that I think about of content that we could post," and continued, "There's a variety" (Food Bank B). Being aware of the importance of variety goes back to Guo and Saxton's idea of attention philanthropy. Keeping the audience interested means keeping them from getting bored. If the organizations were posting the same or very similar pieces of content over and over, their audiences would get tired of the content, and begin to divert their attention to other organizations. This is where a tool like a content calendar is so valuable. Content calendars give a set schedule that an organization can follow for making post on social media. By creating a week's or a month's or more worth of preplanned social media posts, organizations can maintain the variety of posts that is important to the organization. Some organizations interviewed recognized the value in a content calendar but are not able to implement one. The representative from Women's Charity said, "If I could just set aside a couple hours a week to do posts for two weeks and schedule, it would be great" (Women's Charity). Some organizations have implemented a calendar, such as Food Bank B, who stated, "I've an editorial calendar," and, "for certain campaigns I will definitely schedule and plan out" (Food Bank B). By some organizations implementing a content calendar, the idea of all the strategies being half implemented is reinforced. Again, it shows that the value is recognized, by the implementation is not always there.

Frequency is another common thread. Each organization tries to post multiple times per week. "We try to post weekly," "Two or three on a good week. On a bad week zero," "On average, something more like five posts a week," "It's about three to five times per week, per channel," "Almost every day…five to seven times a week of Facebook…a little less with Instagram…Twitter, I would say most days," "We try to post as much as we can, at least weekly." These are quotes from everyone who was interviewed. Posting regularly is important to these organizations. This is a positive as consistency is important in good social media practice, as stated by Tatia Gordon-Troy, former press secretary to the late Representative Elijah Cummings, in her article titled, "Content, Consistency, Engagement: The Makings of a Solid Social Media Strategy": "Being consistent with sharing content is just as important as the content being shared. The only way to build relationships without face-to-face communication is to be seen and heard on a consistent basis on social media" (Gordon-Troy). The fact that each of the organizations understood the importance of consistency highlights their closeness to a formal strategy, despite not being all the way there.

These organizations are close to a formal strategy, close to something that drives their actions with a pointed, direct purpose. However, as it stands now, they have not achieved that level of strategy. While the idea of a rationale might be abstract, it can be made concrete in part by utilizing a formal communication strategy.

Audience

While audience is usually covered under strategic planning, the responses given by the organizations regarding their audiences were striking enough to warrant a category of its own. The organizations can be considered to be halfway through the demographics door. That is to say, the organizations sort of have a handle on who their audiences are on social media, but they do not have a rigid, researched, and accurate report of the demographics of the respective audiences. One organization, the health care organization, did not discuss the demographics of their social media audience at all. Being able to accurately target audiences is one of the biggest benefits to being on social media. As Dave Kerpen states in his book titled *Likeable Social Media*, "Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn held an unbelievable amount of data on hundreds of millions of people. From users' profiles and comments, you could advertise and market toward groups more efficiently than ever before" (Kerpen 25). With this potential, organizations should be able to define their target audiences with ease.

However, three of the organizations discussed only a cursory understanding of their social media audience, or in some cases, discussed having no information about their audience at all. For example, the representative from Food bank A said, "I don't have a really detailed understanding of who our audience is" (Food Bank A). While that is the most extreme example of not knowing what demographic the audience is comprised of, the other organizations that do not have a strong understanding of their audience demographics discussed similar ideas. Quotes such as, "I would guess I would say my age range and other demographics [are why we are on Facebook and Instagram]" (Women's Charity), and, "I think we're just on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter because those are the ones people look at" (Education A), highlight the lack of knowledge of their respective audiences.

