

IN DEPTH  
Technology

## Tools for change

Technology offers charities new ways to attract donations

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Ottawa-based MBAs Without Borders is a charity that matches business experts with non-governmental organizations. (courtesy MBAs Without Borders)

When marketing a not-for-profit organization, one might not immediately think of using YouTube, the site that houses everything from *Saturday Night Live* comedy sketches to political campaign speeches to the efforts of amateur musicians. Yet that's exactly where the Salvation Army turned recently when it placed a clip with its moniker on the popular and free website where people can upload, view and share video clips.

In a highly competitive marketplace and, with resources at a premium, non-profits are becoming increasingly innovative to get their message out. And, technology — in all its incarnations — is playing a key role.

Aside from providing the Salvation Army of Canada with a cost-effective alternative to traditional and pricey television and print advertising, YouTube was chosen because of its ability to showcase the organization's ongoing relevance to the lives of Canadians. As Andrew Burditt, the organization's public relations director, explains, "being on the web is an opportunity to tell people, 'Look we're not the same Salvation Army your grandparents knew. We're out there, we know what's going on, we're available and we're relevant.'"

Moreover, typical YouTube viewers fall into an age group that the Salvation Army is eager to have on board.

"By reaching out to a younger demographic, we can educate them on the depth of what we do in terms of our services," Burditt says. "And maybe when they are a bit older, with more expendable income, they'll think of us."

The Salvation Army has also joined forces with the new social networking kid on the web block, Virb.com, which is similar to MySpace but more design-driven. The not-for-profit's presence on Virb.com is a testament to its ability to stay on top of web trends. As one of the first non-profits to make its home there, Virb.com administrators asked the Salvation Army to lead a new campaign called Do Good Plus Look Good, wherein different non-profits are featured each month.

### Using technology for social goals

In this world of interconnected possibilities, the power to do good that users have at their fingertips makes Salvation Army Canada's pursuit of technology an important part of its marketing strategy. And the organization is certainly not alone. More and more organizations are turning to [social websites](#) such as Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn, and to technological innovations like wikis, podcasts and blogging, in order to reach outward and gain a marketable footing. The rewards can make these initiatives well worth the effort.

"Social media has created opportunities for organizations to more effectively engage their target audiences in a way that wasn't really possible before," Brendan Hodgson, vice-president of digital communications at public relations firm Hill and Knowlton Canada, says.

With the tools at their disposal, organizations can keep their social community informed and have them participate and be recognized for their contributions, adds Hodgson.

### How many giving friends do you have?

In fact, with donor participation in mind, Facebook has added a new application called Causes to its site. Donors are now able to link their personalized pages with a not-for-profit cause, a symbiotic gesture with invaluable potential.

Dedicated to advancing the individual's contribution to philanthropy, the initiative has found a fan in Hodgson. "It brings it to a level of the individual, helping them be seen to be doing good things. If you can get your community engaged in that way, by putting it in the hands of the champions of your cause, that's important."

Ottawa-based MBAs Without Borders, a charity that matches business experts with non-governmental organizations (NGOs, a term for private-sector aid and charity groups) so they can share expertise, would agree. Acknowledging the power of engagement through technology and the internet, co-founder and president Tal Dehtiar understood that, "if we don't try using technological advancements we will be very much like the traditional NGOs that are lost in the dark."

But lost they are not. For example, all the MBAs who are sent into the field write blogs regularly. In addition, a lot of their marketing activities take place on MySpace and Facebook, where they engage with groups and discussion forums.

These business-savvy folks make sure to take advantage of the interactive site LinkedIn — a social networking site for making and maintaining business contacts — as well. As for the ubiquitous YouTube, MBA's Without Borders was recently selected as the site's first Canadian recipient of YouTube Grants, which will allow the organization to get free advertising space while visitors view videos on the website.

Another not-for-profit group marrying technology to its cause is Special Olympics Canada. The organization, which uses sport to enrich the lives of Canadians who have an intellectual disability, has looked at a number of online tools to help achieve greater public awareness of its activities.

"We want to continue to reach as many people as we can in every way possible," says marketing and communications manager Vaso Charitsis. "If people are online, it's our benefit to come up with interactive campaigns that really reach them."

While a proponent of social networking sites — Special Olympics has used them in the past — the organization wanted to take greater control over its own images, videos and postings. So, with the upcoming 2007 World Games in Shanghai this October, the organization decided to build an interactive web page that provided photo galleries and real-time updates on the competitions and its athletes.

"If our home page can have the capabilities of MySpace, YouTube and others, then we can just put everything under one umbrella instead of filtering people through different avenues," Charitsis explains.

### **The cheque is in your inbox**

As for the financial benefits of online fundraising and marketing initiatives, the non-profit community seems to agree it works.

"Our online fundraising results are dramatically increasing every year," says the Salvation Army of Canada's Burditt. "In 2001-2002, we raised over \$200,000 online and that was including 9/11. This past fiscal year we raised \$2.2 million online and that was with no disasters."

MBAs Without Borders' Dehtiar echoes the sentiment. Of the tens of thousands of visitors to his site, he estimates that half come from Google and YouTube. And, as for Facebook, the members have certainly had an impact. "The traffic is huge and it's good traffic," Dehtiar says.

