Personify

Join. Engage. Unite.

Community Beyond Facebook

When Facebook pages and groups debuted they seemed too good to be true – direct access to the members who loved you most, right on the homepage of their most-visited website. With the rise of smart phones, your organization was literally in your members' pockets at all times. Best of all, it was free!

Facebook's biggest advantage? The active users on their platform. Another benefit many find appealing is the ease of set-up – all you have to do is create the group and you're done. No software to install, no additional technology to maintain. And there's that familiar Facebook look-and-feel, making it easy for group members to respond to events, post comments and connect with others who share their interests.

Times are Changing

But, for organizations relying on Facebook, there may be storm clouds gathering on the horizon.

After years of seemingly unstoppable momentum, Facebook's audience growth is plateauing or worse. In their 2018 second-quarter earnings call, Facebook shared its number of US users has remained flat (185 million daily active users) while the number of users in Europe, where GDPR privacy regulations have recently taken affect, has fallen by three million[1]. Why?

Security Concerns Continue

Facebook meticulously tracks its users' online lives, far beyond the company's well-known targeted advertisements. Details that people often readily volunteer — age, employer, relationship status, likes and location — are just the start. When users travel to other sites, Facebook can continue monitoring their activity with software like its ubiquitous "Like" and "Share" buttons, and something called Facebook Pixel — a code snippet dropped onto the other websites that allows that site and Facebook to track users' activity. This data has served as a valuable asset for Facebook, and serves at the core of its business model.

While Facebook users must agree to the company's data policy when signing up for an account, some regulators contend that Facebook has not obtained users' explicit and informed consent to track them on other sites and apps. **Many of Facebook's 2.1 billion users have no idea how much data Facebook could collect about them and how the company could use it.**

And there is a growing unease that tech giants are unfairly manipulating users. This issue has seen significant attention with recent media coverage of Cambridge Analytica, who used a quiz-style game on Facebook to collect information on 87 million users for the purposes of creating psychographic profiles to better target political content.

While recent GDPR regulations have gone a long way at protecting user privacy abroad, outside the European Union, Facebook employs face recognition technology for a name-tagging feature allowing for automatic suggestion of names for the people in users' photos. Civil liberties experts warn that face recognition technology could threaten the ability of Americans to remain anonymous online, on the street and at political protests – particularly important for organizations looking to their groups to drive advocacy for sensitive issues or for those using groups to connect constituents who may be facing illness or disease.

Facebook is... Uncool?

In addition to overall challenges with user adoption and ongoing concerns about privacy, Facebook is confronting a more immediate concern previously faced by predecessors like Friendster and MySpace – becoming passé with younger audiences, a key growth opportunity for many organizations. According to a recently published study from the Pew Research Center[2], **just 51% of US individuals ages 13 to 17 say they use Facebook**, a dramatic plunge from the 71% who reported used the social network in Pew's previous study, fielded in 2015[3]. Usage among teens in homes whose annual family income is $75,000 or more – often a target demographic for organizations looking to leverage Facebook groups to amplify fundraising efforts - is even lower at just 36%.

The study from Pew Research Center is not the only report to suggest younger audiences are leaving Facebook. A February 2018 study from eMarketer[4] estimated Facebook's user base in this key demographic declined by 9.9% in 2017. The study goes on to predict Facebook will lose an additional 2.1 million American users under the age of 25 this year.

Getting Lost in the Shuffle

Although the introduction of the Facebook Zero algorithm in 2018 has improved visibility by prioritizing news feed posts from family, friends and groups over brand pages, Facebook continues to be a busy place. Getting eyeballs either requires constant introduction of fresh content or ads to ensure you're getting messages to your members.

And, Facebook ads can be challenging. Just as Facebook owns your community's content, they also can play a heavy role in determining if your ads get attention and/or how much:

- Text-heavy ads may see impressions throttled while ads judged to be low-quality may receive less exposure due to a poor Relevance Score.
- If Facebook doesn't approve ad copy, the ad won't run. Facebook's new policy on political advertising applies not just to candidate based ads, but "any national legislative issue of public importance in any place where the ad is being run." Additional categories expected to require authorization include high-profile issues important to many nonprofits like "abortion" and "guns" alongside broader concepts like "health," "environment" and "values."
- Budget accordingly. You'll be competing against a lot of other companies to win that ad slot and you've got to beat them in the auction — a low bid will see you miss out too often to generate results and impressions.

