

Exploring Social Media Engagement Strategies in Small Nonprofit Organizations: From Informational Sharing to Community Calling

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ABSTRACT: This study examined the social media activities of small nonprofit organizations (NPOs) in Los Angeles, particularly those with annual revenue under \$500,000, to understand their strategies for audience engagement on Facebook. The study adopted a social media engagement framework and categorized messages into information, community, and action. The findings show that smaller NPOs predominantly focused on sharing information. However, combining information with action-oriented messages significantly enhanced audience engagement, particularly in the form of comments, shares, and likes. Community-building efforts, which require greater resources, were more limited. This suggests that small NPOs face challenges in maintaining two-way communication because of resource constraints that limit their ability to foster long-term community connections. Over 50% of posts delivered dual or triple codes, which highlights the dual nature of NPO communication—while providing essential information, organizations simultaneously issue calls to action. These triple-coded posts signify a multifaceted engagement tactic. Overall, this study highlighted the need for small NPOs to adopt more strategic, multifaceted social media approaches that not only raise awareness but call for action and foster community building.

KEYWORDS: Small NPOs, social media, audience engagement, Facebook

Introduction

The number of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) has steadily grown—reaching more than 1.8 million entities registered with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in 2022 from approximately 1.41 million in 2013 (Smith 2018). Social media engagement has become an important tool for NPOs striving to fulfil their social missions. Small NPOs play an essential role because they can respond to the specific needs of diverse local communities (Ramirez 2022). To address the different needs of many distinct cultural and religious communities living in LA County, the nonprofit sector has to maintain a wide range of services and requires extensive resources.

With the emergence of social media platforms, NPOs have found a social media presence to be an essential part of their identity and a means to appeal to a wider audience (Campbell, Lambright, and Wells 2014; Guo and Saxton 2014). Social media have transformed how NPOs interact with their audiences and have provided NPOs of all sizes new opportunities to deepen and broaden their engagement with their members (Schmitz et al. 2020). Over the past two decades, social media has been used by NPOs for raising awareness, building a brand, connecting with stakeholders and potential donors, recruiting volunteers, and educating audiences on the organizations' missions and programs for advocacy and fundraising. In 2021, about 12% of total giving in the

United States occurred online, and smaller NPOs raised more of their funding (17.8%) from online sources than larger organizations (Blackbaud 2022). Research has also shown that 55% of people who engage with NPOs on social media end up taking some form of action (NP Source 2022). NPOs rely on a range of social media platforms to advance their missions, including Facebook (96% of respondents), Instagram (73% of respondents), Twitter (59 % of respondents), LinkedIn (49% of respondents), and YouTube (44% of respondents).

Audience engagement has emerged as major concern for NPOs as they strive to build meaningful relationships with their stakeholders and wider audiences. Successful engagement is largely driven by the quality of communication strategies—particularly those that are interactive. The more dynamic and skilled the communication, the more effective NPOs are at fostering deeper connections with their target audiences (Guo and Saxton 2014). With the rise of social media, NPOs have increasingly adopted digital platforms as crucial tools for audience engagement (Campbell, Lambright, and Wells 2014; Guo and Saxton 2014). Social media strategies allow NPOs to direct their resources efficiently and capture the attention of broader audiences, especially through the ability to deliver timely and cost-effective messages (Olinski and Szamrowski 2021). However, building these interactive relationships via social media requires significant investments in resources, labor, and time. Engaging with potential audiences on social networking sites is also key to earning stakeholder trust, as individuals who interact with NPOs online are more likely to engage with them in offline settings (Piatak and Mikkelsen 2021). The shift from traditional communication mediums, such as mail and letters, to online platforms has transformed how NPOs advocate for their missions and engage with communities (Young 2012). Social media not only accelerates communication but also deepens interactions between NPOs and their audiences and enhances the overall relationship (Kennedy and Sommerfeldt 2015). Interactive communication on these platforms, especially when executed well, significantly improves audience engagement and helps NPOs achieve their outreach goals (Guo and Saxton 2014). Although social media offers various promising opportunities for nonprofits to engage with their audiences, many NPOs struggle to take full advantage of these online opportunities. These barriers can be particularly challenging for smaller NPOs (Hou and Lampe 2015). Small NPOs can be particularly reliant on a social media presence to attract more resources and attention given their limited resources and a lack of broad brand-name recognition.

