10 Minutes With...

There is no one "type" of organization in our community - we are made up of funders, advocates, policy experts, service providers and communicators. FCAA will work to highlight this collective expertise in a new feature in our e-newsletter:

Suzana Grego, Firelight Foundation

For this third installment of "10 Minutes With..." we are extremely pleased to profile **Suzana Grego, Director of Communications & Advocacy at the Firelight Foundation**. Suzana joined Firelight almost two years ago bringing with her an extensive background in high-tech public relations and human rights-based work, most recently with the New York-based International Center for Transitional Justice. In fall 2009, Firelight launched a new brand strategy and in December 2009 a new website to celebrate the beginning of their 10th year in grantmaking. Suzana shared with us how their blend of communications and advocacy is advancing their outreach strategy and helping to build the profile and capacity of their grantee-partners.

According to Suzana, Firelight's "experience in building a social network strategy that's integrated into a more traditional communications strategy is a good lesson for other small organizations like us that have to find ways to stretch already limited resources even further as they go out and seek new supporters."

Below are just a few of her recommendations and lessons-learned. Or, jump ahead to our full interview!

1. **A website is one of your most important faces to the world, but it will take as much time as you give it.** Think of it as your base platform for building your communications–get it on the fast track and realize it can and will change during the process.

2. **Be realistic about the time and resources needed to get to launch–and commit yourself.** Get into deadline mode and into the habit of updating things regularly, or you can fall out of the habit (and off the radar).

3. **Think about different media possibilities–not just the written word.** A photo or video is easy to post and create a conversation around, and can communicate volumes.

4. **Cross-pollinate!** Once you have something to share, send it out across your different networks: a blog can be tweeted, then shared on Facebook. Always keep in mind your "consumers" and the different ways they want to consume your content.

Related Resources

Here's a list of some of Suzana's favorite Social Network Resources & Tools

- Beth Kanter's blog (**social media for nonprofits**)
- **Smart Brief on Social Media** (for-profit wisdom)
- NTEN (**Nonprofit Technology Network**)
- **Idealware** (software for nonprofits)
- **TechSoup** (technology for nonprofits)
- (Our favorite!) **New Media Toolkit** on the AIDS.gov blog

On Metrics

- **Google Analytics** (website & blog metrics)
- **Facebook Insight** (FB metrics)

Social network tracking & "listening"

- Google & **Google Blog Searches**
- **Technorati** (blog search)
- **Addict-o-matic** (latest online buzz, on any network on any topic)
- **Yahoo Pipes** (advanced combined RSS feed)

Social news & bookmarking:

- Delicious.com
- Digg.com

5. **Customize your metrics to match your project phase.** If you are focused on engaging current users/stakeholders, then look at more qualitative indicators like the quality of their engagement and what actions they take as a result of it. But as you look to reach new audiences, the harder “traffic” numbers also become more important.
6. Think objectively about the “unique” value you have to offer to various audiences. Social networks can open your organization up to whole new groups of users who will be experiencing your content and resources for the first time—make sure to hold their attention and keep them coming back with useful, relevant content.

7. **It’s not an exact science.** Keep your eyes and ears open and learn from what you see (others doing successfully) out there.
Read on for the full interview

Reddit.com

Building online communities
Ning (create your own community)

Groupsite (networking and collaboration)

Fundraising
Facebook Causes

Change.org (personalized peer fundraising pages)

Q&A

Why a new communications strategy? Why now?
In preparation for our 10th year of grantmaking, Firelight entered into a strategic planning process in October 2008. A fundamental part of this plan is the “leverage” component, under which our organizational learning and communications and advocacy efforts would be combined to increase our overall impact. We realized that the qualitative stories and quantitative data points behind what was and wasn’t working, and what our grantees were successful in implementing and still pushing to implement were very important. That information would be critical for the ongoing improvement of our programming, as well as in fueling our communications and advocacy efforts to help us achieve our strategic goal of “*increasing the flow of resources to the grassroots in order to improve the lives of even more children, families, and communities*.” While we were confident that a lot of people knew about Firelight and our model, we felt they could know more – whether they were practitioners trying to emulate our direct international grassroots grantmaking model, or other funders with resources far larger than ours that could be effectively targeted at the grassroots level.

