

Social Media Usage Now Ubiquitous Among US Top Charities, Ahead of All Other Sectors

Conducted by:

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Introduction

The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth [Center for Marketing Research](#) recently completed its fourth statistically significant study on the usage of social media by US charities.

The new study compares organizational adoption of social media in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010 by the 200 largest charities in the United States based on a list compiled annually by Forbes Magazine. For complete details on Forbes Magazine's list of the largest charities, please visit their website at Forbes.com.

In 2007, the first study of this group's use of social media was released. It revealed that these large non-profits were leading large and small businesses as well as universities (see our [previous research](#)) in their familiarity with, usage of, monitoring of and attitude towards social media. One year later, in 2008, the second study showed that lead in knowledge, adoption and positive attitude was still there.

By 2009 a remarkable ninety-seven percent of charitable organizations were using some form of social media. It should come as no real surprise then, that the latest iteration of our study finds that ALL of the top charities in the US are using at least one form of social media from a list that included blogs, podcasts, message boards, social networking (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Foursquare), texting and video blogging.

Sixty-four percent of the organizations are blogging, showing no significant change from last year. Ninety percent of those studied in 2010 report social media is very important to increasing awareness of their mission. While these organizations are best known for their non-profit status and their fundraising campaigns, they demonstrate an acute awareness of the importance of Web 2.0 strategies in meeting their objectives.

To gather this data, The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth [Center for Marketing Research](#) conducted nationwide telephone surveys of the nonprofits named by Forbes Magazine to their list of the 200 largest US charities from '07-'10 under the direction of researcher [Nora Ganim Barnes](#). Thirty-eight percent (76) of the Forbes 200 list participated in each year of the first three years of the study with 39% (78) participating in 2010, making this research statistically valid.

Forbes Magazine's [list of the 200 largest US charities](#) is compiled 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 executives of the 78 charities that responded. Those that participated are diverse in mission, average gifts, and total revenue. They include some of the best-known charities in the country such as the Salvation Army, Easter Seals, Habitat for Humanity, Shriners Hospital for Children and the American Heart Association. On the 2010 Forbes list, the number 5 and 7 charities listed, Catholic Charities USA and Goodwill Industries are included in the study along with six of the top 20. The participating non-profits are geographically diverse with headquarters in most major US cities including New York, Washington DC, Chicago, Boston, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Houston and San Francisco.

The 78 charity executives who responded were asked about social media and their organization's usage of it. In order to enable a valid comparison, this study followed a similar pattern to our earlier studies as well as our research into social media usage in [corporate](#) and [higher education](#) environments. As usual, we asked detailed questions about the organizations' familiarity with, usage of, monitoring of, and attitude towards many common forms of social media (blogs, podcasts, online video, message boards and social networking (studied more specifically in the past two years). Given the frequently uncertain definitions of these tools, common understanding was sought by providing definitions from Wikipedia at the time of the survey.

Familiarity

The survey examined the familiarity of the respondents with popular social media tools. The social media that was most familiar to the Forbes 200 charities in the 2007 study was blogging with 62% of respondents claiming to be very familiar with it. One year later (2008) however, it was social networking that enjoyed the most familiarity with 70% saying they were very familiar with this channel. In 2009, social networking continued to be the tool most well known with 88% of charity executives reporting high familiarity with it. In an effort to determine more specifically which social networking tools were most well known, Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn, MySpace, Twitter, texting and Foursquare replaced the more general term, social networking in the 2010 survey.

Twitter was added to the familiarity question in 2009, giving us two years of data on that particular tool. Charity executives were asked if they were familiar with Twitter. A remarkable 87% reported being very familiar with Twitter in 2009. That number moved up to 91% for 2010.

In the 2007 study, familiarity and usage were not directly related. That changed in the 2008 study and the two continue to be related. The executives we spoke to in 2010 are very familiar with blogging, Facebook and Twitter and these were also the tools they

were most likely to be using. See Figures 1a and b for results on how familiarity with social media has changed among charity executives.

