

Attention Philanthropy:

The Good, the Bad, and the Strategy

by Chao Guo, PhD, and Gregory D. Saxton, PhD

Amid the cacophony of information about social projects, how do we call public and philanthropic attention to our cause? As this article explains, organizations must build and leverage an actionable audience, and the best framework for this is a three-stage pyramid model of social media-based strategy: *reaching out to people*, *keeping the flame alive*, and *stepping up to action*. But, warn the authors, do not chase attention at any cost: if we focus too much on gaining the public's attention, we risk losing sight of our mission and accountability.

"MAY YOU LIVE IN INTERESTING TIMES." This purported Chinese curse captures the nature of the information environment in which nonprofit organizations find themselves. The worldwide proliferation of information and communication technologies has ushered in a new age characterized by a twenty-four-hour news cycle, powerful Internet search engines, and near-countless social media outlets. Most nonprofit organizations make an appearance on social media and have websites that show all their good work, and people are not limited to the organization as their primary information source: they can obtain information through multiple venues—from voluntary web-based transparency and disclosure by the

organizations themselves to intermediaries such as GuideStar, rating agencies such as Charity Navigator, and decentralized "word of mouse."

Yet, this abundance of information comes with a price. As Nobel laureate Herbert Simon noted some forty years ago, "[T]he wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of [. . .] the attention of its recipients."¹ Due to people's limited information-processing capacity, their attention to any particular cause or organization is necessarily diluted. As a result, they often fail to notice organizations or causes that are not constantly in their faces in a flashy way.

The challenges are particularly salient when nonprofits begin embracing social networking technologies. In addition to print media, radio, and television, a typical organization now has a website, uses e-mail, and avails itself of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest, and such custom-made mobile applications as Check-in for Good, Donate a Photo, I Can Go Without, and YMCA Finder, among many others. Recent research

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shows that the great majority of large and medium-sized nonprofits are using these information channels.² The problem is, if everyone is doing social networking, who is paying attention to your nonprofit? There seems no first-mover advantage to adopting these technologies, and just the mere fact of having a Facebook profile is not enough to make your organization unique.

In this altered informational landscape, attention has become a scarce organizational resource. Philanthropy and charity work are increasingly driven by attention, a commodity that nonprofit organizations must acquire in order to attract—and sustain—their donors, volunteers, and supporters. Welcome to the age of attention philanthropy.

What Is Attention Philanthropy?

We define attention philanthropy as the *challenges, opportunities, and responses associated with the phenomenon in which all players in the philanthropic and charitable sector (for example, donors, funders, supporters, nonprofits, and so on) are potentially overwhelmed by information overload and a dearth of attention*. What is behind this phenomenon? The surge in computerization and digitization over the past three decades has led to a sharp increase in the number of information channels, as noted above. The decentralized and participatory aspects of digital media have also led to an explosion in the number of information producers, intermediaries, and third-party providers. Almost anyone can be an online journalist, blogger, or nonprofit analyst. The increase in information producers and channels has in turn led to an explosion in the amount of available information. In short, the information environment of nonprofit organizations has changed. It is markedly richer yet more difficult to navigate. With so much to look at but a limited information-processing capacity, there is an “attention deficit” problem: donors and supporters can have difficulty knowing where to direct their attention, and organizations can have difficulty grabbing and holding that attention.

This attention deficit problem possesses at least three characteristics that have possible broad implications for nonprofit organizations.

First, people’s attention is fleeting. Today, they are reading about the infamous terrorist group Boko Haram kidnapping hundreds of Nigerian girls; tomorrow, a massive earthquake in Latin America holds their attention. Thus, whatever attention the public gives an organization is unsustainable: people notice an organization, like it (or hate it, in some cases), and then forget about it.

Second, people are drawn to drama. Donors and supporters are more likely to notice dramatic stories and spectacular events, such as natural disasters and crises. While these catastrophes certainly deserve attention, they tend to divert support from smaller yet still important local causes. Attention philanthropy seems to exacerbate the issue. This tendency is consistent with and related to the observation that nonprofits often rely on anecdotal, personalized stories and narratives to describe their function rather than highlighting organizational qualities like careful program design and systematic evaluation.

Finally, people crave the new. They are more likely to pay attention to new programs, projects, and activities than to old ones.

The scarcity of attention has thus initiated changes in philanthropic practices that present notable opportunities and challenges for nonprofit organizations. Below we outline the positive and negative aspects of these implications before turning to potential organizational strategies for thriving in this new information environment.

The Good

Attention philanthropy presents opportunities for nonprofit leaders to experiment with new ways of reaching their target audiences. Attention, if properly managed, can be a powerful marketing tool for nonprofit organizations. For example, TOMS Shoes, a company with a charitable mission (“With every pair you purchase, TOMS will give a new pair of shoes to a child in need”), has developed a grassroots marketing approach that entails a series of attention-grabbing events, such as the “One Day Without Shoes” campaign, instead of relying on formal channels of advertising. Its clever, attention-getting strategies have attracted numerous people to the company’s “One for One” message and helped establish a wide network of

supporters crucial to the company's business and philanthropic success. Since TOMS launched in 2006, it has given over ten million pairs of shoes to children in more than sixty countries.

