

ANDREA BALL: PHILANTHROPY

Are trendy Web tools helping charities? More nonprofits are turning to the Web

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Last month, Tyson Foods pledged to give the Capital Area Food Bank 100 pounds of food for every comment left on the company's hunger relief blog.

So the charity turned to the Web community for help. Staffers posted the challenge on Twitter, Facebook and the nonprofit organization's blog (<http://austinfoodbank.wordpress.com/>). Food bank supporters added the information to their Twitter accounts, Facebook pages and blogs. So did their friends.

Food Bank staffers figured that it would take about a month to get a mass amount of signatures.

It took six hours. In less than a day, Web readers had scored the group 35,000 pounds of protein products. That's the equivalent of 43,750 meals.

"The local social media community has really embraced the food bank and become a champion for us," spokeswoman Kerri Qunell said. "With the Tyson blog challenge, they helped us accomplish in six hours what traditionally might have taken days or even months."

These days, nonprofit groups are linked into social media more than ever before. They use Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and MySpace. They've refined their blogs, adding new technology and clarifying their message.

But do those outlets actually attract more donations, increase name recognition and lure more supporters?

Obviously, they can. The key is setting reasonable expectations for what each medium can provide, said Thon Morse, president of Kimbia, an Austin software company that develops online fundraising technology.

"There are all these things you want to do, but some are more appropriate than others," Morse said.

Every day, millions of people hit the Web to catch up with friends and tell the world what they're doing. Facebook and MySpace each have more than 100 million active users. Twitter is thought to have more than 1 million users.

"A lot of nonprofits want to know, 'How do I use this to make money?' " Morse said. "The question really is, 'How do I reach people?' " KLRU is a good example of how social media can work well, Morse said.

The public television station uses Twitter to tell people what's on the air. Its blog provides the whole schedule and a prominent donation button, as does its main Web site. Its MySpace page includes video of its shows, as does its YouTube site.

Meanwhile, during pledge times, the station places an on-screen Web address that allows viewers to donate money to the show airing at that moment. Those combined efforts are designed to generate buzz about the nonprofit organization, which can make fundraising easier.

"The idea is not just doing e-mails that point people to one spot," said Gary Thompson, an Austin business strategist for social commerce and social media. "It's about harnessing a large network of folks."

In December, KLRU (www.klr.org) raised 10 to 12 percent of its money through the Internet, said Shane Guiter, the station's membership director. In March, after installing donation-friendly software on its Web media, that figure jumped to 29 percent. Plus, the station exceeded its fundraising goal.

Guiter attributes the overall success, at least in part, to the additional fundraising power of social media and the general growth of online giving.

But the station can't rely solely on Facebook and MySpace to make its money, he said. It still hosts on-air pledge drives, sends e-mails and mails fundraising letters.

"It's about integrating all our fundraising efforts together," Guiter said. "We don't need to raise \$1 million from Twitter because we're doing many, many things."

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