Social Media’s Impacts on Saint Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center’s Online Popularity

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**Problem Statement**

Saint Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center (SVSF) is an educational center in Detroit which attends to the needs of children and adults. At SVSF, children can better their education where they would otherwise experience a lack thereof. Adults can obtain their GED’s and train to do so while at SVSF. I have been serving as a volunteer at SVSF for more than a year now, and one area that the organization evidently could improve upon is its social media presence.  As of my last volunteering experience at SVSF, the information manager at SVSF, Patricia Wilson, confirmed to me that she would like to expand SVSF’s online presence on social media sites-namely, the Twitter Page. She also mentioned her desire to rework the SVSF organization website. She stated that because she has “only 248 followers,” that she wanted advice on how to become more popular (Personal Communication, March 15, 2017).

 Personally, after writing my Genre Analysis, I have found that the methods utilized on the SVSF-related social media sites, while effective, are limited. The genres of the YouTube page, Facebook page, and SVSF official website, are all helpful in learning about SVSF, but not powerful in persuading their audiences do an activity which directly benefits the organization, such as volunteering, donating, or liking and sharing. Moreover, Patricia asked if I would like to be a “Social Media Advocate.” Essentially my duty would be to share whatever I saw SVSF posted. As an answer to the question, “Why do you feel there is a deficiency in the social media presence of SVSF?” Melissa Gush, SVSF’s director of child services, responded that

“Our staff is not properly equipped or trained in social media. No one has a degree in social media. There is no proper funding to hire someone in that area, which would be a full-time advertising/marketing position. The person in this position would update events and know what’s going on in the agency at all times, and post about in real-time. (Personal Communication, March 28, 2017)

# In addition to this responsibility, I would also like to propose a project that addresses this need to reach a larger audience with its web presence. The work SVSF does often goes unsung, especially through its social media sites. Because there is no person solely working to improve SVSF’s social media sites, SVSF experiences a large issue in accruing support through its social media. Therefore, the research question which will guide my project is: What types of online content would promote the benefits of SVSF’s work?  To parents? To outside contributors/ donors?  Additionally, how would this content align with content which would increase volunteering?

# Proposal for Research

My research into this question began with an interview of SVSF staff which shed light on the current status of SVSF’s online presence. As noted above, Ms. Wilson and Ms. Gush indicated that SVSF requires additional support to aid it in its online outreach.

SVSF, though funded well enough to support its facilities, still lacks the proper donations to allow every individual student to thrive. In order to best accrue donations-most needed are donations of time and money-the most effective methodology of how to use social media is necessary. Specifically, a video is a highly valuable tool to better public outreach-and therefore I propose that using a video to obtain donations is best because it will be highlighted by the different social media sites SVSF already has, but doesn’t use to their fullest.

Secondary literature on this topic would also be very important to help understand how to improve SVSF’s online presence. I plan to research articles regarding the relationship between funding and social media pages. Researching the impact of sites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Tumblr on nonprofit success will prove to be incredibly important. Furthermore, researching how these sites are used to network will be even more so important to in securing donors/benefactors.

Other research may include how the use of social media is limited; that social media may not be a large enough avenue for attracting benefactors, therefore other methodology may prove best. In addition, it may be beneficial to research how to include social media logos so that even a stranger to SVSF will feel compelled to “like us on Facebook!” I plan to study how high quality postings can promote SVSF’s works.

In order to begin researching the topic and the issue that SVSF is facing, I propose to interview the staff at SVSF; interviewing Melissa Gush, Beth Kraft, and Patricia Wilson would be most beneficial. When I interview the SVSF staff, I will be sure to include questions such as, “Why do you think there is a deficiency in the social media presence of SVSF?” To better understand the topic of promoting the viewing of online content, I also propose to study the current literature on Wayne State University’s Library Database. I will be searching for articles that explain how to best obtain funds for a nonprofit organization similar to SVSF. In addition, I will search for articles that articulate the methods in which noble causes that went viral. A prime example is the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, which served to raise millions of dollars for ALS patients. Articles that explain occurrences like this would be useful models for SVSF to follow.

