Share it, Pin it, Tweet it: Effective Use of Social Media for Wildlife Rehabilitation

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Abstract: Flustered by Facebook®? Troubled by Twitter®? Perplexed by Pinterest®? This article provides an overview of the most effective social media tools today—with an emphasis on how nonprofit wildlife rehabilitation centers and organizations can use social media to support their wildlife work. Learn how to effectively and professionally share stories with others while garnering organizational support.

Key words: Outreach, social media, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest

INTRODUCTION

Social media is known as the variety of platforms that allow virtual communities and networks of people to create, share, and exchange ideas. Some common and well-used social media platforms in 2013 are Facebook®, Twitter®, YouTube®, Pinterest®, Google Plus®, Linked In ... and more! There is no cost to sign up for an account; each platform offers instructions for new users who are unfamiliar with social media. Most platforms have special types of accounts designed for organizations rather than individuals.

The purpose of social media is to build relationships, connect people, and create communities. When nonprofit rehabilitation organizations or wildlife centers are present in the social media landscape, they are able to interact with supporters on a personal level. If wildlife rehabilitation organizations are able to create strong communities, they are basically helping to create their biggest fans—a social army of promoters!

GROWTH OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Print media is not as effective as it was ten years ago (Virtual Social Media 2012). While email blasts and newsletters still are useful tools for reaching supporters, it is becoming more challenging for nonprofits

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to stand out in the crowd—people are inundated with emails and newsletters. When nonprofit rehabilitation organizations have a strong presence in the social media landscape, they are able to compete for supporter's attention by simply being visible and accessible in their supporters' everyday lives.

In the for-profit world, the notion of 'social care,' using social media for customer service, is becoming a popular and transparent method to take care of customers. While nonprofit rehabilitation organizations may not need to respond to traditional customers, the same general rules apply. Social care is an excellent way to respond to and interact with stakeholders, such as donors; being present and responsive can help cultivate positive, meaningful relationships.

As of early 2013, Facebook®, Twitter®, and Pinterest® were the top three social media platforms in terms of the number of users—and they still are growing! Facebook® currently has more than one billion users and 17 percent of U.S. consumers' personal computer time is spent on Facebook® (Nielsen 2012). Time spent on computers and mobile devices was up 21 percent from 2011 to 2012 (Nielsen 2012). With high and growing numbers of users, wildlife rehabilitation organizations can benefit by becoming active participants in social media.

GETTING STARTED

Before opening up a variety of social media accounts, key members of an organization should consider how social media will fit into the organization's overall plan. For example, the Wildlife Center of Virginia (WCV) has a very dynamic website; the website is the backbone of the Center's online presence. As of 2013, the WCV can be found on Facebook®, Twitter®, Pinterest®, YouTube®, and Flickr®. The Center uses these platforms to help drive traffic back to the website, and also to share information and build relationships with supporters. Because all information can be

found on the website, the WCV does not use social media to offer 'exclusive' information on patients or happenings at the Center. Because not all people choose to participate in social media, this practice ensures that the Center's information is accessible to all supporters. In short, social media helps supplement the WCVs online presence and reach, but is not the primary method of disseminating information online.

Before an organization chooses a particular social media platform, it helps to understand which platforms the organizations' supporters are already using. Additionally, it helps to understand the demographics of an organization's supporters. The demographics of social media users differ depending on which platform is used. For example, Facebook® has a slightly older crowd of users when compared to Pinterest®; the majority of Facebook® users are between 45 and 54 years of age. Pinterest® users are primarily between the ages of 25 and 34 years of age; additionally, the vast majority of Pinterest® users are women (Jobstock 2012).

With so many social media platforms available, it is easy for the responsible staff or volunteers of nonprofit rehabilitation organizations to become overwhelmed—particularly because these future-administrators often have limited time and other responsibilities. However, not every social media frontier needs to be conquered; the author recommends simply picking one or two means of social media and becoming proficient at those first. Social media administrators should ask themselves: What feels like a natural fit with the work we are doing? How can we wrap social media in and around the things the organization is *already* doing? Integrating social media into other means of communication (e.g., share buttons on the website, links in email blasts) is an effective way to make supporters aware of the organization's social media presence.

