

# Social media and the charity and not for profit sectors

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**the specialists in**  
**charity and not for profit**  
**executive recruitment**

## **Social media and the charity and not for profit sectors**

**Social media has loomed large in our personal lives for well over a decade now, but in recent years, it has played an ever expanding role in our professional world too. More and more of us are using it to stay up to date with news in our sectors, connect with colleagues and peers and get our own messages out, either for our own professional development or to promote the organisations we work for and/or with.**

**Harris Hill Executive Search has been speaking to our network of CEOs and senior leaders to find out how the charity and not for profit sector makes use of the increasingly powerful tools social media platforms offer, and manage the challenges and opportunities this relatively new means of connection and communication poses.**

### **CEO as online ambassador**

A small number of CEOs told us that they personally “don’t do social media”. However, they are vastly outnumbered by their peers who not only place great importance on “doing” social media well, but use it themselves to play an active role in promoting their organisation.

Of all the CEOs we spoke to, the platform of choice for their own professional use is Twitter. They run their own Twitter accounts that specifically identify them as the CEO of their organisation. Several CEOs pointed out a direct link between their role as the face of their organisation and their tweeting - with one CEO in the education sector telling us that they are always aware that they are tweeting as a CEO in addition to as a private citizen, but that would also be true if they were to make a speech.

### **Which audience? Which platform?**

As with any means of communication, charities and not for profits have to consider the audience they want to reach, the message they want to convey, and then make decisions on the appropriate platform/s. One CEO of a charity that provides advice and support to families told us that they saw fantastic engagement on Facebook between the charity and the beneficiaries, allowing the organisation to reach out to them with support and services, but also the platform allowed the organisation to facilitate a community of beneficiaries for peer support. Another CEO echoed that Facebook was a great way to reach beneficiaries, but that they as CEO went to Twitter to reach “influencers”, whether they be in government, the press, or sector colleagues and peers.

Twitter and Facebook are nearly ubiquitous, but many CEOs spoke about the challenges of keeping up with the ever-changing landscape of platforms. This is of particular importance to charities that work with younger people who are digital natives and tend to be early adopters of emerging platforms. Alternatively, there are platforms that are well-established, but while they are nearly universally familiar to certain demographics, they are relatively obscure to others.

An example would be Snapchat, which is a key part of many teenagers’ and young people’s lives, but can appear baffling to the uninitiated. One particularly social media-savvy CEO of a youth charity posed the question: “how on earth do you exploit (Snapchat)? It deletes in 20 seconds.” In their case, it was a largely rhetorical question, and they went on to explain how their charity makes use of the platform’s “Stories” function to put out dynamic, visually engaging good news stories to their young followers. Like a number of other CEOs, they stressed the need to adapt to change and stay up to date with trends and platforms, and think about what best suits the audience, the work and the message. For example, an organisation that works with people to develop employability skills may want to make significant use of LinkedIn, while an animal charity may see more relevance and impact on a more visual platform like Instagram, where appealing or heart string-tugging photos of the animals they help are likely to see high engagement.

## **Direct access**

The huge opportunity of social media done well is that it allows direct access into people's everyday lives, with your organisational messaging beamed directly into potential supporters' and beneficiaries' phones that they have with them at all times of the day. However, this reach and accessibility has a challenging flipside – people use social media 24/7, but there are not the resources in the charity and not for profit sector to be on call for the same.

With much of the sector being quite 9-5, it can be mean great opportunities to engage can be missed: one CEO gave the example of a prime time documentary going out on the BBC about their organisation's area of work that sparked a national conversation on Twitter, but because there was no one working their social media accounts at that moment in time, the charity missed out on a chance to capitalise on the raised profile of their cause.

## **Dealing with criticism**

Social media is in general a very public forum, and there is a reputational risk from complaints and criticism – originally from social media platforms or elsewhere – gaining momentum on social media that can be difficult to stay ahead of. This scenario would be compounded if the issue arises out of hours when an organisation is not geared up to respond quickly. Several CEOs mentioned that they have specific policies in place to see off or ensure damage limitation in such circumstances.

However, when an organisation comes under fire from any source, social media can be a powerful tool to counter negative messaging, especially if it has a strong community of followers who independently speak positively of its work, or even proactively come to its defence. One CEO commented that in today's frequently hostile press coverage of third sector CEOs, tweeting about their role and achievements on a day to day basis is an effective counter to accusations of inactivity and ineffectuality; and by connecting and communicating with sector peers, can defuse claims that the sector is atomised and fractured.

## **Look who's talking**

The different ways the varying stakeholders of a charity or not for profit engage with social media is something CEOs and their communications teams have to be aware of. One CEO commented that younger and older staff can view the whole digital area very differently – while older staff can see digital as something separate from other areas of work, younger staff have likely grown up using the technologies and their forerunners that they now work with, and see digital as an intrinsic part of life with their professional lives being no different. This can result in different training needs, and varying attitudes to cultural and procedural changes.

