

# **Blogging for the Hearts of Donors: Largest US Charities Use Social Media**

## **Conducted by:**

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## **Introduction**

America's largest charities are turning to the Internet in an effort to increase awareness of their missions and to help connect with their constituencies. While these organizations are known for their nonprofit status and their fundraising campaigns, they demonstrate an acute awareness of the importance of Web 2.0 strategies in meeting their objectives.

This research proves conclusively that charitable organizations are outpacing the business world in their use of social media. Seventy-five percent of the charitable organizations studied are using some form of social media including blogs, podcasts, message boards, social networking, video blogging and wikis. More than a third of the organizations are blogging. Forty-six percent of those studied report social media is very important to their fundraising strategy.

The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth's [Center for Marketing Research](#) conducted a nationwide telephone survey of those nonprofits named by Forbes Magazine to their list of the 200 largest US charities for 2006 under the direction of researchers [Eric Mattson](#) and [Nora Ganim Barnes](#). All interviews took place in the spring of 2007. Over one-third (76) of the Forbes 200 list participated, making this research statistically valid.

[Forbes Magazine's list of the 200 largest US charities](#) is based on the amount of private, nongovernmental support a charity received in the latest available fiscal year. The list excludes academic institutions, nonprofits that are either funded by a tiny number of donors (such as most private foundations) or don't solicit, and religious organizations that don't report numbers.

The analysis that follows is based on detailed interviews with those 76 charities. Those that participated are diverse in mission, average gifts, and total revenue. They are some of the best known charities in the country including the Salvation Army, American Red Cross, Catholic Charities USA, Habitat for Humanity International and Easter Seals. On the Forbes top 200 list, 3 of the responding organizations are in the top 10, 5 are in the top 25 and 39 are in the top 100. The participating non-profits have headquarters in every major US city including New York, Washington DC, Chicago, Boston, Atlanta and San Francisco.

The 76 charity executives who responded were asked detailed questions concerning social media and their organization. In order to enable a valid comparison, this study followed a similar pattern to our [corporate](#) and [higher education](#) social media research and asked detailed questions about the organizations' familiarity with, usage of,

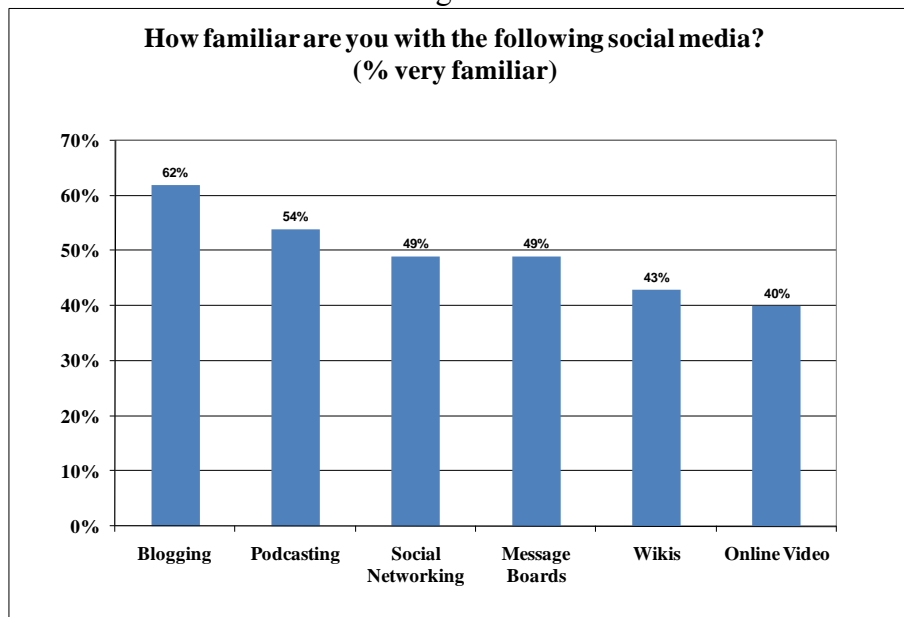
monitoring of and attitude towards six common forms of social media (blogs, wikis, podcasts, online video, message boards and social networking). Given the frequently uncertain definitions of these media, common understanding was sought by providing definitions from Wikipedia at the time of the survey.

### **Familiarity**

The survey began by examining the familiarity of the respondents with six prominent social media (blogging, podcasting, online video, social networking, wikis, message boards). The social media that is most familiar to the Forbes 200 charities is blogging with 62% of respondents claiming to be very familiar with it. It is interesting to note that US businesses as well as colleges and universities tended to be far less familiar with podcasting than the charities studied here. These nonprofits are making good use of both audio and visual technologies to help tell their stories and get their message out.

Familiarity is not directly related to usage. While online video was reported as the least familiar to the participants, it is the social media most utilized. This may be due to the need for outside specialization to create video presentations thereby not requiring the organization itself to have that expertise. See Figure 1 for results on how familiar charity executives are with various forms of social media.