Figure 1a

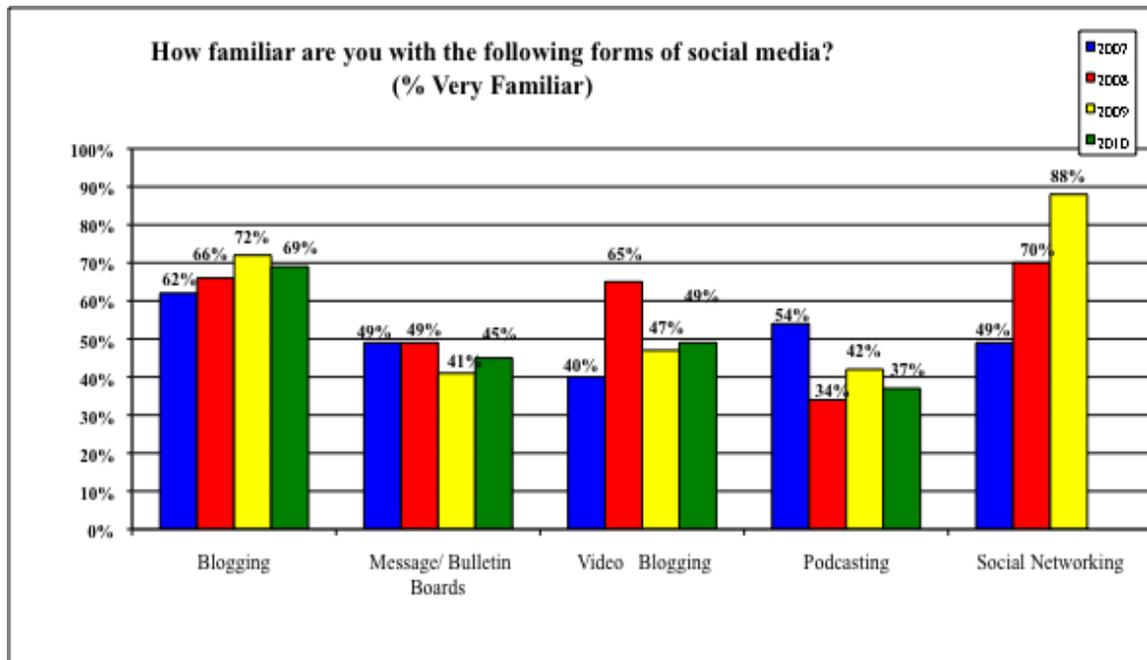
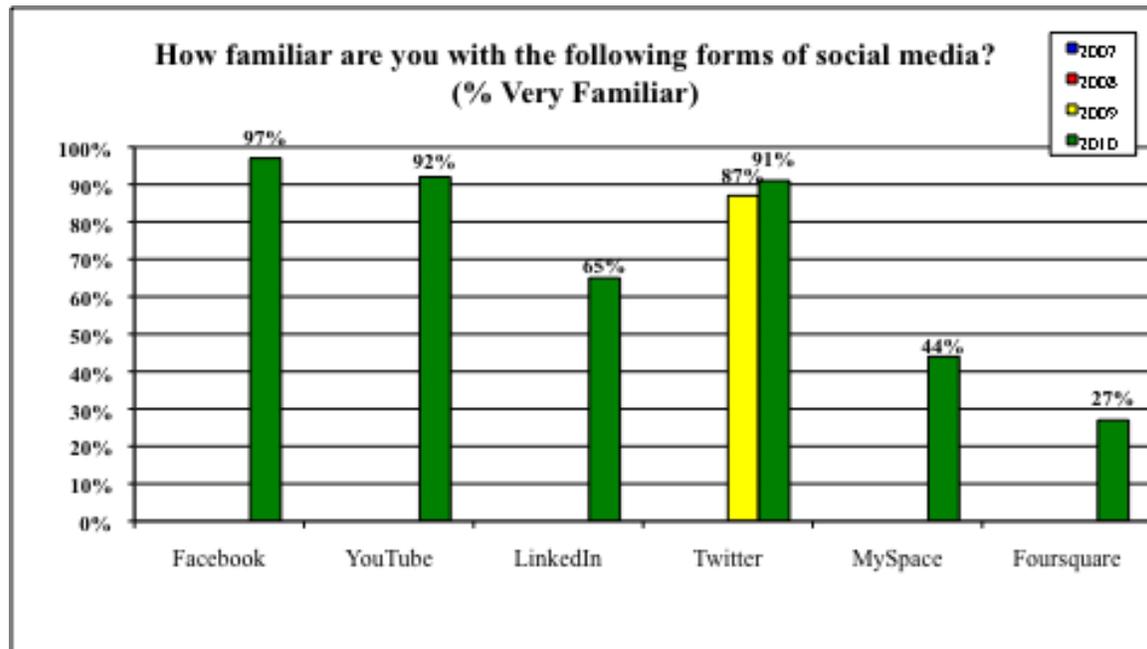


