

Social Media's Role in Non-Profit Communication Strategy for UNICEF

Kelly Dombrowski

Spring 2019

Rutgers University

Public relations and social media have always been my main two interests in the mass communication field. For this research project, I worked to answer the following research questions: How does UNICEF use social media to shape social conversations/engage its followers? Social media is a key factor in the communication strategy for non-profits being that it can work with low budgets and reach broad groupings of people. By analyzing the social media usage of UNICEF, there can be a better understanding of how non-profits can shape social conversations and engagement.

I have been an avid volunteer for many non-profits since I was young, most focused on alleviating poverty and advocating for the marginalized. The volunteer event that had a significant impact on my future was my time as an ambassador for the students and leaders of the Nine is Mine campaign. They were a group of 30 students from the most impoverished areas of India who were hosted by my undergraduate college on their trip to speak at the United Nations. Nine is Mine is a children's advocacy campaign working to end poverty and giving children the rights they deserve (education, food, clean water, and safe living conditions). The students I met are who truly helped me realize that I would like my future to involve non-profit work or companies working to make a difference. They partner with UNICEF to assist in the mission to create change for children in India.

I chose UNICEF as the non-profit to analyze for this project because I valued their mission to give children the rights they deserve and help them fulfill their potentials. UNICEF uses social media to tell stories, engage with the public and gain supporters. They are one of the top non-profit social media accounts because of their ability to reach support through engagement and with emotional and well-informed posts. According to Lovejoy and Saxton, "organizational-level research on social media has not grown as rapidly. What little research that

does exist on non-profit Facebook utilization regards the heavy reliance on basic informational uses as a lost opportunity for furthering interactivity and dialogue with supporters” (339).

My research project is focused on understanding how UNICEF uses social media to shape social conversations and engage its followers. The outcome of the research will be valuable to helping non-profits understand what benefits and harmful outcomes can arise from using social media. I will focus on four main social media sites, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Using UNICEF’s social media accounts, I will show examples of successful campaigns and posts that have made them one of the top non-profits on social media.

Social media has become an important factor in helping public relations professionals create a channel for effective communication between the public and non-profits. Non-profits are distinctive from for-profits in that their strategy involves a variation of informing followers, soliciting donations and creating an engaging conversation. “Although the origins of social marketing can be traced back to the discipline of sociology, it rose to prominence as a distinct application of marketing in the early 1970s when Kotler and Zaltman (1971) recognised that marketing tools and techniques typically applied to products/services could be applied equally well to the marketing of ideas” (Bennett & Sargeant; 801). Before the creation of integrated marketing communications, each subdivision required separate campaigns making it challenging to have a cohesive plan. “Publicity necessitates arranging for significant news about the product to appear in various media. Sales promotion may call for developing special displays, premiums, programs, and events that might be useful in stimulating interest or action” (Kotler & Zaltman; 8). Before the integration of marketing, organizations focused on social advertising as a condition to monopolize the non-profit social movement campaigns.

Don Akchin performed a study on non-profit marketing in 2001 and concluded, “while many non-profits perform one or more marketing functions, few have embraced a marketing approach to operations” (33). Those who came from larger non-profits with high budgets were more likely to use public relations and marketing tactic in their campaigns. One member of the study was quoted as saying “I still have a hard time convincing people that program development and strategy are legitimate marketing roles” (Akchin; 34). Marketing was not seen as an essential piece to completing the goals and strategies for non-profits, instead, it was put on the sidelines as an ‘optional’ feature. In Akchin’s survey results, non-profit employees had self-assessments to rank their marketing skills. The results showed the lack of confidence that the staff had in performing skills such as writing press releases, managing their website and even just developing marketing/communications plans (Akchin; 34).