Additionally, in August of 2018, Facebook announced the removal of 5,000 targeting options to help prevent misuse. While these options have been used in legitimate ways, particularly by nonprofits, to reach people interested in a certain product, service or cause, Facebook elected to mitigate potential risks for discrimination. Although a full list of the prohibited attributes has not been published, many are believed to relate to attributes such as ethnicity or religion – often a valuable datapoint for nonprofits looking to target their outreach.

The Difference Between Social Media and Online Communities

Should an organization even bother?

Social media remains an important channel for building awareness and a cost-effective way to reach thousands of current members. But when it comes to community, social media sites like Facebook can come up short. Facebook:

- Focuses on socially- or conversationally-enabled content (not conversation)
- Relies on a loose network with a hub-and-spoke model of interaction between an audience and the content creator, or person sharing the content.
- Dynamic, broad ranging conversations are facilitated only through a comment or response transaction.

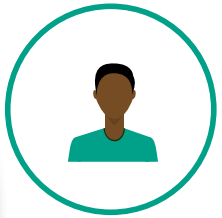
Think about your own Facebook account. You have social interactions online, but those interactions are with individuals and aren't connected by one shared purpose. Your network is broad and wide-ranging with the only shared connection across many of your friends and family being... you. You comment and respond on peoples' posts, but they aren't a dialogue in that they're one-way. And this behavior may extend to the pages you follow or groups you belong to. A nonprofit may share an update on a program – you like the post and may respond with kind words, but there's no dialogue. You may like a photo from an organization's recent event but you don't expect a reply. In this regard, social media often serves as a communal monologue where everyone is communicating but not necessarily with one another. Just because people are connected in a shared network doesn't make it a community.

For nonprofit organizations, community is more than just a destination for discussion to take place. Communities have goals of building a loyal following, growing and cultivating a supportive environment while helping members and furthering your mission. Community doesn't just happen; it's intentional and needs to be taken care of.

It's easy to feel a sense of community, but community can be difficult to define. This helpful description suggests you know you're in a community when your group or online social circle has these characteristics[5]:

- Tight interlinking relationships between a significant percentage of members
- An acknowledgment of shared fate or purpose
- A potentially wide range of topics/conversations within that shared purpose
- A distributed leadership network – sometimes with a single leader, sometimes not
- A core membership that is relatively stable and active

In your organization's community, members and/or donors tightly interlink because of their dependence on the organization or shared belief in a cause. Since everyone is connected, constituents have a shared fate and purpose. A thriving community usually has many topics of conversation, which bonds constituents. That shared purpose and common bond creates a core membership of both active participants and lurkers who hold the community together.



A Real World Example: American Cancer Society

The American Cancer Society (ACS) is on a mission: to free the world from cancer. To make this a reality, ACS funds and conducts research, shares expert information, supports patients and spreads the word about prevention to improve care outcomes and quality of life for patients and their loved ones.

Personify worked with American Cancer Society's Jeff Montegut to outline a few reasons why Facebook shouldn't take the place of an online community.

Secure Ownership of Data and Access to Constituent Information

When users provide information to Facebook, all data is owned by Facebook and sequestered away from your organization.

Increase SEO for Websites

User-generated information that you choose to make available publicly is indexed by search engines. This improves SEO and overall Google Page Rank, which drives greater traffic to not only your online community, but also to your main website.

Generate Leads for Future Marketing Activities

As new members join your community, their contact and profile information becomes available, allowing you to supplement your marketing and awareness efforts. This isn't an option when Facebook users follow or like your business page.

Create a Safe and Interactive Environment

Facebook is a "come one, come all" type of environment that appeals to any member, regardless of specific interest or background. Their focus and feature set is generalized and they must place barriers between members to maintain order. After joining your community, members possess greater opportunities to access, communicate, collaborate and share with other members, creating a true sense of community and purpose.

Offer More Ways to Collaborate

On Facebook, your communication is limited to their existing feature set and organizational use guidelines. In addition, differentiating amongst types of customers (i.e., staff, subject matter experts, Team Captains, Committee Members) and tailoring the experience for them is impossible.