Figure 1b



Usage

From familiarity the survey moved into examining actual usage of social media by the charities. Seventy-five percent of the respondents in 2007 reported using at least one form of social media. One year later in 2008, 89% of them were using at least one form of social media. From 2007 to 2008, usage increased for every tool studied. By 2009, a remarkable 97% reported using some social media tool. Included in that number were 90% with a corporate Twitter account, 93% on Facebook, 36% using LinkedIn and 30% on MySpace.

Facebook (97%), Twitter (96%), YouTube (92%) and blogging (64%) are now the most common tools used. Sixty-four percent of responding charities are blogging, making this group the most prolific bloggers of all sectors studied. YouTube was not included in the study before 2010 and makes its debut at 92% using the portal. Usage of LinkedIn has jumped from 36% to 58% in one year, while the use of MySpace as a platform has declined from 30% to 22%. Both Foursquare and texting were new in the 2010 study and made respectable showings at 28% and 44% respectively.

For the first time, in the four years of our social media studies across diverse sectors, (Fortune 500, Inc. 500, colleges and universities and charities) 100% of those interviewed are using at least one form of social media. These organizations are clearly leading the way in social media adoption and are simply outpacing their counterparts in strategically using these new communications tools to conduct their business. See Figures 2a and b.

Figure 2a

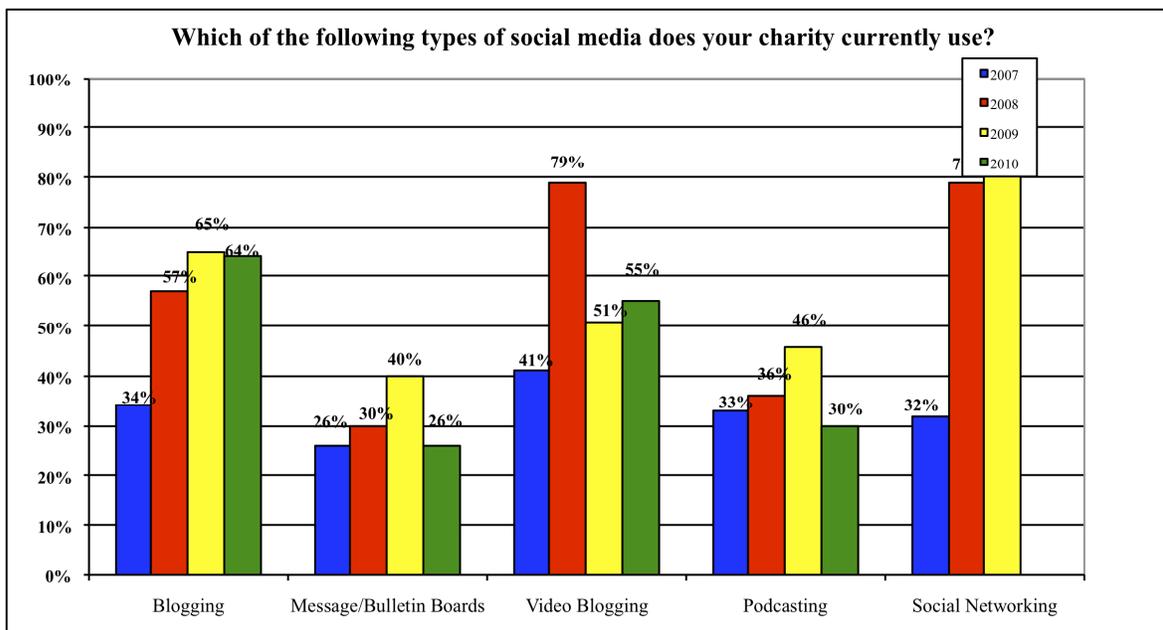
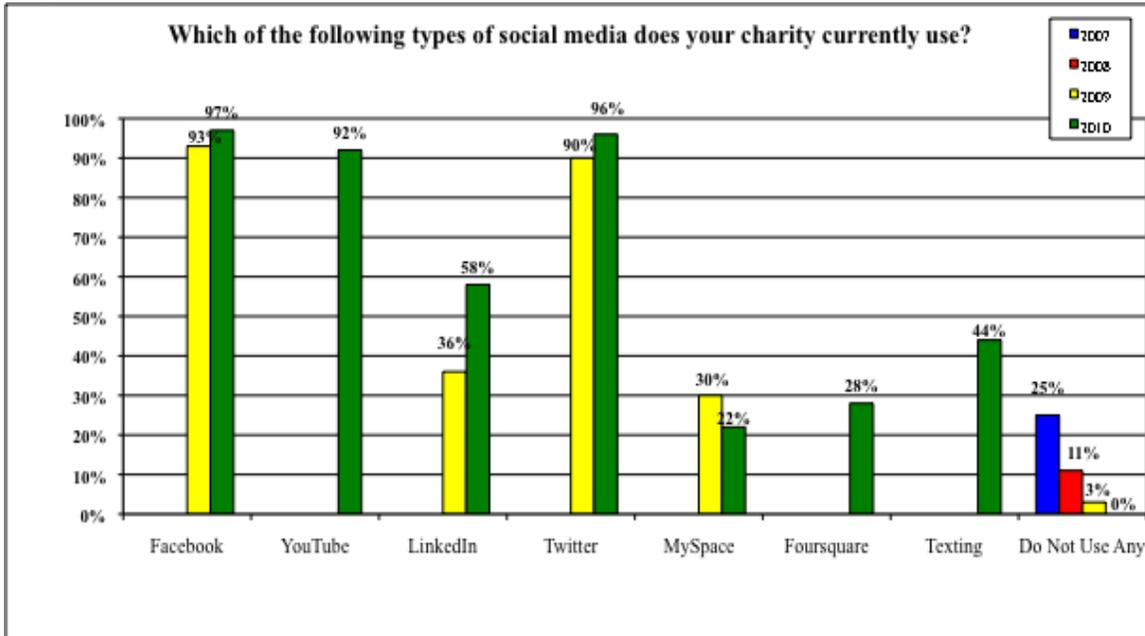
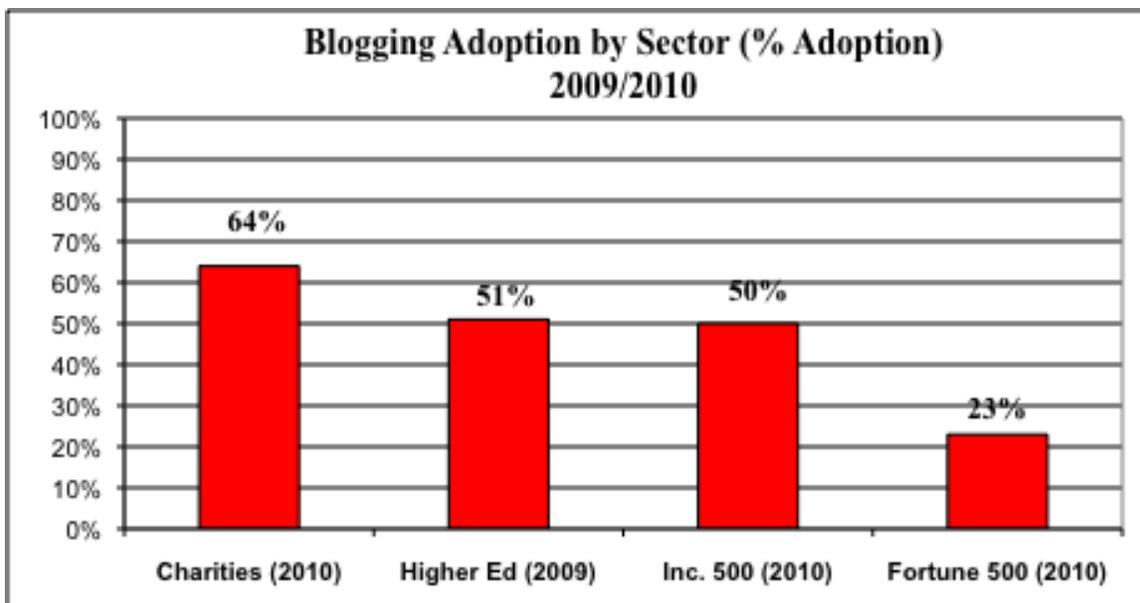


Figure 2b



Research on blogging across sectors clearly shows the extensive involvement of these charities with this particular channel. While the Fortune 500, Inc. 500, US colleges and universities and charities have all increased their adoption of blogging between 2007 and 2010, charities are “out-blogging” all sectors for the fourth year in a row. Our latest research shows the Fortune 500 with the least amount of blogs at 23% adoption, the Inc. 500 with 50%, colleges and universities blogging at 51% (2010 figures forthcoming) and charities now reporting 64% with blogs. See Figure 3.