The Internet has opened up many doors allowing non-profits to “improve supporter relationships, find new efficiencies in their operations, advocate issues, better inform their key publics, as well as to raise funds” (Hart; 353). By creating these online relationships over the Internet, non-profits can work to better their marketing strategy, starting with emails. The messages were a cultivation of solicitations, invites to events and updated info of current happenings. Some marketers felt that the method of sending emails to mass audiences took away the ability to build personal relationships. Hart advises that you can’t lose the intimate aspects that came from traditional methods such as calling, face – to – face and personalized mailers. “Success on the Internet requires an integrated strategy that embraces standards for protecting and preserving donor relationships” (Hart; 356).

In the early 2000s when social media first came to fruition, there was uncertainty surrounding non-profits place on it. But non-profits needed to make a change regarding their

marketing that fit better both budget and approach-wise into their communication strategy. Sites such as Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram proved to be a force for non-profits to allow them to market themselves better and engage with followers/donors more conveniently. Being able to connect with your supporters over the Internet and create lasting relationships can be challenging. Most social media posts are overlooked and ignored if there is nothing memorable or engaging; they also face the risk of wasting time and money. Social media allows free posting through accounts and low-cost advertisements on those sites. The content on your page is the most essential aspect of social media marketing. “Content is published in an effort to elicit a response, which is welcomed by the company to foster and maintain engagement” (Bates).

UNICEF is an example of a non-profit that excels at leveraging social media to be a driving force for their marketing campaigns. Their social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube) have a total of around 18.72 million followers (as of April 28, 2019) UNICEF surpasses others with their ability to keep up with social media trends and posting consistent, constant and engaging content. Aside from the positive, they also tend to post contentious graphics and stories that make have made the public question UNICEF’s motives and views as a non-profit. Some posts, such as the ones I chose to study, involve child soldiers, vaccinations and schooling all topics, which have controversial views.

“Social media measurement research cannot yet provide concrete answers about the added value contributed by social media to securing organizations’ objectives, because this kind of research is still too focused on quantifying visibility and awareness by counting “likes” and “shares” rather than looking more closely at the effects on public behaviors and attitudes” (Valentini; 173). Being that social media is a semi-new concept being included in public relations strategies the outcomes and benefits over an extended time are still unknown. But social

media is a popular and current trend, and an organization would miss out on marketing to a whole generation without using it.

Studying the role social media plays in the communication strategy for non-profits can help practitioners understand what strategies are best to use to reach their full potential. The key measures to be answered from the research will be how non-profits use social media to gain supporters, the tools they use, types of posts for maximum engagement and the challenges that arise. Social media can be a valuable resource but only if used effectively and efficiently. In a society where we are shifting away from traditional means of communications, it is crucial to meet your audience where they are, and social media can be critical to that.

After conducting preliminary research on the role social media plays in non-profit communication strategy, I decided to shift my topic to be more focused on how social media is used to shape social conversations for non-profits, specifically using UNICEF.

Non-profits rely on engaging and constant communication through their social media sites to retain supporters. “In a survey of 409 non-profit public relation practitioners, Curtis et al. (2010) found that all but five were using social media in some way to engage with their stakeholders; however, in a content analysis of Facebook in 275 non-profit organizations it was found that non-profits were primarily using social media for the disclosure of information” (Greenleaf; 4). UNICEF uses social media as a tool to inform and gain support around an issue on both a national and international level.

To study UNICEF’s usage of social media to shape social conversations, I focused on analyzing posts and comparing the stats of each. UNICEF actively uses Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram, with engaging comments from followers. One of the main aspects of my research involved studying the engagement of non-profits on social media sites. My

definition of engagement for the purpose of my research involves an open door of communication between the organization and its followers. The means of communication on social media sites includes not only comments but clicks and shares as well. I picked three different posts from the four social media sites, and analyzed them based on engagement levels and stats on the posts. The posts were all from 2019 to get a representation of what the modern-day effects of social media for non-profits are. I analyzed the content by reviewing if the commenters were in favor or against the message UNICEF was trying to get across. I also looked to if there was interaction between the organization and or the other commenters. Also, I compared the types of content that was posted and how that affected levels of engagement. I pulled the various engagement numbers (likes, shares, comments) for each post and looked at how they compared to one another. For this research, I chose to only compare UNICEF to itself in terms of content, because I feel the worldwide and diverse following they have is.

