

Introducing Networked Nonprofits

chapter
ONE

Surfers and other ocean enthusiasts share common characteristics of stubborn independence and rugged individualism. Like unherded cats, surfers do what they want to do when they want to do it. Any organization intending to organize them could only succeed by operating very differently from a traditional, top-down institution. And that's exactly what the Surfrider Foundation has done.

A handful of surfers founded the Surfrider Foundation in 1984 to protect oceans and beaches through conservation, activism, research, and education. They work with a variety of ocean enthusiasts including surfers, bodysurfers, bodyboarders, windsurfers, swimmers, divers, beachcombers, and ocean-loving families.

As of 2009, the organization had a budget of around \$5 million and thirty staff people working at the national headquarters in San Clemente, California. Surfrider is an inside-out organization. It opens up its work to the world by sharing its strategic plan, annual reports, financial statements, audit reports, and tax forms. It encourages its staff to talk about the work: CEO Jim Moriarity and other staff are available for discussions on its Oceans Waves Beaches blog and on Twitter.

The organization's conservation work happens largely through their all-volunteer chapters. Surfrider doesn't dictate what the chapters do, but rather follows and supports them. The foundation is devoted to building meaningful relationships with supporters that go far beyond asking for donations. Taken in total, Surfrider resembles a social network rather than a traditional stand-alone organization. We call Surfrider and organizations like it **Networked Nonprofits**.

In 2008, the Surfrider network included over seventy Surfrider chapters located along the East, West, Gulf, Hawaiian, and Puerto Rican coasts. The organization had over fifty thousand paying members and many more thousands of local volunteers. In addition to the local chapters, several hundred groups and pages on Facebook were dedicated to Surfrider and its local chapters.

Each chapter works on what the organization calls “atom-based work” on land and “bit-based work” online. The atom-based work includes organizing beach cleanups, testing beach waters, and conducting local education programs. The bit-based work involves many conversations on a variety of social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter, sending out e-mail action alerts, and organizing events online (see Figure 1.1).

Surfrider has created a unique model of engagement to map the participation of volunteers from strangers to friends to supporters, members, activists, and leaders. The organization provides a variety of ways for people to participate at every level. Strangers and friends can buy T-shirts online and sign up for e-mail alerts. More involved supporters and members can download and listen to podcasts and organize local beach cleanups. Leaders can arrange to meet with elected officials to discuss legislation to protect the shorelines.

Figure 1.1
Example of Surfrider Recruiting Volunteers via Twitter



Source: Reprinted with the permission of the Surfrider Foundation.

Like the surfers, the chapters do what they want to do when they want to do it. The Foundation trusts their distributed network of people to work on its behalf without requiring constant oversight. Chad Nelson, Surfrider’s environmental director, said that while this might annoy the lawyers, the national office rarely polices or intervenes with what the chapters are doing.

And it all works to engage people locally and energetically on behalf of the organization. In 2008, Surfrider had over 200 community outreach campaigns, over 900 local presentations of its Respect the Beach education program, over 8,000 beach water tests taken, and over 600 beach cleanups. Surfrider Chapter representatives attended over 125 meetings and events involving city, county, and state governments. In total, volunteers contributed over 145,000 volunteer hours.¹

The Surfrider Foundation ignites the passions of thousands of ocean enthusiasts. In return, this network of participants shares their energy and enthusiasm for Surfrider with their own personal networks of friends, volunteers their time, and donates money to support the organization.

ABOUT NETWORKED NONPROFITS

Networked Nonprofits are simple and transparent organizations. They are easy for outsiders to get in and insiders to get out. They engage people in shaping and sharing their work in order to raise awareness of social issues, organize communities to provide services, or advocate for legislation. In the long run, they are helping to make the world a safer, fairer, healthier place to live.

Networked Nonprofits don’t work harder or longer than other organizations, they work differently. They engage in conversations with people beyond their walls—lots of conversations—to build relationships that spread their work through the network. Incorporating relationship building as a core responsibility of all staffers fundamentally changes their to-do lists. Working this way is only possible because of the advent of social media. All Networked Nonprofits are comfortable using the new social media tool set—digital tools such as e-mail, blogs, and Facebook that encourage two-way conversations between people, and between people and organizations, to enlarge their efforts quickly, easily, and inexpensively.