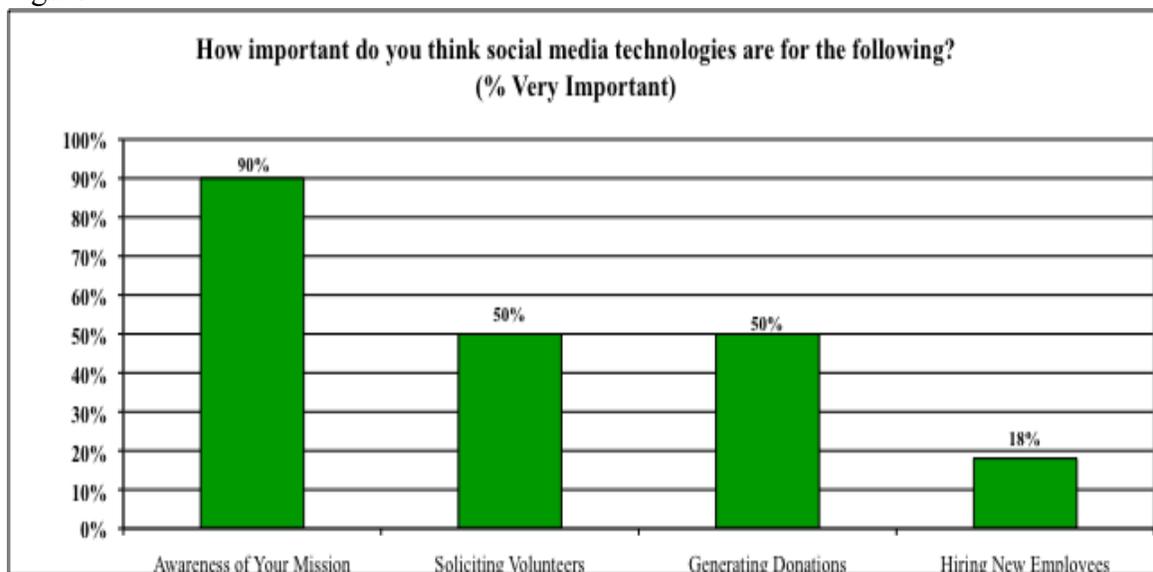
Figure 3



Importance

The adoption of social media by charities is being driven by familiarity and their recognition of the increasingly important role of social media in today's world. In earlier renditions of this research, we asked how important social media strategies were for their marketing strategy. Overwhelmingly, the response was that social media was "very important". In this latest study, we asked specifically about the importance of social media for particular goals within the organization. It is interesting to note that these top performing charities see the role of social media as most important in increasing awareness of their mission (90%) and to a lesser extent (50%) generating donations. Their strategy appears to be one of promoting their cause through blogs, video and social networking sites. See Figure 4.

Figure 4



Are charities using social media effectively?

Managing the blog

The extent to which these non-profits are using social media appears to be a case study in the timely adoption of new technology. A closer look shows how they maximize the effectiveness of these tools and may be changing the way they use some of their early favorites. Comparing the 2007, 2008 and 2009 data, it becomes clear that there had been significant changes in the implementation of one of the most popular tools, blogging.

The survey asked about blog logistics like accepting comments, allowing RSS feeds or email subscriptions, promoting the blog and planning for the future of the blog. The answers to these and other questions from charities with blogs are interesting as it becomes clear they are learning about and using social media in new and different ways. In the 2007 study, 85% of those charities with blogs accepted comments. That percentage rose in 2008 to 88% and 90% in 2009. This latest research shows a drop for the first time in this function. In 2010, 80% of the charity executives surveyed report that their

organization's blog accepts comments. There appears to be a shift in the role of the blog. It may be that blogs are increasingly being used to promote and inform rather than engage as their primary function. Regardless, data does show that for those 80% with blogs that take comments, there is great attention paid to responding and getting subscriptions. Ninety-five percent of those taking comments respond daily and 86% offer RSS subscriptions.