Maintain Brand Control and Harvest the Benefits

On Facebook, the branding is out of your control. It is obvious to your members that they are using Facebook which is not provided by your organization. When a positive member experience ensues, who gets the credit – you or Facebook?

Using Facebook dilutes the perceived benefits that could accrue to your organization, which dilutes the impact on customer loyalty. In addition, opportunities exist for branding confusion. Should they friend your account or a spurious one that only appears to be yours?

Facebook Features are Limited

Facebook creates a siloed experience. For example, American Cancer Society's Relay for Life Social Media Strategy discourages the creation of competing Relay pages on Facebook, except in the case of local events. But, people who join local event pages are not connected to any other page, nor are they connected to the national Relay for Life page. They are isolated from the rest of the Relay community, and limited to interaction between themselves and other members of their local event.

The typical Facebook user does not "friend" everyone. He/she only friends people they know. Growing security concerns around Facebook will only strengthen this statistic. In a private online community, people will be more willing to add strangers to their friends list because the mentality of a community member is to connect with as many like-minded strangers as possible.

Facebook Page Behavior

If you stopped posting comments on your organization's Facebook page, the page would go defunct. As noted above, the conversation on an organization's Facebook page is strictly between you and your "followers". The Online Community strategy allows your constituents to connect, engage and bond with one another. You cannot force constituents to interact with each other on Facebook. It just doesn't happen. On Facebook pages, there is potential for conversations to drop out of visibility in a short amount of time, resulting in a high potential for lost conversations, repeat conversations and comment fatigue.

Creating an Open Dialogue

As noted above, Facebook does not allow for constituents to interact with each other while on a business Facebook page. This makes it difficult to share ideas and resources with other members. For example, Relay for Life volunteers (Team Captains and Committee Members) do not consider Facebook as the "go-to" place for ideas, resources and best practices because it isn't a flexible, comprehensive, searchable outlet. Likewise, Relay for Life divisions aren't able to publish regional announcements and engage in conversations with their volunteers on Facebook, which is their primary need in an online community.

Facebook is all about "me." It's what an individual is doing, their pictures and their life. Their involvement with the organizations they care about isn't 100% of what they do, so their activity may be diluted in Facebook and their opportunity to engage with other volunteers will be limited to the few people in their friends list who support the same organizations.

While social media isn't the ideal platform for member engagement, we're not suggesting you ignore it altogether.

Your social media platforms are a way of capturing the attention of those who may interested in your cause, but aren't necessarily members, donors or volunteers yet. Use your social pages to promote your community and convert followers on social media into community members. If you're able to pull off the transition successfully, you're able to ensure your membership will see future content posted within the community. The social page becomes an acquisition tool for your community, rather than the main point of communication.

Once they're in the door, you can turn your community into the hub for all of your content. When the community is your content hub, you can amplify the power of social media, while enjoying the benefits of maintaining the central content hub:

- Content is created by your members, but you are in control of the discussion
- Content is indexed and searchable in the future
- Organization has rights to use content
- Posts provide a path, and serve as a better awareness and acquisition tools
- Organization is able to recognize contributors and provide more of a 360-degree user experience

If done right, this becomes a cycle. Members come into the community and create and consume content. You share that content on social media channels, enticing other members to join. These members consume and create... and so on and so forth. ASAE's landmark Decision to Join study suggests an engaged member is more likely to take actions resulting in positive outcomes and contributing to the bottom line. In addition to engagement metrics, the following revenue sources should be considered when making the case for your community's ROI:

- Increased retention
- Increased referrals via word of mouth
- Increased event attendance
- Increased product purchases
- Increased volunteerism

Every Platform Has its Place

Each social platform – Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter – has a place in the world and your organization. They're all important and powerful tools. The trick is finding the right job for each tool and it's important to pick the right tool for your community. You'll want to harness that energy more effectively – and grow your community on secure land you can call your own.

About Personify

Personify is the market-leading Constituent Management and Engagement (CME) platform that empowers nonprofit organizations to better engage their constituents, maximize revenue and optimize operations. For over 20 years, Personify has served as the technology foundation for organizations of all sizes from the largest associations, charities, YMCAs and JCCs to emerging nonprofits. Nearly 25 percent of the U.S. population interacts with Personify through their involvement in nonprofit organizations. For additional information, visit www.personifycorp.com.

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