We know nonprofit staffs often feel overburdened, with too much pressure on too few people to do too much. As we will discuss in Chapter Seven, “Making Nonprofit Organizations Simpler,” nonprofits and the people within them have

too much to do because they try to do too much as stand-alone organizations. Networked Nonprofits know their organizations are part of a much larger ecosystem of organizations and individuals that are all incredible resources for their efforts.

Networked Nonprofits are not afraid to lose control of their programs and services, their logos and branding, messages and messengers because they know that in return they will receive the goodwill and passion of many people working on their behalf. Working this way enables these organizations to reach many more people less expensively than they ever could working largely alone.

Some organizations such as the Surfrider Foundation, and others that we will discuss in this book, such as MomsRising and charity: water, are born as Networked Nonprofits. But being Networked Nonprofits is not just an accident of birth. Any organization can become one, and many are in the process of doing so. Venerable nonprofit organizations, such as the American Red Cross, the Humane Society of the United States, Planned Parenthood, and the American Cancer Society, are turning themselves inside out with great success. We will share their stories, struggles, and lessons throughout this book in order to encourage other organizations to become Networked Nonprofits.

But organizations are not the only entities powering **social change** in this new, connected world. Individuals—we call them *free agents*—combine their social media savvy with their passion for social causes to accomplish amazing things. Free agents' facility with social media gives them the power and tools that only organizations had just a few years ago. They have become integral parts of ecosystems within which nonprofit organizations work. While traditional organizations may bristle at their emergence, Networked Nonprofits naturally work with them toward common ends.

THE SOCIAL MEDIA REVOLUTION

Evolutions are incremental improvements of a product or idea. The newest Ford Mustang or iPod may be better iterations than previous versions, but they are still fundamentally the same product. When two teenagers, Shawn Fanning and Sean Parker, created the online music-sharing site Napster in 1999, they sparked a revolution. Power shifted away from music companies toward music listeners. For the first time, consumers had the ability to shape their own collection of songs any way they wanted, and perhaps more important, share these songs with the world online.

It wasn't legal, it still isn't, but it was inevitable given that millions of people could easily and inexpensively access and use the tools. Even if services such as iTunes slow down the free sharing of music files online, they will never erase it entirely. The genie has popped out of the bottle, and she won't be put back in. Social media are revolutionary in their power and reach.

In the 1980s, personal computers landed on everyone's desk and changed the way information was stored and organized. In the 1990s, the World Wide Web connected a universe of people and made information accessible. This century has seen the rise of the social graph; the relationships people are making and renewing using social media tools, particularly social networking sites, enable rapid, collective activity.

We define social media as the array of digital tools such as **instant messaging, text messaging**, blogs, videos, and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace that are inexpensive and easy to use. Social media enable people to create their own stories, videos, and photos and to manipulate them and share them widely at almost no cost. Included in this book is a Glossary to provide more definitions of specific tools and processes.

Social media tools integral to nonprofits fall into three general categories of use:

- Conversation starters like blogs, YouTube, and Twitter
- Collaboration tools including wikis and Google Groups
- Network builders like social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter

Social media are not a fad or a trend. With near-universal access to the World Wide Web in the United States, and the ubiquity of mobile phones and e-mail, the use of social media will only continue growing. Social media use is becoming ingrained in the way that people relate to one another and work together. In particular, social media are shaping the way that young people think, connect, engage, and work together.

We want to caution readers that knowing how to use social media well is not just about knowing which button to push. Technological wizardry shouldn't overshadow the truly revolutionary power of social media, which is its ability to connect people to one another and help build strong, resilient, trusting relationships. But the only way to understand this distinction is to use the toolset personally. There is

no other way to fully understand the power of using social media to connect friends and strangers with common interests than to experience it personally. In other words: *Social media use is a contact sport, not a spectator sport.*

We also warn you that there is no universal rule about which tool will work under which circumstances for which people. Networked Nonprofits do not use just one tool. They use many tools to engage in different kinds of conversations with different groups of people.

More important, keep in mind that tools will come and go, but strategy sustains organizations. Choosing and using any specific tool is less important to organizational success than embracing the principles and strategies that make social media effective. Using social media is a way of being more than a way of doing.

