Are Foundation Leaders Using Social Media?

All it takes is a quick visit to Glasspockets.org to see just how fast and how far foundations have come in terms of using social media. As of August 2010, the web site had documented the Web 2.0 activities of more than 650 foundations, including 271 that are active on Facebook, 190 on Twitter, 102 with blogs, and 93 on YouTube.

While such statistics provide clear evidence that foundations are actively using social media, just how engaged are the leaders of foundations themselves with these new communications tools? In July 2010, the Foundation Center surveyed members of its Grantmaker Leadership Panel in order to find out. Completed surveys were received from 73 of 228 current Panel members, for a response rate of 32 percent. (See sidebar for more details on the Panel.)

Testing the Waters

Usage of social media by foundation leaders is catching on, but it’s not yet part of the regular routines of most chief executives. Aside from relatively “old-fashioned” online communications tools such as e-newsletters and Listservs, fewer than one-third of foundation chief executives are using Web 2.0 services such as blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Podcasts on a regular basis.

- About one-third (33 percent) of foundation leaders use Facebook regularly, and a similar number (30 percent) regularly read blogs.
- About one in 10 foundation chief executives uses Podcasts (11 percent) or YouTube (10 percent) on a regular basis.
- Just 6 percent use Twitter regularly.
- Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) use e-newsletters regularly, while about half (47 percent) use Listservs regularly.

But while regular users of social media are still very much in the minority among foundation chief executives, more than half are using YouTube (68 percent), Facebook (59 percent), and blogs (53 percent) at least occasionally. Podcasts have been slower to catch on with foundation leaders (39 percent use them at least occasionally).

Twitter is largely unexplored territory—just 18 percent of foundation leaders said they use Twitter at least occasionally. More than half (60 percent) have never used it.

Of course, “using” social media is not the same as actively contributing to social media sites. Not surprisingly, only a few foundation leaders (16 percent) have ever “tweeted” (posted messages to Twitter). But a sizable minority (44 percent) have personally contributed or responded to a blog post.

“Usage,” refers to all levels of social media use, ranging from passive consumption to active participation.
Reading Blogs

Blogs have proliferated in every field, and philanthropy is no exception. We asked foundation leaders to tell us which blogs they had read or looked at in the past six months.

Of the 13 blogs mentioned in the survey, about one-third of the respondents (33 percent) said they had not looked at any in the past six months. Another third (32 percent) had looked at one or two, and 35 percent had looked at three or more.

The Huffington Post emerged as the leading blog among the foundation chief executives surveyed. More than half (53 percent) said they had looked at the Huffington Post at least once in the past six months. No other blog had been read by as many as one-third of foundation leaders during that period.

A group of five other blogs each reached about 20 to 30 percent of foundation leaders during the past six months. These included the Center for Effective Philanthropy blog, Philanthropy 2173, Give and Take, PhilanTopic, and Tactical Philanthropy.

When asked to name the blog they read most often, foundation leaders mentioned the Huffington Post (named by 15 of the 73 respondents), followed by Philanthropy 2173, PhilanTopic, and Tactical Philanthropy (each named by 4 respondents).

How Useful Are Social Media in Furthering the Work of Foundations?

Foundation leaders appear to be cautiously optimistic about the potential of social networking/Web 2.0 services to help further the work of philanthropy in general, but are uncertain how best to use them to further the work of their own foundations.

Nearly three-quarters (73 percent) think that social networking/Web 2.0 services have been at least somewhat useful in furthering philanthropic work in general. Just 11 percent feel that they have not been very useful, while 16 percent “don’t know.” (No one said that social networking/Web 2.0 services have “not been useful at all.”)

Foundation leaders are divided as to whether social networking/Web 2.0 services have been useful in furthering the work of their own foundations. Half (50 percent) think that they have been at least somewhat useful, but 39 percent say they have been either “not very useful” (25 percent) or “not useful at all” (14 percent). Eleven percent “don’t know.”

Thomas Wilcox, president of the Baltimore Community Foundation, is among those who say that social networking/Web 2.0 services have been “very useful” in furthering the work of his foundation, noting that the foundation’s presence on Twitter and Facebook “has brought us new donors and philanthropic partners.” Other foundations that have found Web 2.0 services to be “very useful” include: Battle Creek Community Foundation, Community Foundation Serving Richmond & Central Virginia, Greater New Orleans Foundation, Rasmuson Foundation, and Triangle Community Foundation.

Perceived Usefulness of Social Media/Web 2.0 Services

Source: The Foundation Center, September 2010. Figures based on the responses of 73 members of the Foundation Center’s Grantmaker Leadership Panel.
But for many chief executives, realizing the full potential of social media still lies ahead. Said one private foundation president: “I think that our foundation will need to use more social networking/Web 2.0 services in the future. We are now crafting a social media policy.” A community foundation president may have spoken for many when she said, “I am personally inept and disconnected, but I see its value.” Finally, Karen McNeil-Miller, president of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, notes that “the end has yet has yet to be written on the social networking chapter in philanthropy. I imagine a generation of foundation leadership (myself included, even as one of the relatively younger CEOs) will have to go away before it is embraced and tested fully.”

Social Media “Power Users”

While most foundation chief executives still view social media as a frontier yet to be explored, six of the 73 leaders surveyed are personally both blogging and tweeting on topics related to philanthropy—four at community foundations and two at private foundations. Two of the six are also either regular or occasional users of at least six forms of Web 2.0 services (e.g., blogs, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) and have visited nine or more philanthropy-oriented blogs at least once in the past six months. Among foundation leaders, these are the social media “power users.”

**SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILE**

**Emily Kessler, Executive Director**
Joukowsky Family Foundation

Use of social networking/Web 2.0 services:
- Blogs: REGULARLY
- e-newsletters: REGULARLY
- Facebook: REGULARLY
- Listservs: NEVER
- Podcasts: REGULARLY
- Twitter: REGULARLY
- YouTube: OCCASIONALLY

Personally blogs on topics related to philanthropy—YES
Personally tweets on topics related to philanthropy—YES
Favorite blog—Tactical Philanthropy
Also reads—A Fine Blog, Beth’s Blog, Case Foundation blog, Center for Effective Philanthropy blog, Give and Take, GiveWell blog, Huffington Post, Philanthropy 2173, SocialEntrepreneurship.change.org, PhilanTopic

**SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILE**

**Albert Ruesga, President**
Greater New Orleans Foundation

Use of social networking/Web 2.0 services:
- Blogs: REGULARLY
- e-newsletters: REGULARLY
- Facebook: REGULARLY
- Listservs: REGULARLY
- Podcasts: OCCASIONALLY
- Twitter: REGULARLY
- YouTube: REGULARLY

Personally blogs on topics related to philanthropy—YES
Personally tweets on topics related to philanthropy—YES
Favorite blog—GiftHub
Also reads—Beth’s Blog, Center for Effective Philanthropy blog, Give and Take, GiveWell blog, Huffington Post, PhilanTopic, Tactical Philanthropy, White Courtesy Telephone
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- Strengthen education leadership to improve student achievement
- Enhance out-of-school learning opportunities
- Build appreciation and demand for the arts

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Source for all data:
The Foundation Center

For more information about this advisory, contact communications@foundationcenter.org.