

NIK NESBITT, chief executive officer of **KenCall**, argues that charities need to commit to better online engagement, which includes a proper focus on monitoring and responding to donor requirements.



Facilitating engagement with their donors may involve charities giving their contact centres, in-house or outsourced, the tools and processes to engage through Twitter and the like.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF ENGAGING WITH DONORS ONLINE

Traditional methods of communication are always in danger of being superseded. The trouble is that it's not always obvious when this is going to happen. Spare a thought for the once well employed carrier pigeon at the birth of the telegraph wire; and what of the expert smoke signaller at the advent of carrier pigeon technology? Of course, times have moved on somewhat since then but the principles of technology being superseded remain the same.

Unbeknown to many organisations – especially those busy coping with the recession – we are actually seeing this process in action as we speak. Like it or not, many consumers and, consequently, charity donors are starting to wake up to, and engage in, a post-email communications landscape.

At the heart of everything is the growth of social networking applications and the evolution of instant messaging which has evolved into the seemingly unstoppable twitter. Many (though not all) are using these tools to communicate in more logical, interlinked and rapid ways than email can possibly provide.

group

For example, why would someone try to organise a fundraising group over email when countless back and forth emails make the process time consuming and stressful. It is much better to organise a group discussion in Facebook where everyone can pool ideas for raising money, and suggest fundraising targets and dates for meeting in an easy, visible and collaborative manner.



KenCall's Nik Nesbitt – too many charities still seem to have their heads in the sand where online engagement is concerned.

This evolution of communication is not limited to the consumer space though as business collaboration tools such as Huddle and Basecamp continue to gain credence in the workplace. Huddle itself boasts a reduction in unnecessary emails by 50% or more.

traditional

As new generations of staff continue to enter the workspace, it is likely that email will continue to become less and less relevant. And, though voice based contact is pretty secure, we are even seeing new communication tools eat into traditional voice conversations as collaborative communication becomes more efficient.

Communications are clearly undergoing a sizeable change. Charities' supporters now follow new ways of understanding each other, gathering information about each other and their activities, whilst interacting with like-minded people about the issues that matter to them. But many charities are being left behind by maintaining focus on the "traditional" contact routes of phone, post and email.

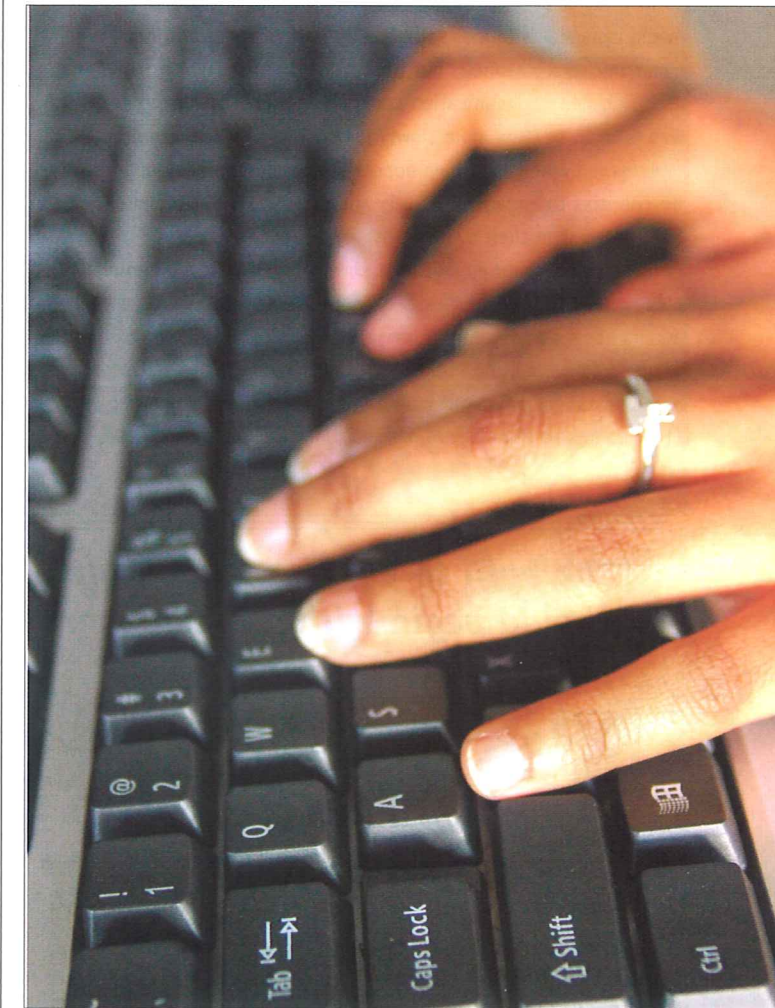
"Charity donors have always liked to see the results of their donations and hear about the good work their chosen organisation is doing."

