

Grantmaking 2.0

Using New Technology to Enhance Grantmaker Practices

August 2007

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Throughout the nonprofit sector the buzz abounds – examples of nonprofits experimenting with new technologies from social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace to online video to text messaging seem to be everywhere. Fewer, yet increasing, examples exist of grantmaking foundations using the Internet creatively to achieve their missions. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation’s exploration of the role of philanthropy in virtual worlds such as [SecondLife](#) and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation’s use of a [wiki](#) to "bring the wisdom of crowds to bear" on the development of a grantmaking strategy around nitrogen/agriculture are two of the more visible and cutting edge current efforts.

Stories from the Changing Communications Landscape

The following examples illustrate a handful of the myriad ways grantmakers can use new technologies productively to help accomplish four common goals:

1. Facilitate communication among grantees
2. Connect grantees with external experts
3. Serve as information resources to the wider community – not only grantees
4. Improve communication with grantees and increase transparency

1. Facilitate Communication Among Grantees

Facilitate connections before and after in-person gatherings.

[Civic Ventures](#) and the Stanford Graduate School of Business' [Center for Social Innovation's](#) Purpose Prize Innovation Network [website](#) provides an example of how foundations can use the Internet to connect grantees before and after in-person gatherings.

In advance of the 2006 “Purpose Prize Innovation Summit,” the organizer posted the event schedule, suggested background readings, and a directory containing profiles of speakers and participants. But one could also find there:

- a [multi-author blog](#) for organizers and participants to begin communicating before even arriving at the event; and
- a “Save A Dance For Me” tool for conference participants to schedule times to connect with each other during the event. Participants indicated in advance those members that they would be interested in meeting at the summit.

Afterwards, the Web site was used to document the event. The organizers assembled:

- event [photos](#) (hosted on flickr¹)
- a [webcast](#) of a discussion with the Prize winners, and other [digital videos](#) of event sessions.

Moreover, the site was structured to promote ongoing communication among participants beyond the life of the event. Each event participant can continue to contribute to the site's blog. Individuals' blog entries can be viewed as [personal journals](#) (only reading one person's entries at a time) or as part of a chronological set of all blog entries made on the site. Along with reading what others have to say, participants can comment on others' blog entries. Thus, the blog becomes an archive of a series of discrete discussions.

Promote tagging as an information-sharing tool.

Beyond the site, the community of people interested in the Purpose Prize can share information, photos, and videos using tags². A [search](#) of the tag "purposeprize" unearths nearly 300 photos and three videos all related to the prize.

A more robust example of the potential of tagging is the use of the "nptech" tag by people interested in nonprofit technology. More than [7,000 web pages](#) have been tagged "nptech" by Internet users, along with more than 2,300 blog posts, nearly 2,000 photos, and 40 digital videos. By tagging an online resource with "nptech" any user can draw the attention of others in the nonprofit technology community to a resource that he or she thinks that others will find valuable and relevant to the issue. Where appropriate, a foundation could introduce and promote the use of tagging among its grantees.

2. Connect Nonprofits with External Experts

The Nonprofit Technology Enterprise Network ([NTEN](#)) wanted to provide educational forums for its

¹ [Flickr](#) is a widely used photo management and sharing application, which allows users to make their photos accessible to a select group of people or to all Internet users. The public accessibility of photos, coupled with online community tools that allow people to tag them (see footnote #2), has created a large collaborative database of categorized photos.

² As described in the [Wikipedia](#), "tag is a keyword or term used to classify content by means of a [folksonomy](#). Tags are usually chosen informally and personally by the author/creator of the item — i.e. not usually as part of some formally defined classification scheme."

members across the country to learn about topics relevant to their work. To do so, they created a series of web-based conference calls or “webinars.” NTEN’s [webinars](#) are “live” seminars led by issue experts in the field of nonprofit technology. Participants log in to watch the presentation on their personal computers and listen by dialing in by phone. By using a Web site plug-in, [Gabbly](#), NTEN provides attendees the opportunity to participate in a “back-channel” chat during the seminar. Recordings of the webinars (audio and slide presentations) are made available following the event on the NTEN Web site. For example, NTEN hosted a discussion about “open APIs.” A [podcast](#)³ of the call is posted on the organization’s Web site.

Most compelling about this example is the subtle community-building effect of the back-channel discussions. The ability to communicate with each other and share their reactions to the experts’ presentations moves people from passive listeners to active participants in this type of online event and provides a sense of shared experience among them.

3. Serve as an Information Resource to Community – beyond Grantees

Some foundations are working to influence the issue areas they care most about by providing valuable information to their communities. These types of projects can be supported through grantmaking or as in-house activities.

Aggregate and share community data.

The [Lucile Packard Foundation for Children’s Health](#) is devoted to promoting, protecting, and sustaining the health of children. Located in Palo Alto, California, the foundation has worked to raise awareness of children's issues in its community and inform program and policy decisions related to their health and well-being.

Central to this effort was the creation of [Kidsdata.org](#) which makes accessible in one location key data regularly collected by numerous agencies about children’s health in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. The site’s searchable database lists and tracks local information on approximately 40 health topics, and shows comparable regional and California data where available. The site also includes analyses of how

³ “A podcast is like an audio blog. Instead of reading it, you listen. The difference between a podcast and a regular webcast/Internet radio/etc. site is that a podcast can be setup to automatically download to your iPod on a schedule you choose. It is like a Tivo/DVR.” [Source](#)

children are faring in each topic area; a database of related news and research; and resources for obtaining and giving assistance.

Aggregate and share information about funding and learning opportunities.