I felt it was essential to create a survey to get feedback on how the ‘public’ perceives both UNICEF and the usage of social media to create conversations around topics. I created a qualtrics survey that asked the following questions: 1. For what purposes do you follow non-profits on social media? 2. Have you ever donated to a cause because of their post? 3. Have you ever engaged/shared/liked content on a non-profits page? 4. (There was photos of the posts) questions will be posed to get a reaction of the successfulness of these posts. Being that my research question is dedicated to how UNICEF shapes social conversations, I think that getting feedback on their posts through my survey was an insightful way of knowing which types of posts attract more comments (both good and bad). I found it necessary to note that the social conversations around these posts can be filled with positive and negative comments because that

to me shows that the post truly instilled a successful conversation with various opinions and sides.

I anticipated that my finding would provide an insight into the value of social media for non-profit organizations. With my previous experience running social media, I have found that Facebook usually provides the most engagement, so I was looking forward to seeing if that remains true for this study. I also believe social media posts that include graphics; videos or links are more appealing to encouraging the public to engage with organizations online. Regarding three subjects of the posts I am studying (child soldiers, education, vaccines), I anticipated that either child soldiers or vaccines would have the most engagement being that they are two controversial issues. The public likes to comment, share or post about subject matters that they feel passionate about or that they have a strong opinion on.

The sub-questions to my main research question I am looking to answer are: What types of posts gain the most traction? How does UNICEF use social media for social engagement? Social media plays an integral part in the communication strategy for non-profits such as UNICEF. Using the content pulled from UNICEF's social media pages, and the public's opinion, I hoped to be able to understand how they use social media to shape social conversations.

The research I conducted focused on studying three different categories of posts from four social media sites of UNICEF. I projected that by combining my analysis alongside with research from a public survey, that I would be able to gauge the perception and use of social media by UNICEF and its followers. This overall analysis of UNICEF social media can assist in further providing insight into how social media has been affecting the marketing strategy for non-profits.



The initial step to my research was to gather posts that would be the basis for the research. I decided to choose two sets (A&B) that had the same posts on each of their social media accounts and one set (C) of similar category posts. Please see the chart below that links to the posts referenced. Set A is focused on child soldiers with all the posts being the same video across all four social media sites with variations in the texts. Set B is similar to the Set A in that the posts are all the same video on education but with a difference in the text of the posts. Set C is distinctive from the first two sets in that each post is focused on the same content of vaccinations but are individual posts.

<i>Set A: Child Soldiers</i>	<i>Set B: Education</i>	<i>Set C: Vaccinations</i>
<a href="#">Facebook (FB)</a>	<a href="#">Facebook</a>	<a href="#">Facebook</a>
<a href="#">Twitter (TW)</a>	<a href="#">Twitter</a>	<a href="#">Twitter</a>
<a href="#">Instagram (IN)</a>	<a href="#">Instagram</a>	<a href="#">Instagram</a>
<a href="#">YouTube (YT)</a>	<a href="#">YouTube</a>	<a href="#">YouTube</a>

The next chart shows the comparison of likes/reactions and comments between the various posts.

	<i>Set A: Child Soldiers</i>	<i>Set B: Education</i>	<i>Set C: Vaccinations</i>
FB	4.6K likes/reactions 76 comments	703 likes/reactions 29 comments	1.5K likes/reactions 11 comments
TW	2.8K retweets/likes 70 comments	1.3K retweets/likes 21 comments	730 retweets/likes 11 comments
IN	42K likes 473 comments	12K likes 82 comments	34K likes 335 comments
YT	3.3K views 6 comments	1.5K views 11 comments	1.8K views 3 comments

Data as of April 28, 2019

The data gathered shows a clear distinction in the types of posts, content, and sites that gained the most traction. Between set A and set B you can see that set A has a higher amount of social engagement on all of their posts. Instagram shows to be the top social media site for all of the types with the highest levels of likes and comments; within the comments is highly engaging conversations between followers and UNICEF. In set C, Instagram is the top site for engagement and dialogue, with YouTube and Facebook coming in a close second and third.