**Literature Review**

In my interview with Patricia Wilson, she had stated that the donations SVSF received on social media were minimal. When I inquired if she had any specific monetary goal, she simply replied, “More would be nice.” (Personal Communication, March 15, 2017) This lead me to the need to investigate if social media is even useful for donating funds.

To many, it may seem ineffective to utilize social media in order to solicit funds. However, in an article written by Joyce Garczynski (2016), author of *#Donate: the role of social media in academic library fundraising*, Garczynski argues that nonprofits with larger social networks are able to raise more money than those with fewer online followers. She continues by stating that “Another recommendation for non-profits is to create online fund-raising campaigns complete with hashtags (Mathos and Norman, 2012) to build brand awareness among their supporters.” Organizations such as the American Red Cross place a high value on the use of social media in raising funds. (Par. 3)

Other scholars such as Ed Schipul argue that using social media as a means to obtain funding is not currently very effective. In citing Blackbaud's analysis of Giving USA data, Schipul (2010) contends that “online donations amount to only 5% of the contributions nonprofits receive.” (Par. 4) With that information in mind, he calls us to consider that several years ago, this percentage would have been significantly lower. This suggests a positive trend in the relationship between funding and social media. Therefore, Schipul states that nonprofits should be using applications such as “Facebook Causes” as an innovative method to greater connect to, and obtain support from, the public. In a side note, Schipul mentions that other similar applications are also useful, such as the “MySpace Causes” application.

Furthermore, Ed Schipul claims that, to make the Facebook Causes Application to really sing, you must use several keys to success. These keys include, but are not limited to, “Convey a sense of urgency so people know you need their help now. Make your case in three points or less. As with other fundraising communication, the case needs to be simple and to the point.” I believe that in a more general sense, these keys to success are applicable not only to the Facebook or MySpace Causes applications, but to any site utilized by a nonprofit organization.

Scholars Marco Castillo, Ragan Petrie, and Clarence Wardell (2014) may agree with this assertion, which may be in line with their perspective outlined in *Fundraising through Online Social Networks: A Field Experiment on Peer-to-peer Solicitation.* In this field experiment, the researchers didn’t need to use specifically the Facebook Causes application, rather, they asked previous donors to ask their Facebook friends to donate. One finding was especially notable: “Donors respond to incentives: larger add-on donations increase the willingness to post having made a donation.” (P. 1) This may prove to be a technique SVSF could employ via their pre-existing social media pages.

However, other scholars, such as Barış K. Yörük (2012) state that the use of mass media, although helpful, did not directly impact funding. He states, in *The Effect of Media on Charitable Giving and Volunteering: Evidence from the “Give Five” Campaign,* “I find that people who were informed about the campaign increased their weekly volunteering activity on average by almost half an hour, but their giving behavior was not significantly affected. (P. 1) This study’s findings are important to consider for SVSF’s situation because even if SVSF were to expand its social media presence, it may not achieve the desired effect of obtaining funds. Yet, if SVSF were interested in obtaining more volunteers, this study supports the idea that expanding online social presence is useful for that end.

In indirect opposition to Schipul’s claim that they Facebook Causes application is a powerful asset, Saxton and Wang (2014) contend that instead of being compelled to donate due to content or use of keys to success, a “‘social network effect’ takes precedence over normal economic explanations.” (P. 1) They explain that this social network effect is the powerful role the organization’s network of followers play. What Saxton and Wang found essentially was a positive relationship between donations and size of following on Facebook. They argue that once a sizable following is created, it is easier to encourage more followers to offer support.

