

Web Conferencing for Nonprofits

Technology You Can Use

Continuing Nonprofit Sector Growth with Technology

The nonprofit sector is a rapidly growing sector. Approximately 1.4 million nonprofit organizations are currently registered with the IRS. The figure includes a diverse group of organizations both in size and mission, which range from hospitals and human service organizations to advocacy groups and chambers of commerce. When compared to other sectors of the economy, the nonprofit sector accounts for 5.2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) and 8.3 percent of wages and salaries paid in the United States.¹ The growth can be attributed to a strong interest in philanthropy as well as a burgeoning economy.

While these indicators do show strength, there remains a persistent challenge – how can nonprofits grow their membership base, satisfy their stakeholders and maintain their core mission, all while keeping a tight control on costs.

Market Trends

Evidence supports the theory that the financial picture for nonprofit growth is healthy. Over the past decade, all three of the major financial measures for nonprofit organizations increased by at least 56 percent — a difference of nearly 20 percentage points.²

With the increased money in the nonprofit sector, the industry has matured as a whole and has begun to address efficiencies and capacity issues. Beth Kanter, who has served as a project consultant for Nonprofit Technology Enterprise Network’s (N-TEN), states “As opposed to a business that looks at technology as the cost of doing business; nonprofits are so immersed in their program delivery that they won’t look at capacity issues such as reach and scalability” That has begun to change.

A maturing industry attracts more engaged stakeholders. Individual donors expect to be more involved and part of the community. Similarly, foundations want to fund larger collaborations so they are asking nonprofits to partner and form communities. These partnerships often take place over large geographical boundaries and effective project management becomes critical.

Historical Perspective

Traditionally, nonprofits have been built from grass roots initiatives, where anything that was not central to their mission was considered extraneous. Beth Kanter, who began her career helping nonprofits adopt IT, states that “Typically, your nonprofit volunteer was a “do-er” who simply delivered their experience face-to-face; technology is a mediated experience so there may have

¹ The Urban Institute, The Nonprofit Sector in Brief [on-line]; available from http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311373_nonprofit_sector.pdf 2005

² The Urban Institute, The Nonprofit Sector in Brief [on-line]; available from http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311373_nonprofit_sector.pdf 2005

| | |
|---|-----------------|
| 501(c)(3) public charities | |
| Public charities | 845,233 |
| Reporting public charities | 299,033 |
| Revenues | \$1,050 billion |
| Assets | \$1,819 billion |
| 501(c)(3) private foundations | |
| Private foundations | 103,880 |
| Reporting private foundations | 75,478 |
| Revenues | \$61 billion |
| Assets | \$455 billion |
| Other nonprofit organizations | |
| Nonprofits | 464,595 |
| Reporting nonprofits | 112,471 |
| Revenues | \$250 billion |
| Assets | \$692 billion |
| Giving | |
| Annual, from private sources | \$260 billion |
| From individuals and households | \$199 billion |
| As a % of annual income | 1.9 |
| Average, from households that itemize deductions | \$3,576 |
| Average, from households that do not itemize deductions | \$551 |
| Volunteering | |
| Volunteers | 65 million |

Sources: Bureau of Labor Statistics (2005); IRS Business Master Files, Exempt Organizations (2005); Giving USA Foundation (2006); NCCS Core File (2004); NCCS National Nonprofit Research Database, Special Research Version (2004).



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Holly Ross, of N-TEN, recounts a similar story of organizations keeping their donor information on 3x5 cards in a shoebox. Holly Ross suggests that this type of activity is not just about a lack of resources but also leadership. “Like anything new there is an adoption curve and change must come from leadership. If the leadership is not able to envision what the new tools can do then adoption will take a lot longer....organizations that really “get it” make it a priority to find the funds.”

Today, it is a given that most nonprofits are networked, have internet access and have e-mail addresses. The focus now is seen as a shift from technology for improved efficiency, to technology for achieving core business functions and objectives. Nonprofits are seeking tools that can help them raise awareness, build membership and educate and train their constituents. The tools must be robust enough to support high volume use, be easy to use and affordable.

Delivering the Program

Although the nonprofit sector has matured and the money has increased, the problems remain the same. Nonprofits must continue to build their constituency and deliver programs while working with scarce resources.

