

## **Charities start to harness the power of the many**

Mass collaboration is exciting new frontier for nonprofits

By Marcia Stepanek

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On June 24, the nonprofit New York Philharmonic ended its annual concert in Manhattan's Central Park in a highly untraditional way: it asked concert-goers camped out on the lawn to take a quick moment to text-message their preference for the final musical number as conductor Bramwell Tovey waited on stage. Would it be Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumblebees*? Or an orchestral version of Jimi Hendrix' *Purple Haze*? Hendrix proved the more popular choice — 74 percent of those texting chose Hendrix — so the orchestra wasted no time launching into a spirited version of Hendrix's 1960s-era counter-cultural anthem.

The vote, however, did more than cap a concert. For many people in attendance that night, it signaled a new era of social engagement for the tradition-bound orchestra and underscored what other institutions in today's cash-pinched charity sector are just beginning to figure out: "crowdsourcing" —using the Web and online social media to invite mass collaboration — is critical to 21st century advocacy. The rise of social media — from mobile phones to online social networks to digital video-sharing — is forcing many charities to expand and accelerate their use of new Web capabilities to drum up much-needed new converts, dollars and ideas. "We need to engage people we have never really reached before," says Vince Ford, the Philharmonic's director of new media. "We need to reinvent the way we build support."

Call it the engagement imperative. Says Joe Rospars, Barack Obama's new media expert: "The biggest lesson nonprofits can draw from Barack Obama's ability to raise more than \$100 million online in a faltering economy is that fundraising now flows from engagement — it's no longer enough to simply believe in the cause. Now it's critical for people to participate in a cause, and feel like they've had some input, before they decide to help it pay for stuff."

To be sure, some advocacy groups are just starting to invite public collaboration to better engage existing and potential supporters. Some, like the nonprofit Human Rights Campaign, are using the Web to crowdsource social action — in this case, an ongoing boycott of businesses that discriminate against people for their sexual preferences. The HRC is offering a digital "Buying

for Equality” guide that lets people see — in real-time and on the fly — which businesses have unfavorable policies. The guide, itself, is also crowdsourced — created, Wikipedia-style, by people who want to share their personal knowledge of those businesses and policies online. A mobile version of the guide, accessible by cellphone, has helped to boost participation in the HRC’s activities, which — in turn, leaders say — has helped to increase membership by more than 10 percent.

### **Dialing in ‘cause videos’**

Another way cause advocates are starting to use the Web to fan engagement and collaboration is through open calls for short, digital “cause videos” — brief, home-made mini-documentaries that people can post on nonprofit sites and link to other video-sharing sites, like YouTube and Vimeo, among others. Manhattan nonprofit Transportation Alternatives, for example, invites members to make and share short, “cause videos” to advocate for improved bike safety in New York. Bicyclist Nicholas Whitaker’s two-minute video blog, or vlog, Bike Lane Emergency — which he made by attaching his video camera to the handlebars of his bike during a dangerous spin through city streets this past spring — was posted on the nonprofit's site. Its goal was to show how bike lane safety is not being enforced across Manhattan and build support for reforms. The home-made clip not only tripled the number of page views on the nonprofit’s Web site, it was a small hit on YouTube and other video-sharing sites and helped to woo new nonprofit members.

Other nonprofits, like the Humane Society of the United States, are using the Web to crowdsource reports of wrongdoing — in this case, news of animal abuse not being covered by the mainstream media. In January, the Humane Society famously drummed up more than a half-million hits to its fundraising Web site after posting a digital video investigation, put together in collaboration with members, reporting the alleged abuse of downed cattle at a California slaughterhouse. The video got some 138,000 hits on YouTube, then was picked up by CNN and led to recall of 145 million pounds of ground beef, the temporary removal of beef from many school lunch menus and eight congressional hearings exploring the possibility of a link between animal cruelty and food safety. Executive Vice President Michael Markarian said the video also helped the nonprofit raise millions of dollars in new and expanded donations.

Sameer Padania, manager of The Hub, the new digital video-sharing site for human rights activists that is an extension of the nonprofit Witness.org, says that increasingly, “People have cameras in cell phones. They’re using social media to capture and share not only the important moments of their lives, things that interest them, but also things that anger them, that relate to social injustice.” Inviting people to share that footage for a cause, he says, can help nonprofits create or become a part of a movement rather than take a more traditional, top-down approach to advocacy.

### **‘Building a movement’**

Still other nonprofits, like Global Voices Online, are giving status quo news organizations a run for their money by crowdsourcing news from around the world, asking international bloggers to send localized dispatches on subjects often overlooked by traditional news networks. Much of the group’s early coverage of the government crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrators in Burma last fall, for example, eventually made it into the mainstream — and helped the nonprofit raise more dollars to keep covering such stories at the same time. In recent months, Global Voices has expanded its mission to organize crowds of concerned citizens around the world to share incidents of government censorship on the site. Says co-founder Ethan Zuckerman: “We’re not simply raising money here; we’re building a movement.”

New media businesses are taking notice, working with some charities to experiment with social media as they also work for a cause. Amnesty International, for example, runs an instant text-messaging program with the U.K.-based mobile telecommunications company, Vodaphone Group Plc. The campaign taps into the widespread use of mobile phones and instant text-messaging in Norway. Since the start of this year, the human rights nonprofit has signed up 25,000 people in Norway to receive “urgent action alerts” twice a month on human rights issues locally and around the world. Each time an alert is issued, a subscriber pays .25 Euros, or about 37 cents. It costs about 75 cents a month to stay on the list, and each time someone responds to an urgent action alert — and about 10,000 do each time — members pay another 37 cents. Amnesty Norway gets about 50 percent of all of instant text-messaging fees, while Vodaphone pockets the rest. This not only generates signatures on Amnesty’s urgent action petitions but also drums up regular income to fund Amnesty’s ongoing programs, to the tune of about 100,000

Euros, or about \$150,000 per year. “It’s an example of the mass power of small donations,” says George Irish, a fundraising consultant who worked with Amnesty on the program.