The next part of my research entailed creating and sending out a survey to gauge the public's perspective of social media usage by non-profits and the posts that were listed above. The mean age of my data was 32 years old with the majority being white females. The lack of diversity was a negative aspect of my survey data that if done again, I would work to ensure a more diverse and equal group of people are surveyed. There were 75 participants in my survey who I solicited via my social media sites (Facebook and Twitter) as well as by email to co-workers, family, and friends. All participants were voluntary, over the age of 18 and submitted their data anonymously.

Out of my 75 participants, 58 follow a non-profit on social media (FB, TW, IN, YT) and close to all had interacted on social media with a non-profit. When asked if they have ever financially supported a non-profit because of a post of that organization's page, there was a close split between yes and no, with no being only slightly higher.

Another aspect of my survey entailed trying to understand the reasons that people follow non-profits on social media. The main result was that people who have a personal tie to a non-profit were more likely to follow their social media (50%); next being volunteers of the organization (22.06%); encouraged by social media post on the non-profits pages (9.29%); encouraged by someone else (8.82%); and last being other reasons not stated. I also asked a question to assess

how many people have engaged with non-profits on social media sites. My results showed that 40.16% have liked/favorited a post; 29.92% shared a post; 18.11% commented; 8.66% had no engagement; and 3.15% thought about favoriting, commenting or sharing but never went through with it. These results show that the public follows non-profits for specific reasons; there is nothing random about how they chose organizations to engage with. Also, people prefer the 'easier' method of just clicking like or favorite on a post, which most feel is their way of showing support. The types of posts that the public says they prefer were: photos 37.72%; videos 30.54%; infographics 14.97%; links to websites/articles 9.58%; text only 5.39%; and the use of emojis/emoticons 1.8%. The social media site that the public is most influenced by ranked best to least was: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, other (which people wrote in LinkedIn) and last with zero votes was YouTube.

The next section of my survey concentrated on UNICEF and their social media pages/posts. 95.71% of the participants were familiar with UNICEF, with two people reporting they follow a UNICEF social media page (Facebook). This stat was shocking to me as I expected that at least five to ten participants would follow UNICEF on one or another social media site. I believe this could be due to my small pool of similar participants who are from related areas and with similar backgrounds. Even though there were only two participants who follow UNICEF on social media, 9.09% had visited their Instagram; 8.22% visited their Facebook; 2.74% visited their Twitter; with zero visiting their YouTube and 80.82% never have visited any of the sites. Regarding Set A and B, I posted all the links and photos and asked the public to provide their opinion of how they ranked based on their personal views of least to most favorite. The participants left an array of comments for these two questions regarding their reasons for placing

the posts in the order they did. Below, I will chart a few of the comments that I felt were the most helpful in understanding the participants thinking.

<i>Comments regarding Set A: Child Soldiers</i>	<i>Comments regarding Set B: Education</i>
Ranked by which accounts I use more	Facebook and YouTube are not news sites for me. Twitter & Insta are my main go to's
I always like Facebook posts if a friend shared or if I care about the post	I never watch 360 videos
I liked how you could see the text first and the post under it better than how the other layouts placed the media.	Rank them by the ability to read and or see the video
Seeing a post automatically play while scrolling down your Instagram feed makes you more inclined to want to stop and watch.	Facebook link didn't have enough text to make me want to know what was happening outside of the video still

With reading the above comments, I had anticipated Facebook or Instagram would be the post that people ranked as their favorite. For set A, the results showed that YouTube was the favorite then, Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook being last. For set B, the results showed that YouTube was the favorite then, Twitter and Instagram were tied, and Facebook being last. These results do not relate to the data that I gathered by looking at the stats of the social media posts. I believe this is because I directly put the links/posts in front of the participants, which made it easy and convenient for them to look at the posts. I believe it does bring up a good point if YouTube had a more accessible and easy to scroll site, would it be the more popular choice of social media for non-profits?