Equally as critical to a nonprofits mission is their ability to disseminate information quickly and easily. As Holly Ross, Executive Director at N-TEN, notes “many nonprofits function across large geographical boundaries so communication between two separate offices is key.” Further, communications to your donors and other stakeholders is even more important because of their heightened involvement. Internal communication is also critical to the health of the programs; when staff members or volunteers leave a program, it is important that the replacement staff can be quickly and efficiently brought up to speed. If this does not happen, it can lead to programs running inefficiently and ineffectively due to lack of leadership and administrative expertise. Sometimes the ultimate cost is the loss of volunteers and program credibility in the community. What’s needed to prevent problems of this nature is a tool that can be used to train large groups of people at once, as well as allow for an uninterrupted communication flow.

Web Conferencing as a solution

To overcome the challenges of training, communicating, building community and membership and controlling costs, nonprofits are looking to tools that are versatile and scalable; web conferencing software is quickly becoming that tool.

At its core, web conferencing software is a communications tool – it allows the user to build community and disseminate information, two critical tasks for nonprofits. For example, volunteers and stakeholders like to feel that they are part of a community - this is one part of the

attraction to nonprofits for some people - like-minded individuals striving for the same goal. Web conferencing software allows every individual to connect seamlessly, no matter their geographical location.

Web conferencing employs a myriad of functionality to achieve its versatility. Document sharing, call recording, chat transcripts, support of multiple presenters and platform support are all features of mature web conferencing software packages.

Important Benefits to Web Conferencing

A number of significant benefits emerge when nonprofits put web conferencing into their technology mix.

- **Controlling Costs:** With domestic toll-free and international toll-free dialing, it is cost effective to connect participants who are geographically dispersed. Further, enterprise and per-minute pricing plans can also be effective in controlling communication costs.
- **Training new volunteers:** Training of new volunteers is critical to a nonprofit's success. With the use of document sharing and recordings, they are able to share valuable information with new people, while also retaining the training session for their archives. This allows the nonprofits to avoid duplication of efforts and promotes scalability.
- **Community Building:** A feeling of belonging is integral to any nonprofit. New members and stakeholders want to feel as if they are apart of something bigger than themselves. To that end, web conferencing builds community through shared communication and the ability to perpetuate content through recordings.
- **Easy Access:** With volunteers and stakeholders geographically dispersed and technologically varied, access is always an issue. A good web conferencing software solution will allow users from multiple operating systems and platforms to connect easily, regardless of whether they are familiar with the software or not.
- **Record Keeping:** Accurate records are extremely important to nonprofits, as they depend heavily on donations and volunteers. Not only do stakeholders want notes from budget and resource meetings, but volunteers need accurate information about the programs they are supporting.

What to Look for in a Solution Provider

When looking for a company to provide web conferencing, certain considerations must be made to accommodate all the critical needs in the nonprofit sector:

- **Operating System & Browser Support:** The web conferencing software must be able to support the various operating systems and browsers that exist today. Your constituents are technologically diverse; your service provider must take this into account for best efficiency

and ease of use.

- **Domestic & International Toll-Free:** Work with a service that provides multiple access options and points. Toll-free calling allows participants access without incurring charges. International toll-free can often be limited to a few countries. Make sure any provider you select has international toll-free options for your constituent's countries.
- **Document Sharing:** The right solution will also allow you to share documents easily without any conflicts between systems. The ability to share an entire desktop, as well as a specific application should be available as well.
- **24/7 Live Support:** Seek a solution that stands behind their product and offers live 24/7 support. Participants will have varying degrees of technical expertise. Choose a provider that will help your participants get connected quickly and easily, so the support burden does not fall into your lap. Make sure wait times are negligible and live operators are always available.
- **Recording:** Recording of calls is essential to information dissemination and proper record keeping. Seek a provider that can provide a robust recording service that allows for recording of both the web and audio. Additionally, make sure the provider does not charge extra for their recording service and allows unlimited playbacks at no extra charge.
- **Chat Transcripts:** Work with a provider that is able to provide chat transcripts free of charge. Additionally, make sure there is a back-up process for these chat transcripts, just in case of unrecoverable error.
- **Flexible Pricing:** Any good provider will work with you on pricing that satisfies both parties. Company wide usage as well as per minute pricing should be available. Any provider that works as a partner with nonprofits will offer special pricing packages.
- **Partner:** Select a company that goes beyond a mere service provider. A partner will offer consulting services, coaching and special rates. They will also understand the special requirements of a nonprofit organization and have a dedicated account representative. Companies often pay lip service to the nonprofit arena to improve their public relations; make sure your provider is truly invested in your success.