Charities in Social Media: The Power of Images

The 2013 Report

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Introduction and methodology

It is becoming increasingly clear that making the right impression in social media can have a positive impact on a charity’s income.

This was underlined by a recent report by New Philanthropy Capital, which said people in the UK would donate an additional £665m a year to charities if they were better informed about the charities’ aims and achievements. Clearly, creating and nurturing social communities is one way charities can better inform and influence people.

Most charities use a mix of social media channels to communicate with their audiences, but in a competitive marketplace (competition for volunteering, not just donations) it’s crucial that charities look to differentiate themselves and not just communicate. They also need to engage, so an effective use of the right social media channels is a key consideration for any charity’s marketing team.

Earlier this year, a survey for Give as you Live found that 30% of UK charity donors had been inspired to donate through social media channels.

Clearly, therefore, social networks are becoming as important as websites for charities to engage with – and positively influence – their key audiences and persuade them to donate.

But are they making the best of those opportunities?

Most research to date has looked at charities’ overall presence in social media, which are the most used networks and the strategies charities use to build followers and fans.

But, until now, an analysis of the type of content being created by charities has been largely ignored. In particular, the impact of visual messages – through photography and video – within social media has not been considered.

The growth of visually-based social networks – such as YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, Pinterest, Instagram and Vine – demonstrates the importance of images in creating that emotional engagement with an audience.

This report examines how UK charities are performing when it comes to the use of photography and video in their social media communications.
Methodology

The key purpose of the research was to assess the extent to which still images, video and graphical data are being used by charities to support their aims and objectives, and to communicate key campaign and/or fundraising messages to volunteers, supporters, potential donors or commercial partners.

For this report, we looked at the social media presence of a sample of 200 UK charities.

The 200 charities were taken from a cross-section of the UK Third Sector landscape, incorporating organisations from a wide range of charitable sectors and with annual incomes ranging from £10,000 to over £5m (for further information, please see the Acknowledgements page at the end of this report).

As a first step, we identified which, if any, social media platforms (including Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, Vimeo, Instagram and Flickr) were being used by those charities as official communication platforms in the UK. We excluded, therefore, any charity’s social media presence that did not appear to originate in the UK, or was clearly aimed at a global audience.

We also excluded any social media being used in an “unofficial” capacity (eg by individual employees, volunteers or supporters).

We then focused on the use of images across those networks – not just the quantity of images, but also the quality and relevance of the content to the charity’s stated aims and objectives. We also considered the level of engagement for that image-based content – not just how many ‘likes’ or ‘views’ have been achieved, but the comments and conversations resulting.

In assessing the relative merits of each charity’s use of photography and video in social media, we then took a view on whether the quality and frequency of that content across the relevant networks was greater or less than would be expected, based on the charity’s size (income), its activities and public/media profile. This was factored into the final analysis.
Key findings

1. Charities tend to focus on one network

Although more than 90 per cent of the charities we surveyed have a presence on Facebook and/or Twitter, only 45 per cent have an active presence across at least two of the image-based social networks, such as YouTube, Pinterest, Flickr or Instagram. [By ‘active’, we mean that new content is being added on a frequent basis]

Of the remaining 55 per cent, 37 per cent are active on just one of those networks, and 18 per cent have no active presence on any.

In total, just 22 per cent of charities are regularly sharing images and videos – and engaging with visitors – widely across the social media landscape.

2. Lack of engagement a factor

After Facebook and Twitter, YouTube is the most popular social network among the charities in our survey.

More than three quarters of charities (77 per cent) have a presence on YouTube (ie have uploaded at least one video), although almost a fifth (17 per cent) have not uploaded a video in 2013.

However, despite the popularity of YouTube as a social media channel for charities, few are taking advantage of the opportunity to encourage engagement through the ‘Comments’ feature, or by linking the video content through to the charity’s other social media channels, such as Facebook. Essentially, they are ‘curating’ their content but not promoting it.

For photography, Flickr is still the most popular social network (apart from Facebook), despite the growth of Pinterest, Tumblr and Instagram. Of the charities we surveyed, 51 per cent had a Flickr presence, followed by Pinterest (36 per cent), Tumblr (15 per cent) and Instagram (8 per cent). As with video, however, most charities appear to be using those networks simply as a method of content curation, but not promotion or sharing.
3. Events and TV ads form the core of social media images

Of the one in five charities (22 per cent) who frequently upload and share photography or videos, they are most commonly taken from fundraising events or TV advertising, rather than being produced specifically in support of campaigns.

This suggests that, by and large, charities are repurposing existing video and photographic content for social media, rather than creating new material specifically for that network.