For set C, I asked each participant to rank the posts individually on a one to ten scale with one being the worst and ten being the best. Included was a list of what would make a post the best or the worst, to ensure the participants were all thinking similarly when using the sliding scale to rank the posts. The data from the rankings can be used to understand what types of posts

work to engage the consumer. The chart below shows the average rankings that each post received.

Set C Data	Average Ranking (Scale of worst to best 1 – 10)
FB	6.46
IN	5.51
TW	6.81
YT	5.60

The Twitter post listed was ranked the highest out of all four of the posts. That post is the most straight forward, containing four relevant diseases that are killing children with the hashtag #VaccinesWork. Being that we are in a time where eradicated diseases are making comebacks, vaccinations have become a hot topic for the public. All of the posts had similar messages, but Twitter had the best used of language in its post, which I believe is the reason that it was ranked the highest.

The data I received from my survey was beneficial to understanding the public's role in how non-profits use social media as a key factor in their communication strategy. At the end of my survey, I opened a question up to public comment, and I received some valuable comments. Below are some comments that I feel would be beneficial to an extended study on non-profits and social media.

<i>Comments regarding social media by non-profits to engage with followers</i>
People like happy-endings, show them this by telling a story through engaging visual content
Placing too much focus on social media makes you miss reaching us old people!
Pictures can be easily edited to tell a different story then what was intended, not a fan of that
Spreading info, even if it has low engagement, is still reaching one person

UNICEF uses an Advocacy Toolkit to provide goals and strategies for the organization to monitor and evaluate advocacy campaigns. The toolkit describes using the best “format to deliver the message” (52), which can depend on the subject matter, the people and the social networking site used. Almost all campaigns that UNICEF creates involve advocating for a particular group or location of children; these posts are beneficial to answering the call for action. The above social media posts that I studied how UNICEF uses this toolkit to continue to stay on track with its goals of advocating for change. Engagement is a critical factor in advocating for change, without it, UNICEF would not be able to be successful in their campaigns. The campaigns feature varied types of content not only to gain supporters but also entice supporters to make a change.

Being in an engagement economy, non-profits are being forced to think outside of the box and shift toward the digital future, which involves building social marketing into your strategy. Unlike the buyers and sellers that are connected for average businesses, non-profits are working to connect to their followers. They aren’t physically selling anything, but what they are doing is encouraging followers to feel invested in, donate or show support. People are looking for mutually beneficial relationships between organizations that they support. By engaging, listening and adapting to what the followers say, non-profits can survive the engagement economy. Non-profits also need to include the concept of integrated marketing communication (IMC) into their communication strategy. They cannot focus on just one medium such as PR, Advertising, or Digital; non-profits need to touch upon all to reach the mass crowd. Also, IMC can assist in creating sustainable relationships that can be nurtured over time. It is also vital for non-profits to not put all their eggs in one basket, such as putting too much a focus on social media. In my research, a participant in the survey made it clear that not all people are on social

media. They felt organizations that forget about traditional methods such as paper mailers and calls, are missing out on a generation who may not be online. There is more focus on using a humanistic approach to forge mutually beneficial relationships with supports. One thing that is important to note would be the difficulty, yet a necessary feature of including a personalized approach to reaching followers. For non-profits, this could consist of sending out personalized thank you letters or interacting with followers via social media.

The research conducted shows the overall benefits that social media can provide to non-profits. Also, it shows the uncertainty that can come from the research and how the public's opinion might not always align with the direct stats. The previous research on this subject discussed the uncertainty around the long-term benefits of social media use. My short-term research played a small part in better understanding of how social media fits in the communication strategy for non-profits, in specific, UNICEF. Social media is an evolving topic and I feel that studying each site individually would be helpful in learning how each can fit into the communications strategy. My survey data confirmed that social media usage provides a practical and cost-efficient way to engage with followers that are successful. Overall, when using social media sites, non-profits need to focus on reaching followers by strategically posting. Undeniably, social media is a trend that is not going anywhere, so non-profits can either use it to their advantage or miss out on a large group of followers.