Sometimes, the amount of public attention an organization attracts is not even the result of its deliberate strategy. One such example is a Facebook campaign by supporters of the Susan G. Komen foundation. In October 2010, a viral Facebook posting of unknown origin encouraged women to say where they like to leave their purses when they come home. The provocative statements—"I like it on the floor" and "I like it on the kitchen counter"—got people talking. The "I like it on . . ." meme—like the "bra color" status updates that swept Facebook a little earlier—was intended to bring attention to Breast Cancer Awareness Month (October). The tactic apparently funneled 140,000 new fans to the official Susan G. Komen Facebook page that year. Komen did not take credit for the phenomenon, but it certainly enjoyed the free publicity. "We think it's terrific," a spokeswoman for Komen commented. "It's a terrific example of how little things get started on the Internet and go a long way to raise cancer awareness."³

More broadly, attention philanthropy potentially yields several positive developments for the nonprofit sector. For instance, it provides a more level playing field, and allows for a more decentralized, bottom-up participatory approach to solving social problems. Gaining attention relies as much on creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship as it does on financial resources. And, as seen in the above examples, the size and resourcefulness of an organization's wider constituent network play a key role in the success of a fundraising or public education campaign. A greater emphasis on the public's attention may also benefit the vitality of the nonprofit sector by concentrating its focus on external constituents.

The Bad

Yet, attention can cut both ways. In the case of Susan G. Komen, good publicity quickly turned bad when, in January 2012, the nation's leading breast cancer charity "quietly" decided to cut funding to Planned Parenthood, the nation's leading provider of health services to women. When Planned Parenthood not

so quietly announced the news on its Facebook page, shocked and outraged people lavished their support on Planned Parenthood—not just in the form of Facebook "likes" and Twitter followers but also in donations; at the same time, they expressed damning criticism of Komen through social media. The negative attention led to heavy public scrutiny of Komen's programs and finances—and, as it turned out, Komen was not as much "for the cure" as its name suggests: it was found that, in 2011, the "pink ribbon" organization spent 15 percent of its donations on research awards and grants, down from 29 percent in 2008; in contrast, 43 percent of donations were spent on education, and 18 percent on fundraising and administration.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, public attention tends to latch onto the flashier organizations, programs, projects, and activities. For instance, research shows that in crowdfunding appeals, certain types of organizations (for example, environmental and health organizations) were more likely to attract money than others (for example, organizations for the homeless).⁴ Evidence shows, too, that nonprofits make crowdfunding appeals largely for new, tangible projects (buying a new building, making a film, and so on), and that none make crowdfunding appeals for such mundane projects as program evaluation or human resources training. Such prosaic yet essential goals simply do not grab attention. Energy more easily swings toward marketing, public relations, stakeholder relations, and capital projects. Within each organization, in turn, efforts tend to shift to those programs that are more attention grabbing. It's the same for certain projects; for example, building a new clubhouse receives more attention than refurbishing an existing one.

Perhaps more importantly, an organization can become lost when it obsesses over getting attention at the expense of its mission, as the Greg Mortenson controversy illustrates. Mortenson, cofounder and executive director of the nonprofit Central Asia Institute (CAI), used his best-selling books *Three Cups of Tea* and *Stones into Schools* to promote the CAI cause. In them, he recounts the story of the founding of his nonprofit, and tells of the struggles CAI faced while fulfilling its mission of providing education to

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girls in remote areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The books brought Mortenson a large fan base and extensive media attention. Until a few years ago, his constant presence had ensured a steady flow of donations to CAI that enabled him to vastly increase the size and scope of its operations. In 2012, however, Mortenson came under heavy scrutiny for alleged inaccuracies in his books, gaps in accounting, and possible exaggeration of the number of schools his organization had built. Unfortunately for Mortenson, regardless of whether or not these allegations are true, the controversy has seriously damaged his reputation and challenged the legitimacy of his organization.

Finally, sometimes an organization can suffer from negative secondhand attention due to its affiliation with someone who is in the spotlight. Take the Livestrong Foundation (formerly known as the Lance Armstrong Foundation) as an example. Established by the world-famous cyclist Lance Armstrong, in 1997, to help cancer survivors and their families, the success of the foundation had been closely associated with its founder, president, and single largest donor. Because of Armstrong's celebrity status, the foundation was able to garner tremendous attention and support from donors, corporate sponsors, and the public. This secondhand attention backfired, however, when Armstrong appeared on the *Oprah Winfrey* show in January 2013 and admitted to having used banned substances to improve his cycling performance.

The Strategy

What is an organization to do in these interesting times? A first step is to recognize that attention is an informational, communicative, message-based phenomenon that implies a series of sender → receiver relationships, with the organization being the sender and the public the receiver. As a result, organizational leaders need to become comfortable with designing appropriate messages and targeting relevant audiences.