Literature Review

Social Media Adoption by NPOs for Audience Engagement

Engagement involved actively the public in the organization's activities and emphasized in relationship building and dialogue (Olinski and Szamrowski 2021). Interactive (such as dialogue) communication strategies are more successful since they more likely to reach larger audiences while remaining cost-effective (Guo and Saxton 2014). Scholars have highlighted how social media has become essential for NPOs to connect with the audience and earn their trust through frequent online engagement (Campbell et al. 2014; Guo and Saxton 2014). However, building interactive relationships via social media requires ample resources, labor, and time (Olinski and Szamrowski 2021), as constantly engaging with potential audiences is vital for developing offline relationships (Piatak and Mikkelsen 2021). Social media could foster deeper, more sustained interactions with audiences (Kennedy and Sommerfeldt 2015), link audiences to the NPO's mission and build enduring connections (Watkins 2017).

Measuring Audience Engagement With Content Analysis

Studies have examined the correlation between engagement levels and content strategy, which was categorized as community, action, and information (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012). NPOs have learned more about what material resonates with their audience and how to communicate more effectively for social media success by analyzing the degree of engagement in audience responses. Audience responses are publicly available, so they can be examined for the analysis of users and even mapped to the pattern of audience interaction (Ross et al. 2018). Those audience responses are evaluated on their pertinent level of engagement, respectively, from low to high (Cho et al. 2014; Kaur et al. 2019). On Facebook, an organization-generated post is more likely to be affected if users engage with the post in the form of likes, shares, and comments (Carboni and Maxwell 2015). It also ties into how different social media strategies affect audience behaviors, such as likes, shares, and comments (Guo and Saxton 2014). Audience responses to organization-generated messages were observed to provide a more comprehensive framework about stakeholders' response to messages; practitioners have also collected messages and later developed a hierarchy of engagement (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012).

Community-Building as an Emerging Social Media Strategy

Numerous scholars have analyzed the relationship between types of organization-generated messages (information, community, and action) and engagement level based on Lovejoy and Saxton's (2012) hierarchy of engagement framework (Campbell et al. 2014; Denq 2023; Huang et al. 2016). Community-related content generated a greater number of likes and comments than information-related content (Guo and Saxton 2014). Also, community-based messages had a much higher impact than information-related messages because community building is "a prerequisite for stimulating dialogue and user engagement" (Smith 2018: 308). The existing literature highlights the importance of fostering online communities for NPOs and explores the potential benefits and growing importance of this strategy (Schmitz et al. 2020). It suggests that some NPOs, despite limited resources, are moving toward integrating community-building as a way to deepen audience engagement.

Research Questions

To investigate how NPOs used Facebook for outreach and to further gain an understanding of the details of which content will resonate with audience engagement effectively, I adopted Lovejoy and Saxton's (2012) hierarchy of engagement to classify the content into three categories: information, community, and action. The research questions were:

1. How do small nonprofit organizations (NPOs) in Los Angeles use Facebook to engage their audiences?
2. What are the predominant types of messages (information, action, and community-building) they employ to achieve their organizational goals?

Methodology

In the first stage of quantitative analysis, 150 posts with text were randomly selected out of a total of 505 organizational posts, which, based on the pilot study, is a number fair to abstract the meaning. In the second stage of qualitative analysis, 150 selected samples were coded in MAXQDA to assess the engagement modes of engagement with both deductive and inductive approaches. For the deductive analysis, all Facebook messages were first categorized into three areas (informational, action-, or community-focused)

and coded based on the 11 subcategories from Lovejoy and Saxton (2012), two subcategories (organizational information and mission) of information from Campbell (2020) and one subcategory (event) of information category (Denq 2023) and one subcategory from action category from Denq (2023). The inductive analysis identified new subcategories for each category (information, action, and community). Each Facebook message was coded by segment, allowing for multiple codes per message.

Results and Discussion

Multiple Content Areas Across Organizational Posts

One compelling observation emerging from the data is the presence of multiple content areas across Facebook messages. For example, a single posting may feature both information and action-related content (see Table 1). Slightly more than 50% of the codes covered two categories, while less than a quarter each had one or three codes applied. The prevalence of dual and triple codes in the sampled Facebook messages suggests that the NPOs use individual posts for multiple purposes. For example, the high frequency of co-occurring information and action-related messaging suggests that NPOs use information strategically to motivate their supporters to become more active.

Table 1. Singular and Multiple Code Patterns In Posts

	Single code applied	Dual codes applied	Triple codes applied
Number of posts (N = 150)	36 (24%)	79 (52.7%)	35 (23.3%)
Information (138)	36	73 (w/action) 5 (w/community)	
Action (107)	0	73 (w/information) 1 (w/community)	
Community (37)	0	5 (w/information) 1 (w/action)	

Three categories were extracted from the findings: Single codes, dual codes, and triple codes. Therefore, there were 150 total sampled posts, but the sample includes 372 codes due to dual or triple codes. All single codes (36) were information-related posts. For example, this type of post conveys to the audience a core belief of the NPO such as “housing and physical stability is a foundational need to do anything else.” Slightly more than 50% of the codes covered two categories. The prevalence of multiple codes in the sampled Facebook messages suggests that the NPOs use single postings for multiple purposes. One example of an information and action post by 20/20 Mom is: “I invite you to help us celebrate this milestone by making a tax-deductible contribution to 20/20 Mom today. Because of supporters like you, we have seen a narrative shift in this space over the last 11 years.” The content of the post provides informational messages as it discusses 20/20 Mom’s current fundraising events and their 11-year duration; the phrase “by making a tax-deductible contribution to 20/20” represents an action-related message, specifically a call for donations.