For volunteers/donors looking to have a conversation online about particular aspects of the charity's mission, interaction through comments can be significant. However, with the availability of multiple channels of social media, there are increased opportunities for engagement and interaction. We may be seeing the beginning of segmentation of tools for strategic purposes. While many organizations have adopted social media tools, linking tools to specific goals is still an evolving effort.

In 2009 and again in 2010 half the charities studies reported having a written policy in place for blogging by employees.

Planning/Promotion/Evaluation

Those not currently using social media were asked if they planned to in the future. Sixty-four percent of those without a blog in the 2010 survey planned to add one in the future, making blogs a permanent tool now and for the foreseeable future. All of those without a Facebook presence planned to establish one. Using texting and YouTube were mentioned as targets for adoption by 49% and 50% respectively. Plans to include more video on social media channels increased from 35% in 2009 to 52% in 2010. There is also some increased interest in podcasting with 45% looking to adopt this tool in the future.

In 2007 a popular answer to the question of how blogs were promoted was "we issued a press release". Later, the most popular response was through a link on their homepage, newsletters or email. Many charities now cite a link on Facebook as a popular way for them to promote their blogs.

Beyond that, when asked which social networking platform is the single most effective, 74% of the charity executives surveyed said Facebook. It has clearly become the tool of choice for top performing charities.

When asked if they thought the types of social media they are using are successful, responses are very positive. For blogging, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, 90% or more called their efforts a success. Even the newest platforms like Foursquare with relatively low adoption, were deemed to be successful. Texting was reported successful by 68% of charity executives surveyed. See Figures 5a and b.

Figure 5a

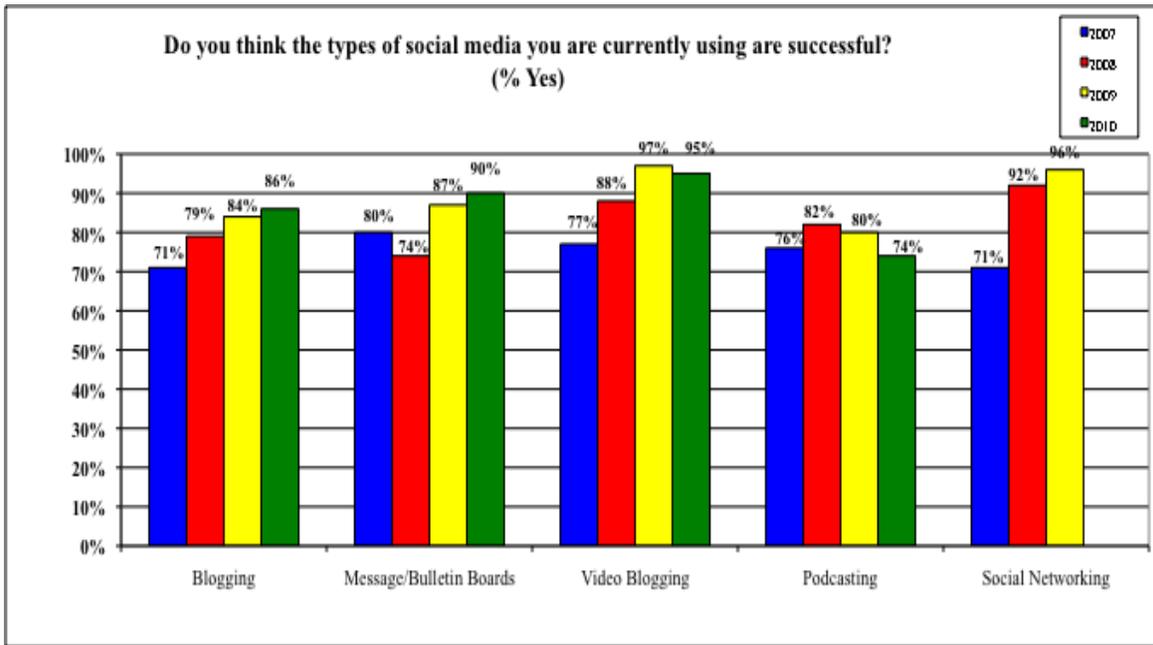
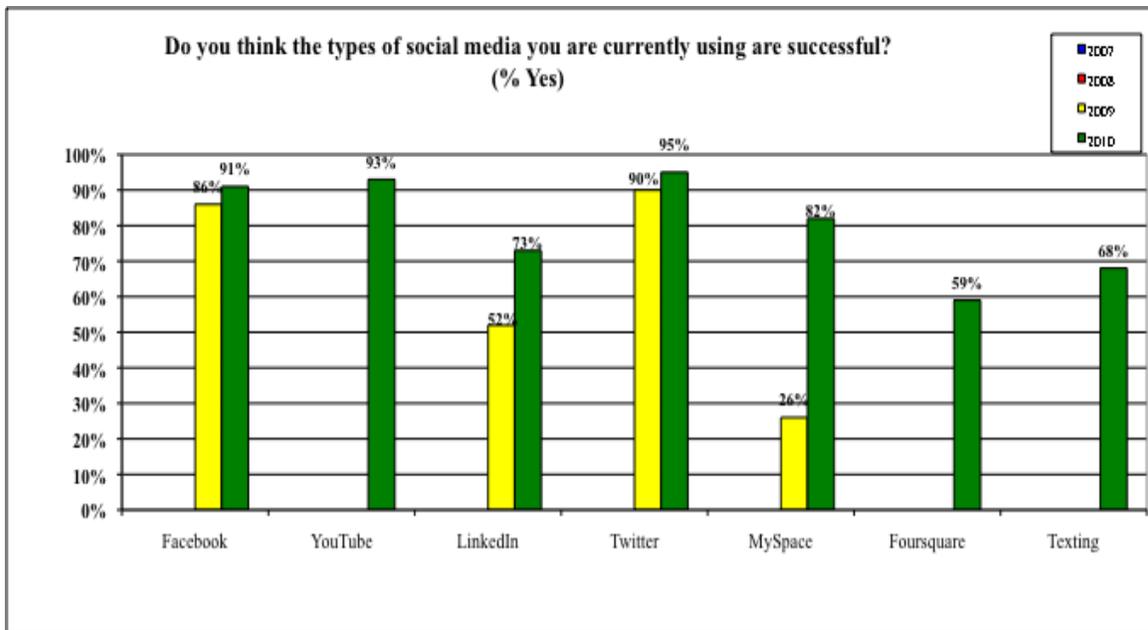


