Social media has largely changed the way people communicate with one another. People can now instantly share thoughts and opinions with people on the other side of the globe.

The prevalence of social media has also made it easier for charities to share a mission statement or message—like a call to volunteer or submit a donation.

The global reach of social media is impressive. Sources including Google, Mac World, Socialnomics and Pingdom cite some amazing statistics with regard to the reach of social media, including:

—One in every nine people on Earth is on Facebook.

—People spend 700 billion minutes per month on Facebook.

—YouTube has generated 450 million unique users who visit every month. The site also boasts 92 billion page views per month.

—Twitter handles around 190 million tweets per day.

—Google+ was the fastest social network to reach 10 million, doing so in just 16 days.

—During an average 20-minute period registered in 2010 on Facebook, there were 580,000 wall posts, 2,716,000 photos uploaded and 10,208,000 comments posted.

While individuals do not necessarily use social media to research nonprofit organizations or make donations, social media is an effective and low-cost method for soliciting people for

volunteerism and even fundraising.

People also turn to social media sites to find out information about the efforts of certain charitable organizations or to hear more from people who benefited from an organization's services or actions.

To enable information flow to people via social media, nonprofits should create a social media presence. One of the easiest ways to do so is to start a Facebook fan page or establish a Twitter following.

Because people may become annoyed by organizations that constantly try to push products or solicit donations via social media, it is important to balance out the content shared with fans. Keep the ratio close to 80/20, which means there should be 80 percent of generic informative information offered with 20 percent of donation/volunteerism messaging.

To keep people coming back for more, organizations will need to engage them on a level that goes beyond simply asking for help. Publish information on topics that are interesting, some of which pertains to the charitable organization itself and some that is just newsworthy.

People are very interested in the personal stories of "survivors" or those helped by organizations. Offering testimonials or tales from these people will lend credibility to the nonprofit as well.

Social media also helps to make anyone who is using it feel more connected on a personal level than a corporate website or an information hotline. It may reduce inhibitions about contacting a charity if it seems like the organization's members are willing to "chat" via social media. Experts advise that charities should use social networks as a way to connect with users through real stories, conversations and interactions.

Communication isn't always most effective when information is disseminated strictly by organizations. A good portion of donations and volunteerism is initiated by individuals who have a stake in a specific cause.

For example, a mother to autistic children may encourage Facebook friends to participate in a specific fundraising walk or make a donation to a charity of choice. Because of this personal appeal, this type of outreach may be one of the most effective ways charities put social media to use.

Nonprofits and other organizations should not overlook the effectiveness of social media to share a special message in a relatively short amount of time with people around the world.

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