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**SOCIAL MEDIA** - Elizabeth Trew

## Social media the way of the future for health-related charities

Like businesses, charities consider social media an increasingly more important component of their marketing mix. Large health-related charities in particular are allocating a greater proportion of their resources to social media and away from traditional advertising. They employ full-time social media specialists to post messages and videos for supporters and to analyze the volume and types of activity on the most commonly-used social media channels – **Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.**

Health-related charities rely on social media to create opportunities for supporters to learn about, contribute to and tell others about their cause. Social media are also a very effective vehicle to advocate for change and are being used increasingly for this purpose. Whether people share their stories with each other and provide mutual support on Facebook or pass on news and healthy-lifestyle tips through Twitter, creating communities and building relationships are the prime objectives of a charity's social media activities. Fundraising is just a secondary objective.

### Heart and Stroke on Facebook

The **Heart and Stroke Foundation** has a winning social media strategy. “Facebook is our most successful social media channel,” remarks **Yaz Maziar**, the foundation's national Web publisher. “We have about 22,000 Facebook fans on our sites, growing by over 30% every year. The analytics to track the donation patterns of Facebook fans aren't quite in place, but we are looking at next year to better focus on this.”

HSF closely monitors its social media campaigns by counting the number of fans and social interactions on Facebook, the number of followers and re-tweets on Twitter and the number of video views on YouTube. Traffic back to HSF's website from both Facebook and Twitter is also closely tracked.

The foundation's Heart Month campaign in February used its web site, email lists and social media sites to promote online donations and engage supporters to share their stories with others. Heart-related videos were viewed over 16,000 times on YouTube. More than 400 supporters shared personal stories on the effects of heart disease or stroke on their lives on Facebook and about 3,500 new Facebook fans signed up during Heart Month in support of the cause.

After conducting successful social media campaigns during Heart Month in February and Stroke Month in June, the foundation collaborated with **Metamucil** in November on a *Lower Your Cholesterol* campaign. The 30-day challenge was promoted through email and social media, with Metamucil donating a dollar per purchase to the foundation, raising a total of \$100,000.

### **Government attention and burger bucks**

The **Multiple Sclerosis Society** employs a full-time new media specialist to investigate ways of using technology, including social media, and to measure their effectiveness in generating awareness and support.

MS spokesperson **Stewart Wong** says that in May, the society conducted a Facebook and Twitter government relations campaign asking supporters to advocate for better income security, caregiver support and funding for MS research. Supporters sent 2,400 email messages and reached 97% of all MPs. Two MPs initiated private member's bills to bring the society's message to the government's attention.

On August 27, **A & W Restaurants** held its first national *Cruisin' for a Cause Day* and donated \$1 for every teenburger sold at its 700 Canadian restaurants to the MS Society. The society created a Facebook event, posted videos on YouTube and tweeted the event to their followers. As well, it created a **Flickr** group for members to post their Cruisin' for a Cause pictures. Wong considers the social media campaign, which raised \$400,000, overwhelmingly successful and says the society will definitely use social media to promote Cruisin' for a Cause next year.

### **Relaying the story via Facebook**

The **Canadian Cancer Society** found some of the most successful social media campaigns are initiated by Facebook users themselves, who invite their Facebook friends to join their cause and encourage them to donate. For its annual June *Relay for Life* campaign, the society used social media to increase awareness and to raise funds (see *In Brief*).

Ontario division marketing director **Mike Kirkpatrick** indicates that during the campaign, people who shared their progress on Facebook raised more funds than those who did not. As well, Facebook allowed participants to invite their networks to monitor their progress and donate through their Facebook pages, rather than asking them personally.

Through its website, the society mobilized supporters to write their MPs and MPPs with an automated letter writing program for the *Take Charge on Toxins* campaign, which was also supported by eleven similar-minded organizations. The *Take Charge on Toxins* site included links to several popular email services and many social media sites.

Because social media are in their infancy, social media specialists at these organizations are setting benchmarks for measuring usage and the effectiveness of social media in raising awareness and enhancing fundraising. One thing for certain,

charities are finding social media to be an effective part of their marketing mix. They are increasingly relying on social media as their supporters turn away from traditional media – print, radio and television – and look to social media to keep updated on what’s happening in the world around them.

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