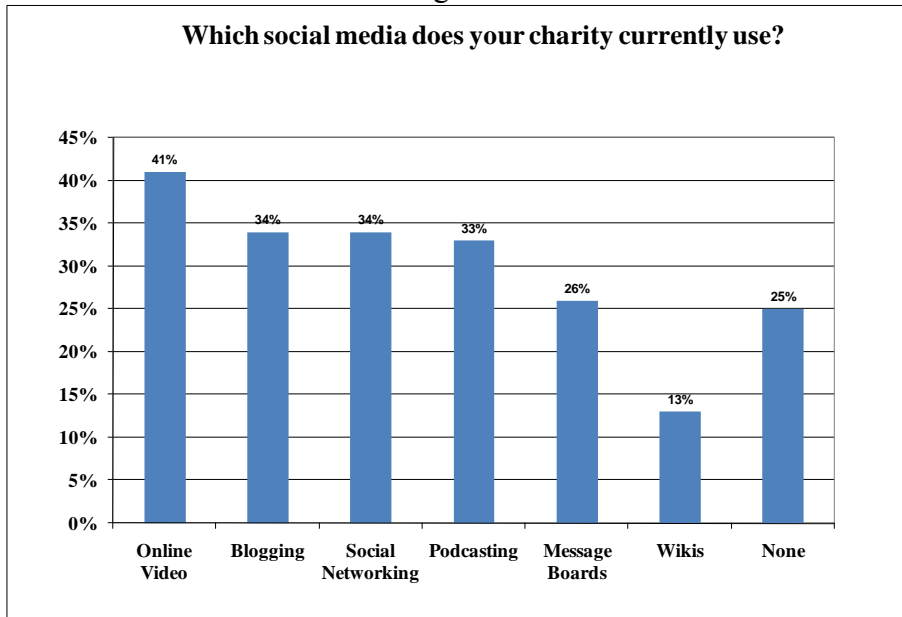
Figure 1



### **Usage**

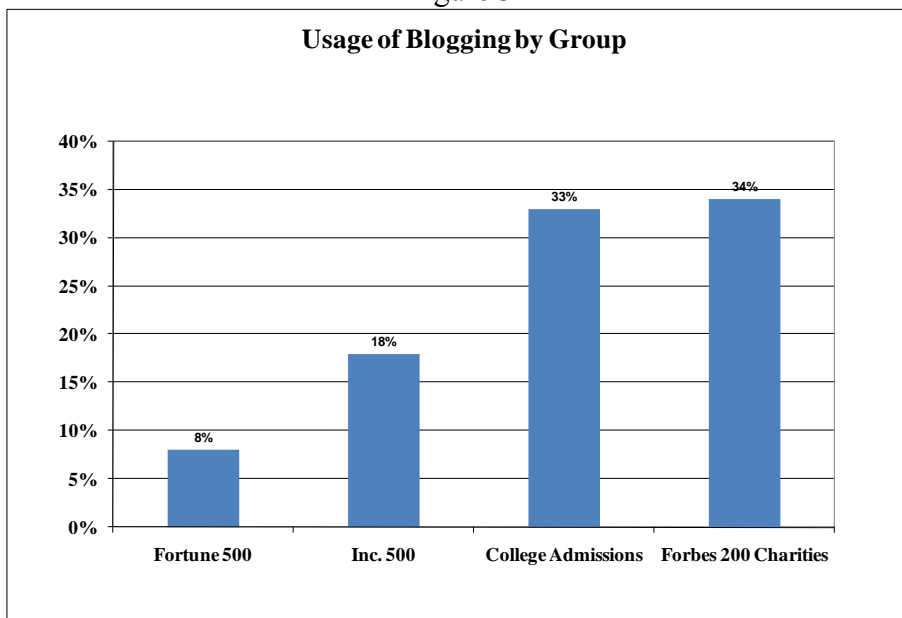
Charities are very likely to use online video, blogging, podcasting and social networking sites. They are highly engaged with their audience in a variety of ways using Web 2.0 technologies. See Figure 2 below. It is also interesting to note that charities are blogging at a higher rate than any group of businesses studied to date and at approximately the same rate as college admission departments. See Figure 3.

Figure 2



Given that [previous research](http://www.umassd.edu/cmr) shows 8% of the Fortune 500, 19% of the Inc. 500 (<http://www.umassd.edu/cmr>), and 33% of US university admissions departments currently having a public blog (<http://www.umassd.edu/cmr>), this research was undertaken to see if there was a difference in the knowledge and usage of social media in the nonprofit arena, specifically charitable organizations. Figure 3 below shows that charities blog at about the same rate as college admission departments and considerably more than businesses.