There are two organizations that do have a stronger grasp of their audience's demographics and utilize that information. Food Bank B and Education B both discussed knowing who their audience is, and tailoring content and platform utilization to get the most benefit. Food Bank B's representative said, "Our audience skews a little older," and that, "We go where our donors are" (Food Bank B). Similarly, Education B's representative said, “Most of our donors are middle-aged or older, so Facebook is where we direct most of our engagement, but we’ve made an effort to put out a lot more content on Instagram as we’re able to reach the younger demographic that so many of our volunteers fall into” (Education B). This is a stark contrast to the lack of knowledge of audience demographics the other three organizations had. However, with the tools available, this is still too ambiguous. The demographics should be strictly defined.

As strong or as weak as the understanding of its audiences these organizations might have, none of the organizations gave a response that indicated how they acquired the information about their audiences. Kerpen states in his book that, “Search marketing and social media have rendered it possible to target exactly the people you know are your customers and best prospects, not the people you think are in those groups based on your intuition and vague understanding of market research” (Kerpen 34-35). Most social media platforms provide free and easy-to-use tools that allow organizations to gather detailed data about their audiences. Demographics such as age, gender, race, and location are all provided. By not utilizing these tools, the organization’s representatives are left saying things such as, “I feel like our social media audience is really tied with our volunteer base” (Food Bank A). These are intuitions, not veracious claims.

In fact, some of these intuitions, while accurate, are based on inaccurate assumptions. As the women’s charity representative said when asked why they chose Facebook, “Just choosing from word of mouth of what was the most popular and widely used with people like, I would guess I would say my age range (people over the age of 50) and other demographics” (Women’s Charity). It seems intuitive that Facebook is for the elderly. That is an idea common among social media users, as a survey conducted by

Hootsuite, a social media platform manager, indicates that, “34% of teenagers think Facebook is for old people” (Sehl). However, according to Pew Research Institute, Facebook is more popular among younger generations than older generations. Their 2019 social media research reports that 79% of adults aged 18-29 in the U.S. are on Facebook compared to 68% of people aged 50-64. (Perrin and Anderson). But Facebook is still the most popular social media platform for people aged 50 and older. So, while the intuitive idea is correct, the foundation is false. Likewise, Education A’s representative stated that, “I think we’re on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter because those are the ones people look at” (Education A). It is true that Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter are extremely popular, but the organization fails to use reliable evidence to explain why they are using those platforms. It is not enough to believe that, because they are popular it is best to use those platforms. The audience the organization is trying to reach may not exist on those platforms, and if that were the case, all the effort would be wasted.

Soliciting donations and volunteers and spreading awareness rely on the right audience being reached. That is the key reasoning for utilizing a specific platform. While the organizations may have, by coincidentally correct intuition, chosen the right platforms, their rationales are based in unfounded information.

<u>Importance</u>

The final key theme is importance of social media. The organizations were split between social media being extremely important, or only a piece of a larger plan. The three organizations that stated that social media are extremely important all stated that it was the most important communication tool. “Very, [social media] is very important” (Women’s Charity), “I think it goes hand in hand probably with emails in terms of communication. Maybe more important" (Food Bank B), and, "It's incredibly important" (Education B) are all quotes showing how important social media can be for these organizations. Education B has even gone a step further and is now in the process of hiring a dedicated communications professional. "We're not currently using it to its full extent, which is why we identified the need to hire a dedicated communications staffer" (Education B). It is made abundantly clear the level of importance placed on social media.

This is in contrast with the other three organizations that identify social media as important, but not significantly so. Social media more serve as another tool to use rather than the lynchpin of the communication plan. Food Bank B is an example of this. The representative stated, "I definitely think it's not replacing our traditional media avenues. I think it's just adding another level to it" (Food Bank B). This points back to Guo and Saxton's work, social media is simply another tool to get donations, volunteers, and awareness.

