

# Harnessing the Power of Social Media for Wildlife Rehabilitation

AMANDA NICHOLSON  
WILDLIFE CENTER OF VIRGINIA  
WAYNESBORO, VIRGINIA

**Abstract:** In today's digital age, social media plays a significant role in both personal and professional lives. Many wildlife rehabilitation centers and organizations have joined the social media landscape in some way, but still are learning how to navigate in this complex online environment. Learning how to effectively use and harness the power of social media is a valuable tool for connecting and engaging with supporters.

**Keywords:** Social media, online, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, engagement, building relationships

## INTRODUCTION

Social media can be a powerful tool through which wildlife rehabilitation centers and organizations can connect with people. In 2016, more than two billion people are using at least one social media platform—Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram, etc.—and there is every indication that the number of users will continue to grow (Kemp 2016). Social media gives wildlife rehabilitation organizations the power to break through geographic boundaries to reach people around the world—no longer are organizations confined to interacting with only people within their town or home state. Social media, when used appropriately, can also be a significant traffic driver to websites. More visits to a well-designed, dynamic website can ultimately lead to converting visitors to supporters. But most importantly, social media is a platform through which we can—and should—engage our supporters.

But how can a facility use social media effectively? How can an organization's voice stand out in such a large crowd of users?

## UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL MEDIA

When considering how to use social media most effectively to represent a wildlife center or organization and reach a wide audience of people, it is important to understand why people use social media in the first place.

---

**Amanda Nicholson** is Director of Outreach at the Wildlife Center of Virginia, overseeing public education and community involvement. Amanda organizes the annual *Call of the Wild* conference, and also is program coordinator for the National Wildlife Rehabilitation Association's annual Symposium.

While there are individual nuances between each platform—e.g., Facebook has a different culture than Pinterest, the demographic of Twitter users is different than Facebook's users—there are commonalities that can be applied to social media in general. People use social media to keep in touch with friends and family, share common interests, find out what is going on in the world, help others and get help and advice, and be entertained (Campbell 2014).

Unfortunately, when asked why their organization has a social media presence, many social media administrators commonly cite two main reasons: to promote the organization and to fundraise (Campbell 2014). This is where the disconnect between users and an organization occurs; it is a good example of how not to use social media effectively! While there is no doubt organizational promotion and fundraising are important and desired goals for a wildlife center or organization overall, these should not be the primary goal for social media use. Promotion and fundraising are pieces of the greater puzzle that come after building relationships and affinity.

To be successful with social media, those responsible for maintaining an organization's social media presence need to always remember why people are users in the first place. Through that frame of reference, wildlife rehabilitation organizations can maximize engagement of supporters and future supporters through crafting the organization's 'voice', interacting with friends and fans regularly, and sharing information beyond the organization's own promotional agenda.

## CRAFTING A VOICE

When an organization has a presence on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, or any other social media platform, the organization naturally will develop its own online identity and personality. The 'voice' of the organization is an underestimated, yet powerful factor; the voice either can attract followers or can alienate would-be fans.

Good voices have a friendly, intelligent, conversational tone that invites interaction and engagement from followers. A good analogy for the online organizational voice is to think of the organization as a person at a party—how does that person behave? Does he/she begin interesting conversations, while pausing to listen and respond to others? Good voices naturally draw people to a particular post and make them want to respond, or share. Voices that can alienate followers often use social media as a bullhorn—they have one-sided conversations without listening to others, and they fail to respond to comments and questions.

The individual responsible for maintaining the wildlife rehabilitation facility or organization's social media account(s) also is the creator of the online voice of the organization. The key person(s) must have a clear understanding of the organization's mission and work. If more than one person is administering an account, care should be taken to remain very consistent when posting and interacting with supporters. Using proper grammar and punctuation is also important for crafting a successful voice, and is an important tool for social media success.

### **INTERACTING REGULARLY**

Another important technique for effective social media use is to interact regularly with followers. Social media administrators need to be present; this means not only posting content frequently, but also regularly checking for new comments and questions and responding to them. Regular interaction with followers is a great foundation on which relationships can be built. While each social media outlet is different, in general, administrators should make an effort to be present and post content every day.

Organizations also should interact regularly with other organizations, agencies, and media outlets within the social media realm. This interaction not only increases the likelihood the organization will be seen in the social media landscape, but also increases the chances that, in turn, other groups will follow or interact with the organization. Organizations also should make an effort to follow or "like" other organizations; to collect only friends and followers yet not follow anyone else is generally discouraged.

### **CONTENT: MORE THAN THE AGENDA**

Wildlife centers and rehabilitators have access to an incredible number of interesting stories, which present many possibilities for social media content. Stories of animals treated and released can showcase an organization's work; these same stories also can present an array of opportunities for educating the public on how

to help wildlife. Inspirational and informative animal stories, photos, and videos are just the type of content that does well on social media.

Even though wildlife rehabilitation organizations and facilities may have plenty of material to showcase their work, they should make an effort to vary content on social media and not solely post about their organization. This strategy may sound counterintuitive to many administrators of organizational social media accounts, but remember: the goal of an organizational social media presence should not be simply to promote activities and events. The greater goal focuses on connecting with people and building relationships. Posting interesting, varied content about wildlife, the environment, and other related stories is an excellent way to contribute to a greater conversation that is not just about the organization. People are on social media to connect with others, find out what is going on, and to have fun.

### **STAY INFORMED**

One consistent social media factor is that the platforms always are changing. Those who have been active social media users in the past few years have seen the birth and grown of new platforms, and have seen significant changes to the 'older' entities, such as Facebook and Twitter. There is no doubt all users will continue to see growth and evolution in this field. To continue to use social media effectively, social media administrators need to stay up-to-date with social media changes, strategies, and advice.


### **CONCLUSION**

Using social media for your wildlife organization can be an effective tool to reach and connect with supporters across the globe. In today's digital age, people are spending an enormous amount of time online, and quite often, on social media. By being present and interacting in a community where there are so many people, organizations can tap into a wide audience of supporters and would-be supporters. Through careful strategy and effective social media management, organizations can build relationships with those who have an interest in wildlife and the environment. These relationships can lead to increased awareness, educational opportunities, and have the potential to lead to increased financial support.

## LITERATURE CITED

- Campbell, J. 2014. How Nonprofits Continue to Get Facebook Marketing All Wrong. Blog on the Internet. [Cited 26 November 2014]. Available from: <<http://jcsocialmarketing.com/2014/11/nonprofits-continue-get-facebook-marketing-wrong>>.
- Kemp, S. 2016. Digital, Digital 2016. We Are Social [Internet news service]. [cited 21 January 2016]. Available from: <<http://wearesocial.com/uk/special-reports/digital-in-2016>>.

## RECOMMENDED READING

- BethKanter.org. [Homepage on the Internet]. Beth's Blog. c2009 [updated 2016]. Available from: <<http://www.bethkanter.org>>.
- JohnHaydon.com [Homepage on the Internet]. John Haydon. c2015 [updated 2016]. Available from: <<http://www.johnhaydon.com>>.
- SocialMediaExaminer.com [Homepage on the Internet]. Social Media Examiner. c2015 [updated 2016]. Available from: <<http://socialmediaexaminer.com>>. 



**For zoos big and small**

Whether a zoo of 3,000 animals  
or a household of one,  
Mazuri® knows nutrition.

**Mazuri**<sup>®</sup>  
EXOTIC ANIMAL NUTRITION  
[WWW.MAZURI.COM](http://WWW.MAZURI.COM) | 