Unfortunately, too many nonprofit organizations are losing ground today because they fear what might happen if they open themselves up to this new world. These organizations are crashing into this set-me-free world powered by social media, unprepared to become Networked Nonprofits. Many of these fears are unfounded. Let's begin by facing and overcoming the fears and myths about social media use that simply aren't true.

BUSTING THE SOCIAL MEDIA MYTHS

The array of social media tools look complex from the outside—a beeping, flashing, chattering din. Watching young people glide through the social media world with ease adds to the perception that social media is only for the technologically savvy or the young. Neither perception is true. But you don't have to take our word for it; we'll let Peggy Padden explain.

Fate dealt Peggy's family the cruelest blow when two of her three sons were born with a genetic blood disorder called Fanconi Anemia (FA), which leads to bone marrow failure. Her eldest son died after a failed bone marrow transplant, while her younger son is still fighting the disease. But by nature Peggy is a doer, so she energetically began to raise money for the Fanconi Anemia Research Fund to help find a cure for this terrible disease. She organized 5k runs/walks on Valentine's Day and golf tournaments as fundraisers in Portland, Oregon, where she lives.

In December 2007, Peggy saw an article in *PARADE* magazine about a new fundraising contest called America's Giving Challenge. The Case Foundation, the

family philanthropy started by AOL founder Steve Case and his wife Jean, sponsored the Challenge. They encouraged individuals to join the Challenge by signing up online at *PARADE* magazine's site or on Facebook.

Over a fifty-day period, these individuals, or champions, competed to raise the largest number of people to give at least \$10 each for their cause. The eight champions who raised the largest number of friends during the contest would win the money they raised, plus \$50 thousand from the Case Foundation.

Peggy's reaction when she read the challenge description was, "That's a lot of money!" She decided to give it a try.

Peggy was the first to admit that all the newfangled technology tools—all of that "Face page stuff" in her words—was not meant for a fifty-year-old woman like her. She knew enough to get by, she thought. She read and sent e-mail, surfed the Web a bit, and was very excited when she learned how to cut and paste in a Word document. But that was it; she left the rest for her children. That is what made Peggy's success in America's Giving Challenge, a fundraising effort that hinged on using new social media tools like Facebook, such a huge surprise.

A few clicks on the *PARADE* magazine Web site and Peggy had registered her cause for the Challenge and added her name as the champion. "I was a beginner; I've never done anything like a **badge** before," she says. "I was able to figure it out except for the picture; I couldn't get it any bigger." She waited for her son to get home to fix the photo.

Once she set up the badge, Peggy began to do what she felt most comfortable doing: she e-mailed her family, friends, acquaintances, and the 250 families on the Fanconi Anemia **listserv** and asked them to become a friend to her cause and donate \$10. It was a long shot, she said, but they could possibly win \$50 thousand and that money would go toward our only hope for a cure for Fanconi Anemia. She also asked them to e-mail everyone they knew about the Challenge. And they did.

Word began to spread online about Peggy's cause. As she recalled, "That six degrees of separation part was right on. I would hear from someone who knew someone who knew someone who had e-mailed everyone they knew. It spread like wildfire."²

Her cause had gone **viral**, meaning friends of friends were doing things on her behalf without Peggy having to ask them to do so directly. To Peggy's astonishment, people she didn't know put the Fanconi Anemia cause up on their Facebook pages, on their blogs, and on MySpace. It was time for Peggy to put

aside her fears and anxiety about social media and just jump into the maelstrom on Facebook and everywhere else the conversation about her cause was happening.

Peggy had no overall plan and no marketing budget. She and her friends just kept going and doing, and somehow it all worked. She wasn't quite sure what people were doing and saying on her behalf, but it didn't matter. The results were clear; many people were working on her behalf and moving their friends to support her cause. Peggy provided constant e-mail updates to her friends, new and old, about how they were doing in the Challenge.

Peggy's efforts continued to pick up steam. She recalls: "At first they thought it was just another one of my crazy ideas and that we couldn't win. Then when we were number five we were so excited and checking the Web site to see where we were in comparison to the other charities. Wow, we thought, this really could happen!"

