

Why Every Philanthropist Should Be Active on Twitter

by Jay Ruderman

When philanthropists act at a remove, it often results in the very people that they wish to help gaining little benefit from services that, after all, their target populations had no say in developing. An easy way to connect is to become active on Twitter.

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A FELLOW PHILANTHROPIST RECENTLY confided to me that he's never sure if his philanthropic dollars are making a difference. "Sometimes it feels like it's all going down the drain," he said. While he has continually received from his grantees metrics, benchmarks, and data about how his dollars are being put to good use, he mused, "If I've really made such a big difference, why do there never seem to be any sustainable solutions?"

Maybe the desperation for return on investment would be lessened if we philanthropists spent more time away from our Ivory Towers and more time with the end users of our dollars, getting to know their challenges.

Why Are So Many Philanthropists Removed from the Challenges They Wish to Address?

A philanthropist myself, I've observed that most major philanthropists are elitists—cut off from the majority of society, including the very populations their largesse is designed to serve. Extremely

wealthy people too often only associate with others in their financial and social class. But, like all things worth doing, philanthropy requires getting your hands dirty. A good starting point would be for the philanthropist to interact with real people and causes via Twitter.

Twitter is a quick and easy way to access and remain accessible to those we serve. All too often, philanthropists are disconnected from their target populations; and it doesn't help that, in addition, when they interact with the organizations they support, philanthropists tend to work through the CEO, who may also be disconnected from the target populations. The CEO may be elitist him- or herself, or enamored of the wealth and status of the philanthropist. Moreover, NGOs actively court the support of major philanthropists, and often tell them what they want to hear for fear of appearing to be failing or departing from their focus on the philanthropist's desired approach.

Some philanthropists retreat from society because, as they complain,

they're constantly being hit up for their time and money. As a private person myself, I can relate to this grumble. While enthusiastic interest from the public can indeed be trying and time consuming, it's a poor excuse for withdrawing. Like other forms of celebrity, wealth comes with a price.

Because philanthropists are often so far removed from the people they are trying to help, they often push for initiatives that make little sense and, consequently, have little impact. They see their wealth as proof of competence, insulating themselves from the scrutiny of the staff, other stakeholders, and the end users.

The end result of this elitism is that frequently the very people philanthropists claim to serve gain little benefit from services that, in addition, they had no say whatsoever in developing.

Getting closer to the target audience is not only sound philanthropy; I'd argue it's morally obligatory. Philanthropists have the responsibility to be more connected to the people they are seeking to impact, because their philanthropic

dollars are not wholly their own. Whether they dispense their donations through a foundation or a donor-advised fund, the U.S. government has provided them with tax benefits in order to advance the public good. How can they be sure their dollars are benefiting the public good if they haven't spoken to the portion of the public they intend to assist?

The Ruderman Family Foundation tries to do the following:

- *Remain accessible through Twitter and other social media outlets.* We respond to people, have conversations with them, and listen to their ideas and criticisms. We tell people what we are doing and want to do. Not only is our foundation active on Twitter, I'm personally active. I use it to both broadcast and listen. As a result, I am much closer to the discussion in the communities I'm trying to influence.

- *Interact regularly with the people we want to impact.* When, for example, we try to enhance our investment in disability inclusion advocacy, we convene a group of self-advocates, who share with us their take on the best solutions. We involve self-advocates in all aspects of our work.

- *Hold major conferences and other gatherings open to the general public or target populations.* Opening ourselves to our constituencies in this way allows people to provide input vis-à-vis the issues at hand, and keeps us aware of their real needs so that we can better align our services.



If we listen more, not just to the professionals but also to the people they

serve, we acknowledge that our giving is not about us or our generosity; it's about the people we ultimately try to help. And we just might find that our philanthropy is making a bigger difference than we ever imagined.

JAY RUDERMAN is president of the Ruderman Family Foundation, which focuses on the inclusion of people with disabilities in our society. He also serves on the Board of Directors of the Jewish Funders Network, and is a member of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee's executive committee. The foundation is holding the 2015 Ruderman Inclusion Summit on November 1 and 2, in Boston.

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