Pop singer Alicia Keys gets it, too. The celebrity has been crowdsourcing cash for an African AIDS nonprofit all summer long, asking audience members attending her concerts to text in donations from the audience. So far, the singer has raised nearly \$50,000 for the charity online in real-time, from thousands of \$5 donations, texted in by fans from the floor — literally, for a song. Jennifer Singleton, the top fundraising executive for Keep a Child Alive, the Brooklyn, N.Y.-based nonprofit that enlisted Keys, says the group has turned increasingly to text-messaging for dollars to offset a steady drop-off in traditional donors and donations: “SMS (text-messaging) is not a new language, but it’s a new language for donations.”

### **An ‘unprecedented’ social trend**

Underestimate crowdsourcing for mass support and engagement at your peril, says Jeff Howe, a writer for Wired magazine who coined the term crowdsourcing and just wrote a book by the same name. “Before, people had to be together physically in order to create a group of people who could work together for social change. But with how the Internet is evolving, suddenly, that’s not true anymore. Now we can create a virtual crowd simply by the technology that we keep. We can get together with others simply through our shared interests. We can self-organize now with just a little prompting from others, into close-knit or far-flung groups that are project-oriented, on the fly. This is unprecedented in human history. This is a social trend that is inevitable, and it can be terribly exciting — or terribly threatening — for existing organizations.”

No kidding, say experts and nonprofit leaders. As some are discovering, new types of leadership strategies are going to be required to manage the surge of public input that these new forms of mass engagement are generating. Nonprofit management expert Paul Light, a professor at NYU’s Wagner School, says most advocacy organizations are in for a surprise. “The concept of being donor-driven or community-driven is a new one for many nonprofit leaders more used to calling all the shots,” Light says, and the new mass participation can, and will, start forcing change throughout the organization.

Clay Shirky, NYU professor of new media, agrees. "The key to making crowds your friend is going to depend on how well you engage them to do the work for your cause. Mass collaboration, if managed smartly, can help you build support" for your cause. The smartest organizations harnessing these technologies, he says, will figure out how to use social media in ways that engage whole new communities of supporters to participate with their pocketbooks, as well — "and not just this year, but repeatedly this year, depending on how perpetually they feel they're being engaged in the cause."

To be sure, not all nonprofit experimentation with crowdsourcing has gone smoothly so far. Some groups, like the Brooklyn Museum of Art, are still trying to figure out how to boost the engagement of crowds — but without overwhelming already stressed staffers with high levels of extra work just to manage it all.

### **Crowd curates museum exhibition**

Last spring, Shelley Bernstein, the Brooklyn museum's new manager of information systems, sought to crowdsource an entire art exhibit, and sent out an email asking anyone interested to send in museum-quality photographic images that best fit the theme, *Changing Faces of Brooklyn*. Bernstein got 389 images. Then, she issued another open call for curators. This time, 3,344 people accepted, and over six weeks, this online "crowd" sorted through the images and tallied their selections, which eventually were whittled down to comprise the museum's June 27-August 10, 2008 exhibit, *Click! A Crowd-Curated Exhibition*.

Entirely Web-sourced and Web-curated, the exhibit represented the first use of crowdsourcing by a nonprofit in this way. "I wanted to try using new media to build our community, expand it, and ask people from the outside to participate in what we do," Bernstein said. She also was inspired by the 2004 book, "The Wisdom of Crowds," which argues that large, diverse groups of people sourced by the Web will make better judgments and smarter decisions than an elite few, no matter how individually brilliant they are.

On one hand, Bernstein said, the crowd chose many of the photographs that professional curators did, proving that mass collaboration can work, to a point. But most importantly, the exercise proved that mass participation also can overwhelm small staffs with "tons of extra work" simply

to accommodate all the input into decision-making, Bernstein said. “On one hand, it worked very well raising interest in and knowledge of the museum and involved thousands of people, literally, in one of our projects,” she said. “But the key lesson here is that you need to learn how to manage all of the new input, or it can create all sorts of new headaches that could, if you're not careful, eat up the very resources you’re trying to expand.”

Amen, says Polly Aris Stamatopoulos, the CEO of The Rainmakers Group, a Washington, D.C.-based fundraising consultancy whose clients are mostly small- to mid-sized traditional charities. “It’s almost shocking to note that so many of these tech-savvy organizations who are trying to get better at engaging people still have no clue how to capture the interest they’ve gotten and convert that into solid, on-the-ground fundraising strategies offline,” she says.

But this, too, will come as more nonprofits share the lessons they learn from their crowdsourcing experiments, experts says. “There's no turning back now,” says Shirky. Indeed, crowdsourcing to excite new levels of public engagement is an unstoppable, inevitable next step in the evolution of the Internet — an unprecedented and critical opportunity for groups looking to sustain themselves over the long-run. Says NYU’s Paul Light: “The charities that embrace the changes and experiment with them successfully will be the ones that will survive.”

*Cristina Maldonado, Richard Balestrino and Rebecca Sherman contributed to this report.*