Figure 3



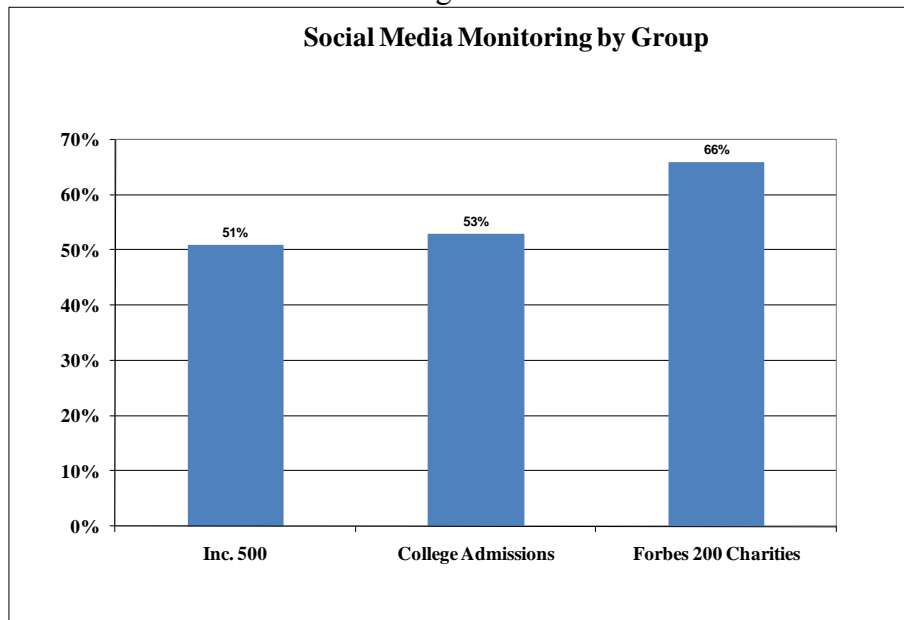
### Managing and Monitoring

Executives at the charities surveyed reported that their blogs were most often written by and managed by their in-house PR or Communications staff. While they reported that social media was key for their fundraising strategy, most measured the success of their blogs using traditional metrics like number of hits or comments instead of donations generated. It might be that donations come in through channels other than public facing blogs or that the role of the blog is to increase awareness of the organization.

Most promote their blog through their website and plan to increase usefulness by expanding authors, adding multimedia or trying new formats. Just over half of the responding executives said that their blogs were available through RSS feed.

In previous studies, respondents were asked if they monitored the online “buzz” about their business or organization. The executives from the charities were more likely to do so. This monitoring was done manually using Google and Technorati searches as well as by employing the automated alerts provided through many online services. It appears that charities are very concerned about their image and the online conversation that might involve them. By monitoring these online conversations in blogs and other forms, the organization can quickly respond if necessary.

Figure 4



Social media is an important part of the marketing strategy for US charities. They are outpacing businesses and even academic institutions in their familiarity, use, and monitoring activity. These top organizations have found a new and exciting way to win the hearts (and maybe the dollars) of potential donors.

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## About the Authors

### Eric Mattson

Eric Mattson is a leading marketing consultant and social media scholar. He helps high-potential companies strategically build competitive advantage and increase market share. To learn more about his consulting practice, please visit [www.ericmattson.com](http://www.ericmattson.com).

Eric's research into social media has been featured in BusinessWeek, Inc.com, The Journal of New Communications Research and numerous blogs. His popular podcast interview series ([www.jenerous.com](http://www.jenerous.com)) with leading social media thinkers, entrepreneurs and marketers has been downloaded over 100,000 times.

Prior to joining the social media revolution, Eric ran direct marketing, market research and marketing analytics for SanMar, one of the largest generic clothing wholesalers in the United States. Eric is a proud graduate of the University of Washington where he earned dual degrees in business administration and mathematics as a Washington Scholar. He can be reached at [eric@ericmattson.com](mailto:eric@ericmattson.com).

### Nora Ganim Barnes, Ph. D.

Nora Ganim Barnes earned a Ph.D. in Consumer Behavior from the University of Connecticut and is a Chancellor Professor of Marketing and Director of the Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

Nora has worked as a consultant for many national and international firms including the National Pharmaceutical Council, the National Court Reporters Association, and the Board of Inquiry of the British Parliament, Scotts Lawn Care Co, Distilled Spirits Council of the US and others. Working closely with businesses in the Northeast US, Nora and her students have provided marketing research assistance to over 200 small businesses.

She has published over 125 articles in academic and professional journals and proceedings, has contributed chapters to books, and has been awarded numerous research grants. Her areas of expertise include Consumer Behavior (both online and offline) and Marketing Research. She has been named a Senior Research Fellow by the Society for New Communications Research. Her most recent work on social media has been published in Business Week, Inc. Magazine and has been featured on Fox News. Nora can be reached at [nbarnes@umassd.edu](mailto:nbarnes@umassd.edu).

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