Notably, staff, volunteers and even Board members who are practised, regular users of social media can be a risk where their less digitally-connected peers are not: they can veer off message. This can be countered with strong and clearly communicated social media policies, which many CEOs mentioned. One CEO told us that they brought in lawyers to discuss social media presence with the Board, with a key piece of advice being that the messages they put out on social media, especially those posts relating to their work at the charity, should stay within the aims of the charity as set out in its governance papers. Specifically, they were advised that since their charity was not a campaigning organisation, they should not engage in campaigning.

## **Content**

This need for caution in what those people connected with an organisation post on social media can cause tension with a quality that is often very important to ensure strong engagement with social media content: authenticity and spontaneity. Key benefits of social media are the ability to respond quickly and, especially for organisations in this sector, to transmit passion. It is important that these benefits are not tamped down by over-caution.

The need to create engaging content was repeatedly stressed by the majority of our CEO contacts. One CEO of an economic and community development charity said that they had brought in consultants to discuss digital strategy. The advice was to ensure that content was kept fresh, rather than repetitious posts about meetings and press releases, with an emphasis on visual content. The same CEO brought up the aforementioned challenge of resourcing the creation of such content, which is an ongoing question for many organisations. The solution this organisation uses currently is that all staff received training on how to take engaging photos using their own phones, which are then internally moderated before being posted, however this moderation takes time which costs something in spontaneity.

## **News**

As opposed to simply getting a message out, every CEO who told us that they were on Twitter mentioned that Twitter is also an invaluable source of real-time news. The use of social media as a news source is highly topical at the moment, with a spotlight on the tendency of social media networks to create “bubbles” that insulate users from those outside their network and their views. However, considered curation of connections, followers, etc, can create social media timelines and newsfeeds that provide focused sector and sub-sector news aggregation that often beats more traditional news sources for breaking stories. This can allow organisations to stay ahead and react quickly to developing situations.

## **Data**

An aspect of social media that can be overlooked in favour of messaging and engagement is the insight it can provide through data analysis. Below headline numbers such as number of followers, data analysis provides insight on who is engaging, how, when, why, etc. This can then be used to tailor messaging – to existing supporters, potential supporters, beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries. However, such information can be used in service design. For example, if analytics reveals that a disability organisation is seeing strong engagement from younger people, it can support a case for developing a targeted service for them.

## **An invaluable tool**

Even amongst the very small number of CEOs who told us they “don’t do social media”, there is no disputing the fact that it is already a vital and ever more important tool for the sector that is neglected at an organisation’s peril. With most employees in the sector signed up to at least one social media platform, it is increasingly difficult to separate it from the work of any function within an organisation, not just communications, marketing and fundraising where its uses are perhaps most obvious. For many organisations, it is a central plank in their service delivery, whether that is delivering support and advice, or campaigning, or knowing where services need to be targeted.

The dangers of neglecting social media are not just the passive ones of missing out on chances to engage and get messaging out. With so much of people's lives conducted through these platforms, if organisations do not maintain a presence and monitor the conversation, they risk losing control of their online reputations, and therefore their reputations in general. Where there is a presence, care must be taken to ensure messaging is appropriate and on target for both the content and the platform (always guided by the intended audience), and that there are clear guidelines in place for this. It is also important that all internal stakeholders – employed and voluntary – have at least some awareness of their role in representing their organisation if they reveal their affiliation online.

Whilst it has its potential pitfalls, social media is a cheap and in most cases free (in direct monetary if not in staffing resources) means of getting your organisation and its message out in front of the world. Like the organisations they lead, the CEOs we spoke to covered a diverse spectrum of expertise, from those who do not or barely make use of social media to early adopters of Twitter who can put together a Story on Snapchat. For the majority of CEOs who have a social media presence, it is just another aspect of their 24/7 role as leaders of and ambassadors for their organisation and fits naturally into their professional lives.

**The real challenge and opportunity for the charity and not for profit sectors, as for any organisation, is to integrate social media into the everyday as much as so many of the general public have into their daily lives.**

**But in an environment where the ecosystem of platforms moves so rapidly, it will be an ongoing process for the foreseeable future rather than something which is done and completed. This type of ever-fluctuating operating environment will be familiar to most if not all organisations in these sectors, which calls for leaders who are comfortable with ambiguity and change, who can see the opportunities in challenges, but also the challenge in opportunities.**

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If you would like any further information on this paper or the issues raised, or to find out how Harris Hill Executive Search can support your senior recruitment process, please contact **Jenny Hills** on **020 7820 7321** or email the team at [executive@harrishill.co.uk](mailto:executive@harrishill.co.uk)