Content

Once a social media platform is chosen and set up, administrators need to think about what type of content they would like to share. The fortunate thing about the wildlife rehabilitation field is that there is never a lack of compelling stories and engaging photos to share. The best way to achieve successful content is to create posts that inspire interaction—the type of stories that engage people and make them want to share with their friends!

Social media allows organizations to develop their own personalities, styles, and characteristics. Administrators should not be afraid to experiment with different types of posts. By examining the responses to a variety of content, administrators are able to understand what sorts of posts are successful and what is of interest to supporters. Many social media platforms have insights or analytics tools that help gather this data; this ensures organizations can learn from their supporters and can focus on creating the most engaging type of content.

Photographs are the type of content that does well in any platform; images speak directly to the limbic system, which is the seat of action and emotion. Photos inspire and engage people (Ambrogetti 2012). For any type of social media, the author recommends taking photographs to help tell stories.

For social media specifics, this article examines four popular types of social media that are recommended for nonprofit wildlife rehabilitation organizations: Facebook®, Twitter®, Pinterest®, and YouTube®.

Facebook®

Facebook® is a social utility that connects people with friends and others who work or study with them, near or far. As of early 2013, there were one billion Facebook® users, making this the most successful means of social media to date.

Organizations that plan on creating a Facebook® account should create a 'page' for their organization. Pages offer additional benefits to organizations, such as insights and ways to interact more closely with supporters. Once an organizational page is created, key individuals within the rehabilitation organization should collaborate to integrate the Facebook® page into other methods of communication. This can include making supporters aware via an email blast with a link, posting signs in the lobby, and providing a link on the organization's website. Once Facebook® users find and "like" an organization's page, the users will be able to see the organization's updates in their newsfeed.

In Facebook®, the newsfeed is considered the 'battleground;' it is where a vast majority of users interact with a page. One important mechanism to understand about the newsfeed is Edgerank. Edgerank is the algorithm based on a user's 'likes' and interactions with friends and pages that determine what is displayed in their newsfeed. In short, Edgerank helps control the 'noise' of a user's newsfeed; there is no way an average user would be able to see every single post from friends and pages. Three factors help determine what a 'fan' sees from an organization in their newsfeed:

1. The interaction between the user and the organization (the more they 'like' and comment on posts, the more they see);

2. How much other users 'talk' about the content, meaning how much other Facebook® users are commenting and sharing a particular post; and,
3. How recently a story is published.

Understanding the basic concepts of Edgerank helps Facebook® administrators create more successful posts that subsequently will appear in users' newsfeeds.

As mentioned above, photos are by far the best type of content to post on Facebook®. Not only can humans process visual images much faster than reading text, but images also appeal much more readily to humans' emotions. In the Facebook® realm, images have the greatest viral potential—users want to share compelling images with their friends.

However, Facebook® administrators do not have to publish only photos; posting a few different types of content is useful to keep things varied. Text updates can be created; it is best to keep the text updates short. The general recommendation is using 80 or fewer characters. The best type of text post is a question because it is a direct 'ask' for engagement from Facebook® users.

Links are the least engaging type of post on Facebook® simply because fans who click on the link are taken away from Facebook®. Many users do not come back to 'like' or comment on the particular post. This does not mean links should not be posted, but administrators should use these sparingly. Administrators can make a few changes when posting links to make them more appealing visually by choosing an appropriate thumbnail to accompany the link. These thumbnails are loaded automatically and correspond to photos within the linked page. The general recommendation when posting links is to keep the longer uniform resource locator (URL) rather than shortening it. Users are three times more likely to click on a long link because it provides them with more information on the link upon which they are about to click.