The [Meyer Foundation](#) in Washington, DC is using its Web site as an information source for the local nonprofit community, not only for its individual grantees. Along with posting current funding and learning opportunities from a variety of sources, the site includes a searchable database where nonprofits can find opportunities related to their specific issue areas. They also highlight current funding and learning opportunities in their monthly email newsletter. Using the foundation's Web site and electronic newsletter is technologically simple, yet can serve as an extremely valuable resource.

Strategic community mapping.

Foundation resources can be used to support the creation of geographic mapping tools, which can be of value to grantees and the wider community.

For example, [Greenbelt Alliance](#), a nonprofit dedicated to protecting open space in the San Francisco Bay Area, worked with partner organizations to create a mapping information system for identifying, tracking, and illustrating the highest priority land conservation opportunities in the region. GIS (geographic information systems), a technology that allows users to view and analyze data from a geographic perspective, was used to link locations and features "on the ground" to information about those features. The resulting map allows users to synthesize land use, demographic and planning data in the region. The tool is now used to quickly and easily produce maps (1, 2) illustrating threats to open space, the resource values of open space (critical habitat, biodiversity, watersheds), land use policies, demographic data and scenarios for the region's future growth. As a result, advocates can more persuasively educate and mobilize the public, the media, and policy makers about threats to the region's undeveloped landscapes. Foundations could use such technology to map the locations and service areas of nonprofits (including data about the organizations such as the types of services provided) as well as community crime, health, school performance and demographic information.

The layering of some types of data onto searchable maps has become much easier since Google started sharing the Google Maps API⁴, which allows users to embed Google Maps into their own Web sites. The

⁴ APIs (application programming interfaces) allow one application to 'request' information from and exchange data

resulting [map “mash-ups”](#) are an example of how content from multiple sources can be combined to powerful effect. Google also recently launched [Google Earth Outreach](#) to assist nonprofits and foundations interested in layering data with satellite images.

4. Improve Foundations’ Communication with Grantees and Increase Transparency

Several experts have suggested that the most useful and important ways that a foundation can use technology tools, especially the Internet, is to improve the ease of communications between the foundation and grantees and to improve the organization’s transparency.

The [Charles Stewart Mott Foundation](#) wanted to ease the transaction burden experienced by its grantees. Along with information about the status of grants – whether a check has been cut, when reports are due, etc. – Mott provides grantees with access to electronic versions of their proposals and previous reports and accepts electronic submissions. Grantees can subscribe to email alerts to remind them of upcoming report deadlines. The system was designed based on input the foundation gathered during focus groups with grantees.

In the interest of increasing the foundation’s transparency, Mott created an online searchable database of all of its grants since 1972. It also makes available by [RSS feed](#)⁵ both its foundation news bulletin as well as details of each grant approved.

Insights from the Experts

The following observations and advice are offered to foundations starting down the technology road:

- “The tool can’t drive the strategy.” One expert elaborated on this commonly-heard theme this way:

In our experience, if a need isn’t clearly identified there’s a big risk of inventing a solution in search of [a problem]. This is a message we frequently deliver to foundation staff

between computer programs.

⁵ “RSS is a standard for syndicating frequently updated content to users. The advantage of RSS is that updates to your subscribed channels are delivered automatically to your RSS news reader in an easy to browse format. You can choose to subscribe to RSS channels from a wide variety of sites. An RSS channel consists of a list of items, each containing a headline, short description, and a link to a web page with the full article.” [Source](#).

interested in exploring this concept. In fact, we usually recommend that the project begin with a discovery phase process specifically to define the problem to be solved. Absent that, any technology solution is likely to fail. There are simply too many things competing for grantees' attention -- both online and off.

- For many technology tools, success requires extensive time and effort on the part of the foundation, grantees, or both, even if the actual technology implementation, such as creating a blog or setting up an email discussion group, is simple and quick.
- Whether a project is successful hinges much more on how it is implemented rather than on the technologies themselves. The exact same technology tools and tactics can lead to dramatic failures or fantastic successes, depending upon the particulars of how they are implemented.
- “Grantees want to talk with each other, but they don’t want us [foundations] there.” More than one expert cautioned that the task of facilitating communication, and especially collaboration, among grantees is a tricky endeavor for a foundation to undertake because of the uneven power relationship between grantees and the foundation.⁶
- “Be useful. Grantees don’t need another thing to do. They are all overwhelmed, overworked, and under-resourced. Unless what you do fits into their workflow and provides value, it will not take off.” This hard-edged comment reflects the oft-repeated axiom among communications and technology experts of “Don’t do tech for tech’s sake.”
- At least four experts highlighted the potential for foundations to use the Internet to support their core work – grantmaking – by improving communications with grantees regarding their grants. One expert explicitly suggested that this should be a foundation’s initial and primary use of technology in working with grantees.

Lastly, as foundations think about how new technologies can transform their work, an even larger issue is at hand: Technology is changing the ways we as a society are organized and the ways individuals interact with each other. The media we use to communicate are changing our behavior. As one expert stated, “What tools we use actually change the way we think and work,” and these changes are affecting how the social sector works. “Technology is pervasive... There are networks and centers of community that are being built that can completely bypass nonprofits... Nonprofits can find their way there, but as a field

⁶ [“The Power of Learning: Funders and Grantees Getting Smarter Together”](#) by Jack Chin discusses funder-grantee power dynamics and ways to address them through learning communities.

they are not in any way a part of it.” Foundations will need to pay closer attention to the impacts of new information and communication technologies on how people pursue and achieve social change.

Experts Consulted

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