Despite how important social media are for these organizations, there was almost no discussion about critical public relations theory. Foundational principles such as two-way symmetric communication and dialogic communication are almost entirely neglected. As noted in the literature review, two-way communication and dialogic communication are utilizing the voice of the organization to open an honest and direct dialogue with the audience. Very few of the organizations approached this topic. Food Bank B is the only organization that directly discussed an idea that applied two-way communication through their objective of, "Creating a sense of community within the people we're talking to" (Food Bank B). Creating a community online through dialogue is a direct application of these theories. These communities tie directly back to audience and from there tie back directly to the three needs each organization has: donations, volunteers, and awareness. Yet only one of the six interviewees mentions anything related to foundational public relations theory.

When each organization describes social media as at least somewhat important, it would stand to reason that the organizations would properly apply foundational theory. However, due to whatever causes, be it cost, expertise, or time, that is not the case. The rationale that it is important to use social media are not based on accepted public relations theory.

Limitations and Further Research

In-depth interviews with a convenience sample of local nonprofit organizations were used in this research. This was done to more accurately understand each organization's rationale for using social media. The methodology and sampling techniques prevent this study from being generalizable. However, the study still lays a foundation for future research, both qualitative and quantitative. As noted earlier, it is critical that continuing research heeds Taylor and Kent's call to understand the decision making within the organization and not just what the organizations post on their social media.

Inductive coding has an inherent layer of subjective bias. The major categories that were discovered, as well as the specific quotes that fit into those categories, may be wholly different than what another researcher might find. Public relations is a very broad topic, and different practitioners and researchers in the public relations field may place varying emphasis on different topics than what has been done in this study.

Further studies can be conducted into the causes of the shortcomings discussed in the analysis. For example, Briones et. al 2010 article conducted similar interviews and discovered there are many root issues preventing the American Red Cross from utilizing social media in the most effective manner. In that study, they stated that “The most frequently cited barrier to using social media was resources, specifically time and staff” (Briones et. al 40), highlights one of the conclusions made in that study. In the 2014 study, Taylor and Kent state that, “Steps should be taken by publics to ensure that their spokespeople and leaders be trained in dialogic engagement” (Taylor and Kent 394). The training and education, or lack thereof, that those responsible for the social media channels of their respective organizations engage in could be a focal point for a study.

Another research opportunity would be to determine if the results found in this study extend beyond the Nashville area. Local nonprofit organizations exist throughout the nation, and in certain areas it may be entirely possible that social media strategy is consistently well developed and public relations theory is strongly understood. The Nashville area is just one small section of an otherwise expansive country.

Conclusion

By seeking to answer what the rationale for using social media of six Nashville-area nonprofits is, the result is clear. These organizations are utilizing the new tool, social media, to achieve outcomes that are nothing new: donations, volunteers, and awareness. The major benefits of the new tool, however, are not being taken advantage of, particularly as it relates to two-way communication and dialogic principles. This is reflected in the three categories—strategy, audience, importance—as previously defined. If the organizations created a strategic communication plan that targeted their specific audiences, and then engaged in a dialogue with those audiences, they would be served so much better. However, their rationale does not have the key elements of proper public relations theory and practice. This lack is what prevents these organizations from taking advantage of the benefits social media provide.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Establishing the organization

- What are the organizations primary objectives?
- How many people are currently staffed?
- What is, approximately if preferred, the yearly budget of the organization?

Establishing the interviewee

- What is/are your role(s) within the organization?
    - *If not specifically in a communication role:* How did you become in charge of social media for the organization?
- Do you have any formal communication education?
- Do you have any prior professional communications experience?
- Do you have any social media experience, personal or professional?

Communication strategy

- What is the overall communication strategy of the organization?
- How important is social media in the communication strategy of the organization?
- How often are the social media channels updated?
- What role does social media play in the communication strategy of the organization?
- What social media channels does the organization use?
- How were specific social media platforms chosen?
- How do you decide when and what to post on a given social media platform?

