

Atlanta Nonprofits Get Social

BY KIM ZELL, CPA

If you're like me, you have been hesitant to jump on the social media bandwagon. Or at least I was until I realized the power of networking; or, should I say virtually connecting with "contacts, friends and followers?"

In February 2009, Compete.com blogged that Twitter had more than six million unique monthly visits. Facebook claims that more than 150 million users log on to its site at least once each day, and LinkedIn welcomed its 40 millionth member on May 5, 2009, the site's sixth anniversary. These are astounding numbers considering none of these sites existed ten years ago.

Every user of social media I've talked to agrees with Ashley Skiles, marketing and development manager at Susan G. Komen for the Cure of Greater Atlanta. "It's about creating community. You find people who are bonded by the same interests. And that is what nonprofits are doing every day. We are finding people passionate about the same cause and connecting to them. People want to talk about their experiences, and social media is a great way to do that."

Komen Atlanta created a Facebook page in January 2009 and now has more than 280 friends. As part of fundraising efforts related to the organization's marquee event, the Race for the Cure, Komen Atlanta created an application (commonly referred to as an "app" in the social media world) for Facebook. The app provided Race participants with a link to their own Facebook pages, allowing friends to support their fundraising efforts. The result? Komen Atlanta saw a 360% return on investment from the amount of money raised from participants' Facebook friends.

Another use of social media is event promotion. The Atlanta nonprofit organization Jerusalem House created a Facebook page for its annual event in October, the Carnevale After Dark Halloween Bash. The goal for Alex Wan, development director at Jerusalem House, was to "extend our reach beyond traditional routes of public relations and to a younger population. Facebook is a more effective way of accomplishing that."

But it isn't all about fundraising. Nonprofits can also use social media to spread the word about what they're doing. Charles Swint, audience development director for The Atlanta Opera, uses Twitter's theme day, Music Monday, to promote the music of upcoming performers and educate followers on the origins of the upcoming operas. He believes Twitter is simply "more promotion of our brand." Swint created the Twitter account @TheAtlantaOpera to connect to supporters of the arts in the greater Atlanta community as well as other opera companies around the country. The Atlanta Opera currently has more than 600 followers on Twitter.

Just as nonprofits gained access to many new potential supporters with the creation of Web sites, they are now reaping the benefits of social media and, even better, with little to no costs. Most experts predict social media will replace current Web sites and even e-mail. While that may not happen overnight, you don't want to miss this bandwagon.