Figure 5b



Over the past four years, comments, hits and traffic have been reported as the primary indicators for measuring success of social media efforts among top charities. We are now

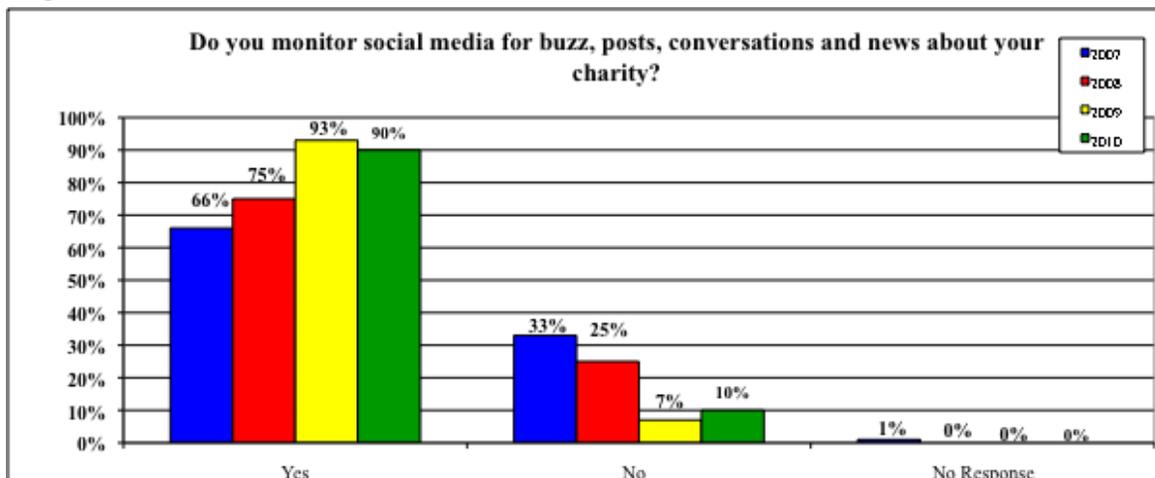
seeing language that is consistent with particular tools, emerge as measures. In 2010, “fans” and “likes” topped the list of indicators with hits and comments following. It is interesting to note that donations, as indicators of effectiveness, were far below these traffic related measures. We are also seeing the emergence of measurement tools like Google Analytics mentioned.

