

How 3 nonprofits use social media on a shoestring

You don't need a bountiful cash flow to make the most of online networking channels. Here are some proven approaches.

We hear an awful lot about social media case studies like Southwest Airlines, Dell and Comcast. Those companies are typically ahead of the curve and have the resources to try new things.

Come to think of it, most of the case studies we hear about are retail or consumer-based in nature, aren't they? What about nonprofits? We don't hear as much about those kinds of organizations in terms of case studies.

There are a few reasons why. They typically don't have the resources or budget to pull off some of the more interesting campaigns, employ social media celebrity types, or have high-powered agencies and consultants pushing the story and applying for industry awards (which is how case studies are often discovered).

Despite those factors, there are a number of nonprofits setting the bar high in 2011. Here are three that are delivering results while not breaking their cash-strapped banks.

1. Goodwill

What it's doing well:

- **Twitter lists.** I've long felt Twitter lists are a resource that [brands tend to neglect](#). For nonprofits, they're a wonderful opportunity to recognize key partners and volunteers, and monitor bloggers and other advocates. Goodwill has lists for partners, "thrifty" bloggers and green news outlets. By organizing its Twitter followers in lists, it gives those followers a great way to scan and track activity on Twitter—and highlight and share tweets when appropriate.
- **Recognizing the community around them.** Goodwill does a nice job of highlighting anyone who's talking about them. Here's just one example from its [Facebook page](#). Why is this important? For nonprofits, their volunteer and supporters are their lifeblood. By recognizing them publicly (remember, Goodwill has 23,000-plus Facebook fans, so a post on their site is significant), they are saying, we value you and your hard work. That makes a difference for volunteers and supporters, believe me. And it engenders (excuse the pun) more good will. As a result, it's increasingly likely that these people will either donate again, volunteer more time or share with friends.
- **Success stories podcasts.** Podcasts can put a human face to the organization. More important, [these podcasts](#) afford those thinking of working for Goodwill the opportunity to get a glimpse into the kind of people working there, the types of jobs available and why people

enjoy working for the organization. It's a multimedia recruiting tool.

2. Share Our Strength

What it's doing well:

- **Using blog technology as a CMS.** This is a move I suggest to many nonprofit clients because of its ease of use and flexibility. Granted, I'm not positive Share our Strength is taking this approach, but its [current site](#) looks like a WordPress template to me. That template gives it everything it needs in website functionality. Sure, it probably needed a developer's assistance to set the site up, but I guarantee you it didn't come with an outside vendor's price tag.
- **The No Kid Hungry Pledge.** Check out Share our Strength's [Facebook page](#). Its custom welcome page is simple, but brilliant. On it, the organization asks you to take a pledge—to help end childhood hunger by 2015. Once you sign up, you receive a short e-mail message asking you to help spread the word by way of social status updates (templated Facebook and Twitter posts) or via e-mail. There's no plea for money or to volunteer your time. Just spread the word. And it's building a valuable email database of superfans with whom to stay connected.
- **The basics of blogging.** SOS doesn't do anything sexy with its blog, but the basics can be powerful over time. It blogs about topics important to its audience (advocacy, how their partners are supporting SOS and specific programs like [Cooking Matters](#)). It includes bloggers from across the organization (easing the blogging burden). And it makes it easy to subscribe via e-mail, which is how most people will subscribe, as opposed to RSS. You won't find a ton of comments on its blog, but that doesn't mean it's a failure. Remember, each post is now an "informational annuity" (a term I'm stealing from [Jay Baer](#) and [Amber Naslund](#)). It's searchable, and it's easy to share with partners, volunteers and potential donors with a simple click of the mouse.

3. The Humane Society of the United States

What it's doing well:

- **Focus.** Visit any nonprofit homepage these days, and you'll probably see an array of social media interaction. Organizations with Facebook and Twitter pages, YouTube channels and even Flickr accounts. Wait, I thought these organizations were strapped for resources? How do they stay on top of these real-time platforms? Turns out, many don't. They create them, then let them wilt or add meaningless content. The Humane Society hasn't taken that route. It concentrates its efforts on blogging, Twitter and Facebook. That's a ton of work, especially when your Facebook posts get 500-plus comments! But it's a much better approach than spray-and-pray.

- **Telling its story through the ‘top dog.’** Sorry, I couldn’t resist the obvious pun. What really impresses me about The Humane Society is its knack for nailing the basics of blogging. Consistency? Since 2007, CEO Wayne Pucelle has posted virtually every week. Community building? Each post includes relevant and helpful links. The blog boasts easy share buttons at the bottom of each post (many with more than 200 “likes”). After reading a post, what if I want to donate to The Humane Society? One click at the top of each post. My point? The Humane Society’s blog is an effective storytelling device because it executes the basics so well.

- **Galvanizing its fans.** I love its “[Tell Strawberry to go Fur-Free](#)” campaign on its Facebook page. The tab asks supporters to fill out a form that urges retailer Strawberry to go fur-free. The Humane Society is taking a fan base that already supports its organization and gives those fans a tool to help a cause they care about.