Another way for SVSF to expand its presence in social media is to employ the use of an online donation servicing provider. An example of one is called Network for Good, which exchanges its services in organizing donations in return for a three percent fee per donation. While seemingly a hefty sum, Richard Hoefer (2012) explains that Network for Good reported, through its services, that “$7 billion was contributed online in 2008.” (P. 2) This dollar amount was spread over 50,000+ community service organizations. Therefore, while the downside to using Network for Good to enrich online presence is that a cut of donations is taken, it is still important to consider the costs and benefits of employing its services. An even more ambitious plan, Hoefer suggested, would be to set up an online membership, through a nonprofit website, where members would agree to donate a certain amount per month. (P. 2) This would be advertised on social media sites other than the main SVSF page, and would be incredibly convenient for users.  
 Posting SVSF’s new testimonial video may find its most powerful impacts on YouTube, given its ability to greatly raise attention towards humanitarian causes. One of the most powerful methods of accruing fame and funds is to utilize YouTube, an online video sharing platform, to the fullest. Nonprofit Business Advisor (2016) reported that in 2016, YouTube launched a new feature that allows organizations to set up YouTube accounts with a donation card. (Par. 7) This donation card allows users to directly send money to the nonprofit after watching a video. Pantti Mervi’s (2015) viewpoint from *Grassroots humanitarianism on YouTube: Ordinary fundraisers, unlikely donors, and global solidarity* would agree with this fact that YouTube is a great asset in directing the attention of people towards humanitarian causes. Mervi essentially concludes in her study that because YouTube “offers a new site of cosmopolitan citizenship,” (P. 14) it is has the capability lead to greater opportunities for increased public dialogue and participation.

To expand on citizenship-it would also greatly serve SVSF to know who is most likely to donate to SVSF, and how to target the video towards their giving tendencies. In order to figure out who donate to nonprofits, and why, Shanahan and Hopkins (2007) investigated the idea of “social marketing” in action. (P. 1) Social Marketing deals with influencing a consumer to benefit something besides themselves. In order to achieve that end, Shanahan and Hopkins concluded that it is most ethical and still effective to use some label, or poster, with real victims, which will serve to create a perceived social responsibility in the donor to donate. In SVSF’s situation, this will simply mean that in the video, current literature suggests portrayal of real Detroit children actively trying to improve their education, rather than actors. This will be aimed towards obtaining an emotional response in the potential donor, who will then feel socially responsible to donate. (P. 14)

Another important detail to consider is the success of nonprofit campaigns that quantify the specific effects of a donation in a dollar amount. For example, Lise Vesterlund (2006) states that Doctors Without Borders, a very successful medical nonprofit organization uses this technique, who claim, “Doctors Without Borders states that $35 will buy two high-energy meals a day to two hundred children”. (P. 5) It may greatly benefit SVSF to do the same- and this may be advertised in the testimonial video- as this provides potential donors a very powerful motive to donate.

### Methodology

Based on my understanding of the issue and the time allotted to study it in detail, I believe a video testimonial project would best help meet SVSF’s need to improve its social media presence. This project would theoretically improve social media presence by encouraging possible students, parents, or any benefactor to go online and search for this video. This video would showcase the successes of SVSF’s educational programs by placing students in its spotlight. Parents may encourage it, as it will serve to provide evidence of their child’s success at SVSF. This project would be convenient, yet effective, because at minimum, all Patricia or any SVSF worker would be required to do is have a child answer a few questions regarding their experiences at SVSF. The process would be take a small amount of time, but yield a large impact because of how accessible posts are on social media currently. SVSF’s need to have a more prominent presence online would be on the path of rectification, as this video would be a great aid to garnering public curiosity and interest.

In order to generate a high-quality video, it will be necessary to secure the use of a proper camera for recording purposes. Questions will be developed to ask the current students about their education. The video will include student responses, compiled together. Subsequently, to make the video as appealing as possible to the possible viewers, the video will be edited using the proper editing software. (for example, Adobe may prove to be a good software because it is used by professionals) In addition, the format of the testimonial questions may be as follows:

1. What’s your favorite subject?

2. What do you like most about learning (insert favorite subject) at SVSF?

3. How do you think SVSF has made you better at (insert favorite subject)?

4. What do you want to be when you grow up?

To accomplish the ultimate goal of accruing more donations, I propose to work with Ms. Patricia Wilson, who will get the permission of the SVSF students and their parents, to take testimonial videos of them working with me. This video recording is planned to be on a Tuesday or Wednesday, between 3:30 and 5:30 PM, while I work with the young students.