Organizations should recognize that certain types of messages are more likely to receive attention than others. Here we present several insights from nonprofits' use of social media that provide an excellent context in which to see the immediate

audience reaction to organizational messages. Not only are the insights valuable, given the ever-increasing use of social media tools, but they can also be generalized to other communication channels, such as websites and traditional media.

Our research suggests that, on Twitter, targeted messages (those seeking to connect to other users), messages including images, and messages tapping into preexisting networks through the use of hashtags are more likely to receive audience reaction. Just as importantly, those organizations that communicate frequently and those with larger audiences are more likely to receive attention.⁵ This observation makes intuitive sense. You need an audience that not only reads your messages, "friends" you on Facebook, and/or follows you on Twitter but also makes donations or signs up to volunteer; if you can make it "captive," you will be more successful in the long run. Yet how do you build a captive audience? You need to build a network and communicate with it.

So how can an organization build and leverage a captive audience that is actionable? Our research suggests that the best framework for building an online network is a three-stage pyramid model of social media-based strategy: *reaching out to people, keeping the flame alive*, and *stepping up to action*.⁶

The first stage, *reaching out*, involves making new connections and getting the word out through the continuous sending of brief messages to followers. These tweets are largely informational, and the focus is on getting attention. One interesting practice on Twitter is what might be called "celebrity poking" or "fishing," as in the following attempt by Public Counsel (@PublicCounsel) to target Oprah Winfrey:

@oprah in tribute video to Elie Wiesel: "you survived horror without hating"

Celebrities have tremendous network powers, in the sense that their tweets almost immediately reach audiences of hundreds of thousands—even millions—of followers. If a nonprofit can capture the attention of a celebrity, the payoff, in terms of geometrically increasing the diffusion of an organizational message or call to action, is enticing.

The second stage, *keeping the flame alive*, involves deepening and building emergent ties.

The focus is on preserving attention: enhancing and sustaining communities of interest and networks of supporters. The two types of community-building tweets are *dialogue* and *community building*. First, there are tweets that spark direct interactive conversations between organizations and their public. An example is the following tweet from ChildFund International (@ChildFund):

Change a childhood #childfundcac event starts now. Give us your best tweets on child rights. Rules @ <http://www.childfund.org/twitter>

Second, there are those tweets whose primary purpose is to say something that strengthens ties to specific users (via @user mentions) and discussions (via hashtags) in the online community without involving an expectation of interactive conversation. The following message from Make The Road New York (@MaketheRoadNY) offers a good example of this type of community-building tweet:

Great work everybody! MT @LICivicEngageTks for pledging to reg. voters this year! @naacp_ldf, #local1102, @32bj_seiu, #liia, #carecen

The third stage, *stepping up to action*, involves mobilizing supporters. The focus is on turning attention into action. Tools such as hyperlinks and hashtags are frequently used in conjunction with mobilizing messages. For instance, the following call-to-action tweet from the National Council of La Raza (@NCLR), a large U.S. Latino civil rights and advocacy organization, contains two hashtags:

Today we are storming the Supreme Court to highlight the injustice of #SB1070. Join us and demand #Justice4AZ

You can employ similar messages to mobilize constituents to donate, volunteer, attend an event, or indeed do anything that will help the organization meet its mission.

Of course, these examples represent just one model for how an organization can approach its audience. The key takeaways from the model are: (1) audience precedes attention, as attention is unlikely to grow if there is no audience; (2) audience needs nurturing; and (3) by all means seek to attract attention, but know that it is a means and not the end. Keep your mission in sight and

leverage attention to produce more-substantive outcomes.

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The age of attention philanthropy presents opportunities as well as challenges for nonprofit leaders, who must be vigilant in innovating new ways to reach their target audiences if they hope to gain support for their organizations. Yet, when they focus too much on gaining the public's attention, they risk losing sight of mission and accountability. They must clearly situate their quest for attention within the organization's mission and strategy. Attention is in many ways a new form of currency for nonprofit organizations. And, just as you would not want to chase dollars with harmful strings attached, be sure not to chase attention at any cost.

NOTES

1. Herbert A. Simon, "Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World," in *Computers, Communication, and the Public Interest*, ed. Martin Greenberger (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 40–41.
2. Seungahn Nah and Gregory D. Saxton, "Modeling the Adoption and Use of Social Media by Nonprofit Organizations," *New Media & Society* 15, no. 2 (2013): 294–313.
3. Susan Donaldson James, "Bra Color Status on Facebook Goes Viral," ABC News online, January 8, 2010, accessed June 4, 2014, www.abcnews.go.com/Health/bra-color-status-facebook-raises-curiosity-money-viral/story?id=9513986.
4. Saxton and Lili Wang, "The Social Network Effect: The Determinants of Giving Through Social Media," *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* (advance online publication, April 24, 2013), doi: 10.1177/0899764013485159.
5. Chao Guo and Saxton, "Speaking and Being Heard: How Nonprofit Advocacy Organizations Gain Attention on Social Media" (working paper, 2014).
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