Appendix B: Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

IRB

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Office of Research Compliance,
010A Sam Ingram Building,
2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd
Murfreesboro, TN 37129

MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

IRBN001 - EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL NOTICE

Wednesday, July 10, 2019

Principal Investigator	**Anthony Czelusniak** (Student)
Faculty Advisor	Matthew P. Taylor
Co-Investigators	NONE
Investigator Email(s)	*ajc6m@mtmail.mtsu.edu; matthew.taylor@mtsu.edu*
Department	Journalism & Strategic Media Entertainment
Protocol Title	***Investigating the rationale for social media use by Nashville nonprofits***
Protocol ID	**19-2258**

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) through the **EXPEDITED** mechanism under 45 CFR 46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110 within the category *(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior*. A summary of the IRB action and other particulars in regard to this protocol application is tabulated below:

IRB Action	**APPROVED for ONE YEAR**		
Date of Expiration	**6/30/2020**	Date of Approval	7/10/19
Sample Size	50 (FIFTY)		
Participant Pool	Primary Classification: **Healthy Adults - 18 years or older** Specific Classification: **Nashville-based employees of non-profit organizations whose work function may involve social media operations.**		
Exceptions	1. Contact information allowed. 2. Audio recording are permitted for data collection (when applicable). 3. Apprroved for verbal consent over telephone.		

Restrictions	**1. Mandatory active informed consent using MTSU tempate; the participants must have access to the informed consent.** **2. All identifiable data/artifacts that include audio/video data, photographs, handwriting samples, and etc., must be used only for research purpose and they must be destroyed after data processing. 3. Not approved for online data collection.**
Approved Templates	MTSU templates: F016 Informed Consent, and email script Non-MTSU Templates: Telephone informed consent script.
Comments	NONE

Post-approval Actions

The investigator(s) indicated in this notification should read and abide by all of the post-approval conditions (https://www.mtsu.edu/irb/FAQ/PostApprovalResponsibilities.php) imposed with this approval. Any unanticipated harms to participants, adverse events or compliance breach must be reported to the Office of Compliance by calling 615-494-8918 within 48 hours of the incident. All

amendments to this protocol, including adding/removing researchers, must be approved by the IRB before they can be implemented.

Continuing Review (**Follow the Schedule Below**)

This protocol can be continued for up to THREE years (**7/31/2022**) by obtaining a continuation approval prior to **7/31/2020**. Refer to the following schedule to plan your annual project reports and be aware that separate **REMINDERS WILL NOT BE SENT**. Failure in obtaining an approval for continuation will result in cancellation of this protocol. Moreover, the completion of this study MUST be notified by filing a final report in order to close-

Reporting Period	Requisition Deadline	IRB Comments
First year report	6/30/2020	NOT COMPLETED
Second year report	6/30/2021	NOT COMPLETED
Final report	6/30/2022	NOT COMPLETED

Post-approval Protocol Amendments:

Only two procedural amendment requests will be entertained per year. *In addition, the researchers can request amendments during continuing review. This amendment restriction does not apply to minor changes such as language usage and addition/removal of research personnel.*

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Date	Amendment(s)	IRB Comments
NONE	NONE.	NONE

Other Post-approval Actions:

Date	IRB Action(s)	IRB Comments
NONE	NONE.	NONE

<u>Mandatory Data Storage Requirement</u>: All research-related records (signed consent forms, investigator training and etc.) must be retained by the PI or the faculty advisor (if the PI is a student) at the secure location mentioned in the protocol application. The data must be stored for at least three (3) years after the study is closed. Subsequently, the data may be destroyed in a manner that maintains confidentiality and anonymity of the research subjects.

The MTSU IRB reserves the right to modify/update the approval criteria or change/cancel the terms listed in this letter without prior notice. Be advised that IRB also reserves the right to inspect or audit your records if needed.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board
Middle Tennessee State University

Quick Links:

- Post-approval Responsibilities: http://www.mtsu.edu/irb/FAQ/PostApprovalResponsibilities.php
- Expedited Procedures: http://www.mtsu.edu/irb/FAQ/PostApprovalResponsibilities.php