You also did a rebranding at the same time. Can you tell us a little about this?
After 10 years in the field, we realized that we had evolved as an organization (broadened our focus and our reach), and that we needed a brand more aligned with the organization we had become. We contracted a firm to help us with the process, the main part of which took about 3-4 months. In a smaller organization, it’s only natural that everyone maintains a sense of ownership, especially on something as central as the brand. But if you manage the staff and stakeholder feedback process well, it is one of the most important ingredients for a successful rebranding. In the end, we ended up with a new logo and a tagline (*Communities Changing Children’s Lives*) that we not only love, but that is true to Firelight and our mission at the same time that it speaks to and engages our staff, our boards, and our diverse audience base. **[Learn more about Firelight’s new brand and tagline here]**

How did you launch the brand?
We employed a very pragmatic, gradualist approach. We couldn’t afford to wait for all of the elements to be in place, so immediately after the logo and tagline were finalized, we published our 2008 Annual Report based on the new brand. The last eight weeks of 2009 were focused entirely on building the new website. It was a crazy time focused on developing and launching both our new website as well as our online and social network strategy, but in the end, it turned out to be a good move to put a hard time-constraint on that process because, basically, a website will take as much time as you give it. As we had spent a lot of quality, focused time developing our “communications base” and collateral material (brand, content) in 2009, I was confident that once the platform was in place, our decks would be cleared in 2010 to focus more on reaching new audiences by expanding our content and our approach.

We launched the website in late December 2009 as an unofficial "beta" of sorts, adopting an incremental improvement approach. Along the way, we consulted different stakeholders to get their initial reactions to our branding and to the site's general look and feel, so we had a pretty good sense that we were on target. This was a very satisfying and necessary part of the process, and it seems our stakeholders appreciated the more informal but personal "survey" approach and outreach. They appreciated that an important part of what we were doing was trying to enrich our relationships with our existing corps of supporters, at the same time that they encouraged us to reach our potential of increasing our influence with new and influential audiences.

Let's talk about social media/networks. How did this play a factor in your strategy?
Shortly after the launch of our strategic plan, the economic crisis hit, and we had to take a serious look at our budgets and cut back. Our diminished communications resources forced us to start thinking in much more cost- and goal-efficient terms, which has actually turned into a very rewarding lesson learned about the importance of laser-focusing on your goals and how much can be done with limited resources. One of the first things we decided to do was to build our communications infrastructure – including our new brand and new website – to support our new five-year strategic plan. We knew from the beginning that we wanted the website to be "social network-integrated". That's why you'll see, for example, the blog feed on our homepage. We designed the site to be able to automate content across multiple platforms.

Firelight's social network strategy is divided up into two phases: 1) the first and foremost priority was to engage and enhance our relationship with existing audiences, which is why we decided to focus first on a new blog, and then secondarily on **Facebook**. An important element of this first phase is our new blog (Ubuntu), designed to share the work of our grassroots grantees serving vulnerable children and families, who are core to our mission. 2) The second phase (which we are now entering) is about using other channels and social network tools (**like Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, and Ning**) to bring new audiences information and resources that are useful and interesting to them. As an important initial part of this phase, we are about to embark on a full landscape assessment of who's out there, who cares about and is interested in the kind of work that we do, and who is saying what about the spaces we operate in (children, HIV/AIDS, poverty, etc).

What has the reaction been so far?
Feedback has been very positive—one of the things I've heard from a lot of people, especially those that don't know Firelight as well, is that our online footprint makes us look like a much larger organization than we actually are. This is heartening because it means that we've succeeded in effectively representing the breadth and depth of the amazing work of our grantees and the lessons we've learned from a decade of grantmaking. Still, we realize there's a lot of room for improvement: one of the things we hope to do more of in the near future is helping our grantees raise their own profiles by bringing even more of their experiences—in their own words and voices—to our audiences here. Stakeholders are encouraged by our new direction of building an online community that connects our various audiences with a range of Firelight "voices" (including staff and board members, but especially grantees and country resource people). We've posted nearly 20 blogs since launch, and have tried to balance our entries by including one from a Firelight staff member and one grantee profile story each week. Our supporters are most excited by the grantee stories that relate the rich detail of who and what we fund, and the on-the-ground impact.