While this is by no means flogging a dead horse, it does indicate that many have failed to adapt to create new supporter engagement – the fulcrum of donations. Flopping donors off with bi-annual phonecalls asking for more money and posting them about new initiatives can anger donors whilst creating doubt over what good donations are actually doing.

These changes clearly have huge implications for the charity sector. The three most important concern engagement with existing donors, the driving of new donations and development of support around initiatives. Charity donors have always liked to see the results of their donations and hear about the good work their chosen organisation is doing. The avenues of sharing this information and rallying others to a cause are growing very rapidly.

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Likewise, the ability to gather support around niche causes and initiatives and spread the word wider than ever before, is now available to even the smallest charity. Knowledge is now almost as important as money when communicating online.



When online donor engagement does take place, it should be on as human, honest and transparent a basis as possible.

The key to donor engagement online

1. Speak to supporters – What do they need? How do they need it?
2. Listen and find out what's going on – Who is talking? What are they saying? Where are they saying it?
3. Assess and understand your charity's role - How can supporters help?
4. Develop proactive useful communication tools and channels to engage with supporters.

The ground is really shifting under charities' feet, as regular donations are no longer assured and charitable support now often develops and moves in different ways than before. If a charity's supporters are changing, then it is vital for charities, small and large, to bring themselves up to speed before it is too late. Incoming donations must be maintained and donors need to be kept onside and up to date in as effective and efficient a manner as possible.

groundswell

So what can charities do? The first thing is not to panic. Social media evangelists talk of seismic shifts away from traditional communication channels, but this is not the case. While many donors are using new communication channels, reactive technologies on the web tend to develop more slowly taking time to gain interest, groundswell and mainstream appeal. But there are many opportunities for charities to engage positively and usefully within communities and build interest in their own causes.

The path to donor engagement should begin with a listening process where a charity must work to understand how, where and why donors engage and gather information. It's also important to find out what might be missing in a charity's communication repertoire – for example, supporters might have trouble finding and engaging with other donors or finding information about a charity's activities.

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This can be done using online polls, interviews and so on. It is important to get this feedback from donors to ensure that all "bases" are covered and also that those who don't use online tools are not neglected.

The listening process must then continue to find out what is going

on and where. To save money, free monitoring tools such as Google alerts and Monitter (in Twitter) can be used. For the larger charity, a premium service such as Radian 6 or Analytica could be preferable. Understanding a charity's donors' communications landscape is a complex task, so listening and unravelling what is actually going on takes at least a month and sometimes longer.

"The listening process should not stop after the initial period because communication around charity issues will continue regardless."

Once this is done it is up to the charity to assess where and how it needs to engage, or facilitate engagement with its donors. Some examples of this might be to acquire expertise to engage in supporters forums. In another case it might be creating a space on the website for community engagement or giving contact centres, in-house or outsourced, the tools and processes to engage through Twitter and the like. Numerous charities have also had success in creating their own social networks and groups, for example over Facebook and Ning. There are many companies which can advise on this process from marketers to customer service and call centre organisations – all should have something to add.

The listening process should not stop after the initial period because communication around charity issues will continue regardless. It is up to proactive charities to constantly monitor what is being spoken about around charity issues and engage appropriately.

answer

For example if people ask questions about ongoing campaigns or charity projects, it is the charity's place to be there to provide the answer. While ongoing engagement will obviously incur costs, most find the benefits of added engagement far outweigh spending.

A word of caution to charities before diving in, is not to think that they should be involved in everything which is happening online. In many cases supporters will be getting on just fine helping each other out without extra input, for example grassroots charity campaigns in Facebook. However, in most cases there will be something which the charity can add. A charity's commitment to its donors necessitates that it caters for all their needs.

This also means changing the way the charity communicates across customer service, marketing and other relevant departments. And, when online donor engagement *does* take place, it should be on as human, honest and transparent a basis as possible.

It is clear that communications is changing on a daily basis, but too many charities still seem to have their heads in the sand where online engagement is concerned. Acting now to understand the landscape, whilst learning how to communicate with supporters in new and productive ways, will stand a charity in the best possible stead for the current, and evolving, post-email world.