When the Case Foundation announced the winners of America's Giving Challenge, Peggy won second place. Her cause garnered 2,730 friends and \$65,538, plus the \$50,000 challenge grant for a grand total of \$115,538.³

As Peggy proved, remembering a world before the Internet does not disqualify a person from using social media well. The data about social media usage are also proving this assumption wrong. According to the Pew Center for American Life and the Internet, the average age of Web users is mid-forties, the average age of Facebook users is climbing, and 95 percent of the population have mobile phones and use e-mail.⁴

The first myth that social media is just for kids has been busted. Let's continue our social media myth busting:

- **Our constituents aren't online.** The old assumptions of a digital divide that makes access to technology in low-income communities difficult to overcome no longer hold. Although a gap of access persists, it is closing very rapidly, and the almost-universal mobile phone usage here and abroad will soon put this issue to rest. For a time, organizations will need to continue to reach out in traditional ways to constituencies with access problems or who are hesitant to use social media. But they should still prepare for a future where everyone is using social media.

- **Face-to-face isn't important anymore.** Nothing will ever substitute for the power of people meeting face-to-face. No amount of clicking, pinging, and

poking can build the trust that happens in a room between people—ever. Social media augments relationships built on land. It is important for organizations to avoid the social media zero-sum game, meaning the presumption that because some things happen online now, they don't happen on land anymore. Online and on-land activities augment one another; they have to in order for social change to happen.

- **Social media isn't core to our work.** It's difficult to imagine any organization engaged in social change where relationship building, conversations, and connections aren't core to their success. Social media strengthens these relationships and connections with people outside of an organization's walls.

- **Using social media is hard.** If social media tools were hard to use, they wouldn't be so widespread. As Clay Shirky wrote, "Communications tools don't get socially interesting until they get technologically boring."⁵ But as with anything in life, mastering social media requires practice. Everyone needs to try the tools to understand why they are so powerful and important and to discover for themselves which ones they like and which work best for them.

- **Using social media is time-consuming.** Okay, this one is actually true. It does take time to use social media, particularly in the beginning when there is a learning curve to master. However, once the workflow becomes a habit, Networked Nonprofits accomplish more with less time. And ultimately, when people and organizations become better at working with their networks and learn how to distribute their work rather than assume all the heavy lifting, their overall workload will decrease.

As Peggy Padden learned, using social media is easy; but using it effectively for social change is challenging. It's important to understand exactly what social media can do for organizations, and then rethink how organizations could work by embracing it.

SOCIAL MEDIA POWERS SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

This book is built on a simple equation: Social Media Powers Social Networks for Social Change. When we discuss this equation with people working within nonprofit organizations, they sometimes miss the operative word: social. Their focus is on the gadgetry when it should be on embracing social ways of behaving.

This distinction is key not only to using social media, but also to effecting social change.

One constant in life is that human beings want and need to connect with one another in meaningful ways. These connections are made through social networks that are the conduits for the conversations that power social change. The job of nonprofit organizations is to catalyze and manage those conversations.

Forty years ago, it was commonplace for people to throw trash out of car windows as they sped down the highway. Today that's not acceptable behavior. The change didn't result from one person's or organization's efforts, or even one crying Native American in a television commercial. Change happened because individuals began to adjust their behavior based on the norms developed within their social circles. As friends, mothers, children, aunts, and cousins begin to change their behavior, so does everyone they know. Laws codify this behavior; they don't create it.

Conversations through social media include two-way discussions between people, and between people and organizations. Conversations also include sharing information online, like photographs, for friends or the broader public to see and comment on; writing a blog post that stirs a conversation in the comments section; and raising awareness of an issue on Facebook. Conversations are the lifeblood of social change efforts. Without them, people would not donate, protest, change their minds, or pass new laws.

We describe social media as **channels** in this book, meaning vehicles for conversations. Networked Nonprofits engage in conversations with people using multiple social media channels. We also define social change inclusively for this book. **Social change** means any effort by people and organizations to make the world a better place. It includes advocacy and direct service efforts, as well as conversations between people outside organizations about challenges that people and communities face. If the intention is to understand and fix problems, improve people's lives, or strengthen communities, we consider those efforts part of the broad spectrum of social change.

Conversations activate the natural creativity and passion that people bring to causes they care about. Just ask Peggy Padden how excited people are to help when given a chance. That's what Networked Nonprofits working as social networks and using social media can accomplish.