Facebook® offers 'insights' for page administrators, which is a great way for administrators to monitor how engaging different posts are. Posts can be sorted by post date, content type, or a variety of measurements that indicate how successful a post is. Measurements include 'reach,' which is the number of unique people who saw a post; 'engaged users,' which is the number of unique people who have clicked on a post; 'talking about this,' which is the number of unique people who have commented or shared a post; and, 'virality,' which measures how viral a post is. Virality is a measurement that takes the 'talking about this' number and divides it by the 'reach,' Generally, it is thought that 'talking about this' is one of the most important measurements administrators should track.

As mentioned above, using Facebook® is free. However, there a way in which administrators can pay to have more posts seen by using promoted posts. Promoting posts influences the Edgerank algorithm because after the promotion, the people who saw and interacted with the post are more likely to see posts from the organization in the future. The general strategy with promoted posts is to promote only an organization's best content. By using insights, administrators can identify what the most viral posts are, which is a good indication of what people want to share. Posts can simply be promoted, or they can be targeted to a specific audience (e.g., gender, age, or location). An additional useful tip for busy Facebook® administrators is the Facebook® activity log, in which administrators can schedule Facebook® posts. While there is much to gain by being present and active on the Facebook® account, scheduling posts for an ideal time of day when the most users are online can assist busy rehabilitators who are short on time during the day.

TWITTER®

Twitter® is a social networking and micro-blogging service that enables users to send and read text-based messages of up to 140 characters.

When an administrator is setting up an organization's Twitter® account, he or she needs to choose a username for the organization. The username should be short and to the point—the maximum number of characters allowed for usernames is 15. In the Twitter® world, a username appears after an '@' symbol (for example, the Wildlife Center's Twitter® username is @WCVtweets).

'Tweets' are the text-based messages that are sent out to followers. These messages are limited to 140 characters; brevity is a must in this social media platform. Many abbreviations and symbols are used because of this limitation. Users often use 'RT' in front of posts they are re-tweeting or asking others to share. The hash tag symbol (#) also is used in Twitter® to mark keywords or topics in tweets. Clicking on a word marked with a hashtag leads users to search results featuring tweets containing the same hashtag.

Once an organizational Twitter® account is created, it is recommended that organizations 'follow' others on Twitter®. While administrators may not want to follow every one of their individual followers, following other respected organizations and local news media is a great networking tool for the organization. When tweeting, organizations should not simply tweet

about their own work all the time; pertinent re–tweets from others are good ways to vary content on Twitter®.

Organizations can use Twitter® to drive traffic back to the organization's website, share updates on wildlife patients, and talk about events as they occur. Twitter® has a very 'current' feel to it; users often tweet about things as they are taking place. This means events like patient releases can work well in the Twitter® landscape and can build real excitement for followers. Additionally, there are often opportunities for contests and promotions on Twitter® in which nonprofit organizations and their followers can participate.

Twitter® accounts can be managed directly through the Twitter® page; there are also several tools to manage multiple social media accounts. HootSuite® and TweetDeck® are two types of tools that some administrators may find useful. Both tools offer 'bookmarkets,' which enable easy tweeting of articles viewed on the internet.

Pinterest®

Pinterest® is a content–sharing service that allows member to 'pin' images, videos, and other objects to their personal pinboards. In many ways, users can think of Pinterest® as a virtual scrapbook. Nonprofit wildlife rehabilitation organizations have a place in Pinterest®; this social media platform allows organizations to connect with people based on their social passions and interest. The unique bonus that Pinterest® has, which is especially appealing to nonprofit organizations, is that each pin has a website address embedded with it. This means there is excellent opportunity for driving traffic back to an organization's website.

Rehabilitation organizations can create Pinterest® accounts for their nonprofit. When supplying information to an organization's profile, administrators should give careful thought to appropriate keywords in the profile; this will make the organization account and photos more successful when members search for particular subjects.