An example of a combination of information and community-building statement would contribute to building a sense of community with shared mission interests (such

as maternal mental health). Less than a quarter (23.3%) of posts covered all three categories. This suggests another way NPOs seek to promote multiple goals in a single Facebook message.

A post coded under all three categories states: “Thanks to your generous support, we filmed Eviction last week. . . . With the affordable housing crisis getting worse, causing mass evictions, our social impact films will help push for policy change!” The appreciation could be interpreted as a community-related message, as it falls under the subcategory of ‘giving recognition and thanks’ mentioned in the community category (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012). This message not only expresses gratitude but also serves as a reminder or encouragement for the audience to take action via further donations. “With the affordable housing... help push for policy change!” presents an informational message about how this organization contributed to the mission.

A total of 150 samples were categorized according to three core content areas: information, action, and community. Table 3 provides the classification of 150 sampled posts based on the content focused on information provision, calls for action, and community-building. I also assigned 14 subcategories (two new subcategories from Campbell, 2020 and one new subcategory from Denq, 2023) of message contents that emerged during the coding process (Table 2). In Table 1, the sample reveals that 92% of the Facebook messages were used to distribute information; 71.3% of messages contained calls for action, while only 24.7% were focused on community-building. This dominance of information focus aligns with expectations that smaller nonprofits may not have the resources to develop more complex and sustained social media strategies. However, a more in-depth analysis of these results also reveals a more complex picture of how NPOs use information and action functions.

Table 2. Distribution of Sampled Post Across Three Core Categories

Core Category	Information	Action	Community-building
Actual Posts	138	107	37
Percent (N = 150)	92.0%	71.3%	24.7%

Event-related Subcategory added to Information Category and the Characteristic of Each Category

For the 138 information-related posts (175 codes out of a total of 372 codes), three subcategories for information-related messaging were identified (see Table 3). The information-focused messages typically convey content on the organization’s activities, events, facts, or reports relevant to the organization’s supporters and stakeholders. In information-focused messaging, I applied existing subcategories (mission, and organization-related content) and found a new subcategory (event). Campbell’s (2020) mission-related message is exemplary for solely mission-focused content: “Celebrating the generous spirit of our humanitarians inspires each of us to do more, give more, and be more.” The goal is to positively reinforce the organizational mission, vision, and values and raise awareness among the audience. Organizational information subcategories included examples of programs, services, and board members. Event-related information, an emerging subcategory, often included information focused on fundraising events, including time, location, or purpose and political activities such as advocacy and lobbying. This subcategory sometimes led to the messages with the call for action category, such as seeking volunteers or other calls to action to online followers (the detail refer to see “multiple content areas across organizational posts”).

The information category messages can be considered one-way communication because they do not explicitly aim for an ongoing exchange between NPOs and their online members.

Table 3. Subcategories of Information-Focused Messages

Subcategory	Key Content	#codes	As a % of Information Category
Mission	Information related to its specific mission to raise awareness of the organization's brand	88	50.29%
Events (new)	Information related to events, activities, including advocacy and lobbying to promote organizational events/ activities	64	36.57%
Organization	Information related to organizational programs, services, board members, or photos posts for events	23	13.14%
Total	Single, dual, or triple codes	175	

For the 107 action-related posts (150 total codes out of 372 total codes), the analysis presented in Table 4 revealed all subcategories. In addition, one existing subcategory was rephrased and labeled as “call for volunteers, employees, and public representative.” In terms of action-related messaging, the study indicated a prevalence of event- and support-focused actions around advocacy and learning. Notably, NPOs do not excessively use action-related messaging for fundraising or volunteer drives. Instead, these NPOs are using calls for action in more community-building efforts such as more frequently directing their audiences to other groups and networks than has been previously recognized in the literature. For example, advocacy-related messaging in this realm focused on giving supporters the tools to contact local politicians or to connect to other organizations with similar missions.