### Reference List:

- Advocacy Tool Kit.(2010) United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).  
[https://www.unicef.org/cbsc/files/Advocacy\\_Toolkit.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/cbsc/files/Advocacy_Toolkit.pdf)
- Akchin, D. (2001). Nonprofit marketing: Just how far has it come? *Nonprofit World*, 19, 33–36.
- Appleby, Morgan (2016) "Nonprofit Organizations and the Utilization of Social Media: Maximizing and Measuring Return of Investment," *SPNHA Review*: Vol. 12: Iss.1, Article 4. Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/spnhareview/vol12/iss1/4>
- Bates, Paul (n.d.). Why Public Relations Should Play a Role in Your Social Media Marketing. Georgetown University. <http://csic.georgetown.edu/magazine/public-relations-play-role-social-media-marketing/>
- Belanche, D; Hofacker, C.F.; (2016) Eight social media challenges for marketing. *Spanish Journal of Marketing*. ESIC 20, 73-80. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sjme.2016.07.003>
- Bennett, R., & Sargeant, A. (2005). The nonprofit marketing landscape: guest editors' introduction to a special section. *Journal of Business Research*, 58(6), 797-805
- Carboni, J.L. and S. P. Maxwell. (2015). Effective Social Media Engagement for Nonprofits: What Matters? *Journal of Public and Nonprofit Affairs* 1(1):18-28.
- Durett, Meghan. (2013). UNICEF Case Study: How A Nonprofit Uses Facebook To Drive Change. Square2Marketing. <https://www.square2marketing.com/blog/unicef-case-study-how-a-nonprofit-uses-facebook-to-drive-change>
- Greenleaf, J. (2016). Nonprofit Use of Social Media: Insights from the Field. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 7(3), pages 1-16.  
<https://www.gjcpp.org/pdfs/Greenleaf-FINAL.pdf>
- Grindeanu, A. (2013) Best Social Media UNICEF Campaigns. Retrieved from <https://nnc-services.com/best-social-media-unicef-campaigns/>
- Guo, C., & Saxton, G. D. (2014). Tweeting Social Change: How Social Media Are Changing Nonprofit Advocacy. 43(1), 57  
79.<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0899764012471585>
- Goldkind, Lauri (2015) Social Media and Social Service: Are Nonprofits Plugged In to the Digital Age?, *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*,39:4, 380-396, DOI: 10.1080/23303131.2015.1053585
- Hart, T. R. (2002). ePhilanthropy: Using the internet to build support. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Marketing*, 7, 353–360.



- Kotler P, Zaltman G. Social marketing: an approach to planned social change. *J Mark* 1971;44:24–33 [Fall].
- Kristen Lovejoy, Gregory D. Saxton; Information, Community, and Action: How Nonprofit Organizations Use Social Media, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Volume 17, Issue 3, 1 April 2012, Pages 337–353, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2012.01576.x>
- Papworth, L., (2013). UNICEF: They Just Don't Understand Social Media. [online] SilkCharm. Available at: <https://laurelpapworth.com/unicef-they-just-dont-understand-social-media>
- Valentini, Chiara; Is using social media “good” for the public relations profession? A critical reflection, *Public Relations Review*, Volume 41, Issue 2, 2015, Pages 170-177, ISSN 0363-8111, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.11.009>.
- SOAT, M. (2013). Sell Your Story. *Marketing News*, 47(7), 18–19. Retrieved from [EBSCOhost](#).
- Waters, R. D., et al. (2009) Engaging stakeholders through social networking: How nonprofit organizations are using Facebook. *Public Relations Review*, doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2009.01.006