Pinterest® users can create a variety of pinboards on different subjects. Pinboards are a collection of 'pins,' which are the actual pieces of content posted. In most cases, pins are photos, though users are also able to pin videos to boards. Pins do not need to only be content from the organization; pinboards can contain mixed content and can include repins from a variety of people and organizations, if administrators feel the subject fits into the general theme and is appropriate content. Administrators have a lot of creative latitude to design a variety of boards for different subjects. For example, some of the Wildlife Center's pinboards include Wildlife Patients, Baby Season, Helping Wildlife, Year of the Snake, and Our Area.

Pinterest® administrators can directly upload pins to their Pinterest® account; in these cases, the administrator should directly add the organization's website address to the pin to ensure that a link is associated with that particular piece of content. Pinterest® also offers a 'pin it' bookmarklet, which is an easy way to pin photos or videos from any website. This only requires a couple of clicks of a mouse and the website URL is automatically embedded within that pin on the pinboard.

An analytics tool is offered to organizations that are able to verify their website on Pinterest®. Additional resources exist for those organizations that might not be able to do so.

YouTube®

YouTube® is a video–sharing website and is also a social space with a dedicated community. Viewers can watch a person's or an organization's collection of videos, which is called a 'channel.' Anyone is able to watch videos; an account is not needed. Those who do have YouTube® accounts are able to comment on videos and can subscribe to an organization's channel, which provides alerts when new videos are added. In general, videos can be powerful tools for nonprofits; they also are shared readily across multiple platforms such as the organization's website, YouTube®, Pinterest®, Facebook®, and more.

YouTube® administrators can create an account for an organization, and can supply the organization's mission statement and other information to the profile page. When uploading videos, keywords and descriptions should be added to ensure the videos are searchable. The author recommends adding in the organization's logo, website address, or some other sort of branding to ensure viewers know from what organization the video is coming.

Because YouTube® users can add comments and questions to each video page, YouTube® administrators should periodically monitor the comments field of each video. Email notifications are available to alert administrators when new comments are added. By interacting with viewers and responding to questions or comments, organizations can be active members of the YouTube® community and can build relationships with people who may not already be familiar with the organization.

YouTube® has an analytics feature, which provides administrators with information about how viewers are watching the organization's videos. The author has found one of the most helpful features in analytics

is the reported average length of time that viewers watch videos. This statistic provides video editors with indirect feedback on suggested length of future videos.

CROSS–POSTING

There are several tools available to help social media administrators manage multiple social media accounts. The idea in some cases is that administrators can quickly cross-post content to a variety of social media platforms at once. Cross-posting is known as posting the *exact same* content on different social media platforms. However, a word of caution: cross-posting content may save time, but is actually a hindrance to effectively sharing stories and messages across several different types of social media.

One reason why cross-posting does not help share stories is because some of the language in different social media platforms is quite dissimilar. Twitter® is full of abbreviations and symbols; these do not make sense outside of Twitter®. Additionally, shortened URLs, which are vital for saving space on Twitter®, receive fewer clicks in other venues since the URLs are lacking the valuable information for those who are about to click them.

Cross-posting on these management tools also makes it clear to the user that the administrator is not really present. This lack of presence makes it harder to relate to people on a personal level and makes the organization seem less accessible. Sharing stories and engaging supporters through different means of social media takes some time!

CONCLUSION

Social media, when used effectively, can be a powerful tool with which organizations share their mission and stories, while engaging and interacting with supporters. Wildlife centers and rehabilitators have access to an incredible number of interesting stories; social media allows organizations to break down geographic limitations so that they may engage with supporters from all over the world. Many people will donate to an organization in which they believe and with which they feel strongly connected. Social media allows organizations to expand their horizons!

The social media landscape will continue to change. Those who have been in the social media landscape during the past few years have already seen several major changes—changes with Facebook® layouts and accounts, the growth of Twitter®, the birth and evolution of Pinterest®. There is no doubt that various social media landscapes will continue to grow and evolve, and new platforms will join the arena. Key

personnel in rehabilitation organizations should spend time strategizing on how to most effectively spend their time sharing their centers' stories. Those who are acting as the social media administrators should keep up-to-date with social media statistics, changes, and advice.

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