

TACTICAL PHILANTHROPY

Twitter Presents a Chance for Savvy Charities to Reach More People

By Sean Stannard-Stockton

Late one Friday afternoon this fall, Matt Flannery, the co-founder of Kiva.org, posted a message on Twitter: "It seems like my Twitter account is getting attacked by spam. 500 new followers a minute. Anyone else experiencing this?"

In fact, a small group of people who use Twitter to talk about philanthropy had also been inundated with followers. But the reason for the instant increase wasn't anything as spurious as a spam attack. All the people who suddenly attracted new followers had just been added to Twitter's official "suggested users" list of people worth following. Traditionally, Twitter's suggestions have included celebrities like Al Gore, Shaquille O'Neal, and Oprah Winfrey, so adding the likes of Matt Flannery and other stars of the philanthropy world represents a big shift.

Twitter's decision to elevate people in philanthropy to its list of those worthy of watching is important for the nonprofit world. It gives people at foundations and other nonprofit organizations a new platform to attract supporters and discuss important issues — but people in philanthropy will need to change their ways if they plan to capitalize on this important moment.

It is easy to dismiss Twitter, since it requires that people post their thoughts within a limit of 140 characters at a time. Many press releases put out by foundations feature headlines two or three times longer than an average "tweet."

But this has been the year for Twitter to enter the mainstream of online social networks. While President Obama was considered cutting edge when he released his choice of a running mate in 2008 via text message, it's clear he would have used Twitter to make such an announcement if he were trying to stir the same kind of excitement this year.

Twitter allows people who broadcast messages to get the word out to anyone who has signed up to listen. And reading the messages doesn't require any special access; just sign up to follow someone and you can get all the public messages the person sends.

Twitter has also gotten some attention in philanthropy this year. At the annual conference of the Council on Foundations this spring, people were using Twitter to post messages about many of the sessions, in part because the council created an official Twitter account from which it encouraged conference goers to chat about sessions they attended.

But to a large degree, Twitter posts about philanthropy end up circulating within a small group of people who are passionate about the subject. While a hot topic might capture the interest of a small number of Twitter posters, those tweets rarely if ever "go viral" and branch out to reach the millions of people who use Twitter for reasons that go well beyond philanthropy.

However, that could soon be changing, as Matt Flannery learned.

When Twitter decided to add a group of philanthropy-focused people to its suggestion list, it vastly expanded the number of people who now get updates on nonprofit issues. In addition to adding Matt Flannery, Twitter highlighted organizations like the Skoll Foundation and the Acumen Fund as well as individuals like the nonprofit-social-media expert Beth Kanter and the social entrepreneur Kjerstin Erickson.

The results of getting on Twitter's suggested user list are phenomenal.

Since he was added, Mr. Flannery's follower count has ballooned from a couple thousand to more than a hundred thousand. If the experience of the past is a guide, then the new philanthropy-focused members of the list can expect to add half a million or more followers over time. The exposure is seen as being so valuable that the Internet entrepreneur Jason Calacanis once offered Twitter \$250,000 if it would add him to the list.

Those kinds of numbers make Twitter a key forum for discussions of philanthropy, in many cases outstripping the number of people who subscribe to print and online publications about nonprofit affairs.

But what is even more important about Twitter's decision to highlight nonprofit leaders in its list is that it is yet another sign that philanthropy itself is becoming more and more a part of mainstream culture. News organizations are devoting more attention to nonprofit affairs, Product Red made giving a prominent part of the consumer world, and the NBC drama *The Philanthropist* brought the topic to prime time.

As a result, philanthropy is no longer a topic of discussion reserved for the ultrawealthy, nonprofit executives, or academic researchers. As with any topic that goes mainstream, many insiders will complain that the subject is too nuanced for the masses to understand.

But the people and organizations that can figure out how to speak authentically about philanthropy to a mainstream voice — without dumbing down the subject or talking over the heads of the newly formed crowds — will dominate the discussions about the nonprofit world in the coming months and years.

For the most part, people in philanthropy have a tradition of speaking in jargon-filled messages to other philanthropy insiders.

But preaching to the choir never changed the world.

While it might be a strange new world for philanthropy, unless more people at foundations and charities learn to speak to the newly gathering mainstream audiences, they may blow a huge opportunity to radically expand the influence of the nonprofit world.

Sean Stannard-Stockton is chief executive of Tactical Philanthropy Advisors, in Burlingame, Calif., and author of the Tactical Philanthropy blog. He is a regular columnist for the The Chronicle of Philanthropy.