Table 4. Subcategories of Action-Related Posts

Subcategory	Key contents	# Codes	As a % of Action Category
Promote an event	Invited to attend the event or activities	41	27.33%
Learn how to help	Requested to learn how to help NPOs	38	25.33%
Lobbying and advocacy	Requested the audience to contact public officials and to lobby for policy petitions	21	14.00%
Following the organization on social media	Invited the audience to follow NPOs on official websites or social media sites	15	10.00%

Subcategory	Key contents	# Codes	As a % of Action Category
Donation appeal	Requested monetary and in-kind donation	14	9.33%
Know All other (miscellaneous)	Recruit volunteers and employees; join another site or vote for the organization; posted positive feedback	21	14.00%
Total	Dual and triple codes	150	

For 37 community-related posts (47 codes out of 372 codes; see Table 5), the least common community-related messages served as means to interact, share, and communicate with stakeholders to facilitate online and offline community-building. Table 5 provides a breakdown of these messages based on three subcategories. There were three subcategories with multiple coding. The two dominant subcategories were mentions and acknowledgments of current and local events that were not initiated by the organization itself and giving thanks and recognition. For example, 20/20 MOM, stated that “CCBHCs, . . . provide a range of mental health and substance use disorder services.” This type of community-related messaging focuses on linking the NPO and its supporters to broader networks of actors with similar interests. Community-related messages reflect the broader views on social issues held by the NPOs. Although the reference in messages may not explicitly state how NPOs attempt to build relationships, networks, and communities with the audiences, community-related messages demonstrated that NPOs reach out to larger audiences through their organizational or personal affiliations. Given recognition and thanks represents acknowledging the contributions of their supporters, volunteers, and followers, it may include mentions of deceased employees. This message received the largest number of comments. Interestingly, the majority of thank-you messages were for the provision of direct services (11 of 19), not for financial support. Recognition for financial support is likely accomplished through more direct forms of communication (e.g., thank you letters or personal calls), rather than through more anonymous online channels.

Table 5. Subcategories of Community-Related Posts

Subcategory	Key contents	# of Codes	As a % of community category
Acknowledgment of current and local events	Events not initiated by the organization	25	53.19%
Giving recognition and thanks	Recognition of individuals or groups	19	40.43%
Responses to replied to messages	Responses as interactive communication	3	6.38%
Total	Dual and triple codes	47	

Discussion and Conclusions

The first findings revealed that information-focused posts dominate NPO messaging on Facebook. A total of 92% of the sampled posts were classified as information-sharing, with these posts primarily being one-way communications that do not actively engage audiences. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that NPOs often use social media platforms for disseminating information about their activities, events and missions but may lack the resources to create a more interactive communication environment (Guo and Saxton 2014; Lovejoy and Saxton 2012). This content aimed to educate and continuously engage the audience by providing actionable links and resources, such as videos and articles- which deepened their understanding of the issues at hand. That is why new subcategories were identified- events- highlight all organizational events and activities, including advocacy and lobbying to proactively address the root causes of social issues directly.

The findings show that action-focused posts, comprising 71.3% of the sampled content, played a significant role and emphasized the call for the audience to contribute, including donating, volunteering, or participating in organizational events. This finding supports extant studies that NPOs' calls for action are a way to engage supporters and actively participate in their advocacy efforts (Saxton and Waters 2014).

Although the limited focus on community-building could indicate current smaller NPOs still missed opportunity for creating deeper, more meaningful engagements with the audience as one-way communication, it raised a promising observation that community-building become an emerging social media strategy, which aligns with the study of Smith (2018), as community-based messages had a much higher impact than information-related messages (Smith 2018b) as well as Schmitz et al. (2020) highlights the importance of fostering online communities for NPOs and explores the potential benefits and growing importance of this strategy (Schmitz et al. 2020).

The finding that more than 50% of posts delivered dual or triple codes highlights the multiple nature of NPO communication—while providing essential information, organizations simultaneously issue calls to action. This duality of content suggests that NPOs understand the importance of connecting with their audience emotionally and intellectually. Furthermore, the existence of posts coded under all three categories—information, action, and community—further illustrates a complex and layered communication strategy. These triple-coded posts signify a multifaceted engagement tactic, addressing various audience needs simultaneously. This approach not only enhances the audiences' loyalty and action but also actively drives support for the organization's mission.

Limitations and Future Research

There are limitations to this study. First, the sample size was relatively small due to the specific criteria used for selecting NPOs. While the analysis of Facebook messages provides valuable insights, a larger sample size is strongly recommended for future research. This would allow for a more comprehensive exploration of the factors related to different types of NPOs. Second, Facebook posts collected during a different timeframe may have yielded distinct findings and conclusions. U.S.-based NPOs typically engage in fundraising activities toward the end of the year, which could lead to different organizational messages and audience responses. Future research could also examine how various factors, such as timelines for diverse topics, influence social media strategies.

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