She and I believe that if these videos of us working were to be posted, parents and people interested in SVSF would learn more about how successful SVSF is, and why people love SVSF. These videos will eventually get posted to social media, which will increase the quality of SVSF’s postings. By increasing post quality, I will help SVSF stand out amongst other non-profit organizations, making it more popular and more likely to receive donations. In addition, these videos may include a short interview of the younger students, which would highlight what they love about SVSF. This portion of the video would be helpful in showing viewers the progress students make.

A limitation of using a video to increase public outreach for SVSF is that it may not reach parents who don’t have a Facebook or Twitter account. A way to ameliorate this is to include a “like us on Facebook or Twitter” message on any business cards, brochures, or flyers to be distributed at SVSF. Another limitation is that the younger students may not answer the questions in the manner I expect them to; I hope that they will answer something to the effect of, “I love it here, and got smarter by being here.” A way to ensure getting positive answers would be to make them loaded and very simple to answer.

#### Discussion/Expected Results

Once the video is posted, I expect to see a large number of likes, comments, and shares on the video. Therefore, I expect that this will result in a larger amount of donations. Certainly, after the video is completed, it will be important to analyze how successful the video is. A straightforward way to assess the video’s efficacy may be to, after the video is posted to any social media site, wait a few days for people to “like” the video. If that video is liked more than other postings, it will indicate relative success in pushing for a wider public outreach. Furthermore, any comments made on the videos after being posted would also serve to aid in deciding if the video was effective.

The video would be incredibly provocative in terms of attracting any average internet user’s attention. The video would begin with a short introduction to SVSF’s facilities, some volunteers, and some staff members. (likely Melissa Gush and Patricia Wilson) I would expect the use of songs in the video, possibly a light instrumental piece, that builds up to the climax of the video where the young students state their dreams or aspirations. The video would end with a call to action that would say something to the effect of, “Saint Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center Needs You.”

The potential benefits of my Research Proposal include an extensive range. Ideally, SVSF would become a viral sensation, yet, this proposal, in the worst-case scenario would lead to no change in the status quo; the status quo, around March 1st, was fifteen dollars. (Personal Communication, 2017) However, it must be considered the potential ceiling of success of this research proposal may yield results as successful as that of the media campaign done in Japan after the 2004 tsunami, should SVSF receive an equivalent amount of media coverage and similar conditions. (Brown and Minty, 2008)

Sandbox Church (2017), like SVSF, is a Christian nonprofit organization. On the organization’s YouCaring site, which is a site meant to obtain donors, has made about 69 percent of their goal in donations since their page was updated. (P. 1) This shows that similar nonprofits to SVSF, by making a change to their online presence, whether it be through YouCaring, or other websites, have the potential to obtain a lot of donations- in Sandbox Church’s case, over one-hundred thousand dollars thus far. But, it must be considered that the success of SVSF is dependent on many confounding variables-which is why the creation of this testimonial video for SVSF may not produce the same results Sandbox Church had.

A problem area that my proposal may encounter is a lack of social media advocates to spread the new YouTube video on social media. Without a sufficient amount of people who are either agreed or compelled to like and share the video, there will be no other convenient method of spreading the video. The only other methods available would be to spread the news of the video by word of mouth, and to include social media logos on SVSF-related brochures/distributable’s.

In order to advance the study I have done, it would be significant to interview adult students next. This would show the efficacy of SVSF’s programs for all age groups. My study is limited to young students’ success stories, and is therefore less relatable to older audiences that may not be attracted to SVSF just because a child improved in their elementary education. Moreover, showcasing adult students would present to the audience of benefactors, volunteers, donors, or others, the success of SVSF’s GED program.

In conclusion, SVSF sees large avenues for growth in its online presence. A video may improve its online presence, but only if it is properly shared across, and enhanced by SVSF’s various social media sites. Furthermore, it will be important for SVSF to carefully craft it so that it appeals towards people’s desires to donate. If done well and done right, this video will help shine light on the excellent work SVSF does as an educational organization attacking the heart of Detroit’s educational gap at its source.

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