After fundraising event highlights and TV advertising campaigns, the most popular charity videos on YouTube, Facebook and Vimeo feature interviews with charity employees or trustees.

One charity picked out for developing network-focused content is Diabetes UK, which is driving engagement with diabetics and other supporters by creating specific interest boards on Pinterest and informative videos for YouTube.

4. Quantity is winning the battle over quality

Charities are demonstrating a tendency to prioritise quantity over quality. The desire to share information, rather than engage and influence, leads to social networks being flooded with hundreds of images and videos. This can often lead to confusion over the charities’ key aims and objectives. This, we believe, will impact ultimately on support for those charities.

The Alzheimer’s Society is one charity which, in our opinion, is focusing on quality rather than quantity. It has a good range of videos and photography on both Facebook and YouTube, which are categorised by subject area. However, the charity could do more to engage with visitors – for instance, by being clearer about ways in which people can support the charity.
5. Size doesn’t matter

It is not necessarily the biggest charities that are most actively using video and photography within social media to promote their campaigns and events.

Our research clearly indicates that the size of a charity’s marketing budget is not the over-riding factor determining its success, or otherwise, in using photography and video in social media.

Mencap, for example, focuses its Flickr activity on images from fundraising events, and its video content in social media is comprehensive but appears to be unfocused. Although the charity has a number of campaign platforms, its YouTube channel does not reflect that.

The National Autistic Society, on the other hand, has far fewer YouTube videos or subscribers, but its content is co-ordinated across a number of social networks and focuses more on the charity’s campaigns and on autism policy.
Social media can help charities provide real points of difference.

However, our research demonstrates that the majority of UK charities are failing to make the most of photography and video in social media to maximise their appeal to potential supporters, donors or commercial partners.

The power of images to influence consumer attitudes and attract donations is being under-utilised by charities large and small, with too many focusing on promoting their events rather than their campaigns, and curating content rather than driving engagement.

Getting people to become active and committed supporters would arguably be more effective if the charities harnessed the power of images in social media, rather than just words. Text gets information across, but images bring the campaigns to life and drive real emotional engagement with supporters and volunteers.

Only a small minority of charities will have the budget for a TV advertising campaign, but almost anyone can produce a low-cost video that, if successfully shared in social media, could create a similar level of engagement and response to a TV campaign.
Recommendations

Although we have highlighted a number of key points from our research that could be applied broadly across the voluntary sector, we do acknowledge that a ‘one size fits all’ approach would not be appropriate. Each charity’s objectives from its social media presence will be different, so it is difficult to apply hard and fast ‘rules’ to all of them.

Nevertheless, we have identified a number of general recommendations we believe would benefit most charities:

- Ensure there is video/photography available that can be uploaded and shared after each event, even if it is provided by a volunteer or supporter.

- Every charity has case studies of people it has helped, or work it has done. Images and videos featuring those case studies can help supporters and donors better understand how they can become involved.

- Avoid “talking heads”. Many charity videos are focused on interviews with executives or academics, and fail to engage on an emotional level with potential supporters.

- Instead, maximise the “human interest” opportunity. All charities need help from donors, supporters or volunteers, so use photography and video to drive emotional engagement with your audience. Images of fundraisers in charity t-shirts manning a cake stall have their place, but highlighting case studies or communicating hard-hitting campaign messages through video may have more impact with those audiences.

- Keep it active – if it goes dormant, people will move on and probably not come back.

- Using YouTube, Pinterest, Vimeo and Instagram as image and video storage libraries is not making best use of those networks. Each has extensive and well developed communities of people keen to engage and share, so anything you upload should be seen as an opportunity to strengthen that engagement by encouraging comment and sharing.

- And create ‘Donate’ buttons in social media. If you have successfully engaged with potential supporters, make it easy for them to give. Redirecting them back to your website only increases the risk they will end their visit before donating.
Six of the best

Of the charities in our survey, we believe the following are good examples of how to use photography and video effectively in social media.

They are not necessarily the ‘best’. The purpose of our research was not to create a ‘league table’ of the best and worst charities in social media, but we felt it would be useful to highlight several we felt could act as a reasonable benchmark for the sector.

Although those charities have different subject matters, do not use the same social networks and have different types of video and photographic content, they are all consistent in understanding the need to provide engaging photographic and video content.
Acknowledgements

The following additional research sources were used during the compilation of this report:

‘Top 3000 Charities 2013’, by Wilmington Publishing

‘Money for Good UK’ 2013 report, by New Philanthropy Capital
http://www.thinknpc.org/publications/money-for-good-uk/

Charities Aid Foundation – Charity Trends
http://www.charitytrends.org/

Charity Commission – Sector Facts & Figures

Third Sector Research Centre – Exploring social media as a tool for knowledge exchange

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