Why are these grantee stories important?
We wanted to provide our grantee-partners with the forum (our website and blog) and training necessary to help craft and share their own stories. We're planning a series of sessions on "writing for blogs," how to take and upload photos, and we are also piloting a program to provide some grantees with their own Flip video cameras. Part of the

sensitivity, of course, is that while our grantees are eager to engage in this effort, we know that it can be a burden on some of them. So instead of legislating an editorial calendar on everyone, what we've done instead is started to tier our grantee-partners, piloting those that are better equipped to be early adopters. Down the road, we hope we'll be able to put more resources into our capacity-building program so that we can help our grantees build their own web and social network presences. We know and they're acutely aware that it will be critical to their future resource mobilization. A critical part of our grantmaking strategy is about helping our partners get to a certain point where they're likely to be supported by other, in some cases, larger funders. This is often a long process—we typically fund grantees for about seven years to help them build their capacity—but after they get to that point, many of them are sustainable, robust organizations.

Why is social networking important?
If you're a nonprofit seeking some sort of baseline change in the world, it's no longer enough to focus your outreach efforts on a relatively small set of traditional influencers. This doesn't mean you should target the "general public" as your audience. But it does mean that you have think creatively about which individual demographics you want to bring to the table to help you further your mission. And if you're seeking a new corps of supporters, you can't afford not to be in the social network space.

But in the end, it's all about prioritization and sequencing. You have to be realistic about your goals and resources, and make sure that your colleagues are on board. It's not uncommon for people to grossly underestimate the time and effort it takes to maintain an effective social network presence. But, there are ways to stay relevant and interesting while also avoiding saturation. For instance, photos and videos are very easy to post and create conversations around. It doesn't always have to be a written piece...the different media possibilities are huge time-savers, enabling you to get a point across to your audiences in under a minute. Second, once you have something to share that's of some value, it's so easy to incrementally cross-pollinate your different networks. A blog is tweeted, and then shared on **Facbook**, etc. Always keep in mind that different "consumers" want to consume your content in different ways.

How are you measuring success?
You need to collectively brainstorm (with your program and other staff) what "success" would look like before you begin measuring; and determine at which points you continue on your path or change direction. In terms of objectives and goal setting, the kinds of metrics you use need to be customized to the phase you are currently charting. If you're focused (as we were) on reengaging your current audience base, then you would want to analyze the way in which those visitors our interacting with your site and choose more qualitative indicators like the quality and duration of their engagement and what actions they take as a result of it. But as you look to reach new audiences, the harder "traffic" numbers also become important. While the number of new visitors to our site has increased, we are still focused on enhancing our current relationships, so it's more meaningful for us to know that the average time visitors are spending on our site has dramatically increased, indicating that we are producing some compelling and/or useful content.

There are great (and free!) tools to help you track your progress better and more consistently, including **Google Analytics** and **Facebook Insight**. Both tools will give you a better understanding of who is coming to your site, and why, and what they do afterwards. This is where the link between communications and advocacy comes back into play; the metrics can tell you a lot about how your audiences are using this information: are they making a donation? Signing a petition? Joining public conversations to put pressure on policymakers? Because while raising awareness and disseminating good, useful information is extremely important, if your audiences don't do much with it, you have to ask yourself whether you're getting a satisfactory ROI, and also, what you could be doing differently to engage and mobilize your followers.

What surprised you? Biggest learning?|
The most exciting part is the amazing cross-pollinating nature of social networks to reach far and wide but also deep. You have to be using it to fully appreciate it, but the ability to reach multiple audiences with multiple formats through a small handful of powerful tools really stretches your time and resources, as well as your impact. And the great thing is that even the optimizing and automating tools are free (e.g. **ping.fm** and **hootsuite.com** for cross posting).

Social networks can open your organization up to whole new audiences who will be experiencing your content and resources for the first time. This creates both a huge opportunity as well as a responsibility: if you want to grab their attention and mindshare, you'll have to catch it with the first impression. To do this, you need to look at yourself as objectively as you can and really think about what value your organization can provide to the various audiences you're looking to reach and influence. You'll also need to make sure that you provide that value consistently, over a longer period of time.

Finally, don't forget. This is still all pretty new! It's not an exact science – there is tremendous value in keeping your eyes and ears open and learning from what you're seeing, readjusting as you go along. Look for guidance from your peers but also from outside of your particular field/industry (e.g. the for-profit world's focus on the consumer is something we in the non-profit world need to learn more from). A great source of good web design and content practices is the **Webby Awards** – some of the best websites out there are "social network-integrated" so by checking out the nominated websites, you can learn a lot about what good social network strategies look like.

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