Are they listening/researching via social media?

It is clear that not-for-profits are now communicating in new ways. The next question is: Are they listening to what’s being said about them online? Sixty-six percent of respondents in 2007, 75% in 2008 and 93% in 2009 reported they monitor the Internet for buzz, posts, conversations and news about their organization. That number remains fairly consistent in the new study with 90% monitoring online activity. See Figure 6.

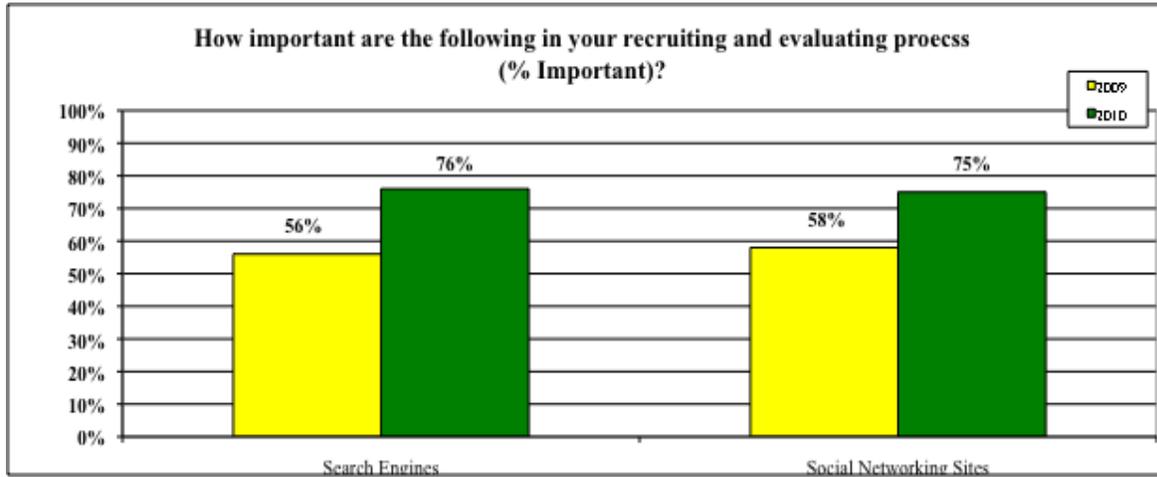
There has been movement among the charities in how they monitor buzz about themselves or their causes. The data indicates extensive use of both manual and automated searches. These organizations realize the importance of knowing that conversation might occur around their cause, their name, their location or constituents. Some monitor manually using Google or Yahoo searches, while others use automated alerts available from these platforms. This monitoring is just another example of how this sector is both active and sophisticated in their use of social media.

Figure 6



Charities are also using social media in their recruiting and evaluation processes. In 2009, they reported search engines were very important to these processes (56%). In 2010, that number rose to 76%, demonstrating the perceived value of online information sources. They were also asked about using social networking sites in their recruiting and evaluation processes, 75% reported these sites were very important (up from 58% in 2009). It appears that there is a significant amount of effort now expended online in an effort to recruit employees or volunteers as well as to evaluate potential recruits. See Figure 7.

Figure 7



Conclusion

Ninety-seven percent of the charities studied have a Facebook profile, 96% have a Twitter presence and 64% have a blog. For the first time in the past four years, every charity surveyed reported using at least one form of social media. This latest study in a longitudinal look at social media usage among the top charities from 2007-2010, reveals that social media has become an incredibly important part of the communication strategy for US charities.

The largest charities continue to outpace businesses and even academic institutions in their familiarity, use, and monitoring activity. These top organizations have found a new and exciting way to engage employees, volunteers and donors. They are connected and react quickly, as evidenced by responses to recent disasters. They have truly embraced social media tools in a way no other sector has. It will be exciting to see how the most innovative among them move forward from here!

To be added to our email distribution list so that you can stay abreast of our research and writings, please email me at nbarnes@umassd.edu.

Bio & Acknowledgment

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Nora has worked as a consultant for many national and international firms. Working closely with businesses in the Northeast US, Nora and her students have provided marketing research assistance to hundreds of small businesses.

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