



# Report by Zoe Hogan

Community Seminar 2008

Using technology  
for social change:  
What our sector needs  
to know to engage the  
net generation

how many  
people  
does it take  
to change  
the world?

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There's nothing like a free lunch in a skyscraper building to really put things into perspective. And a community seminar doesn't hurt either, I suppose.

The massive social experiment that is the internet has turned media into a diverse user-driven colossus. As Rachel O'Connell pointed out, information is no longer contained within the 6 o'clock news and one or two newspapers. Tapping into this milieu for the benefit of young people everywhere are community organisations who want to use the power of the internet for good, not evil.

Social networking sites provide opportunities to move from 'working for' and 'speaking to' young people to working *with* and learning *from* them. The internet can link what young people identify as their personal interests with the issues and campaigns of community organisations. As young people are more inclined to reveal themselves emotionally and sign up to a 'cause' online, 'grassroots' engagement has never been so easy. By favouring a cause, young people are also recommending it to their friends, and so the movement grows. As the workshops identified, 'discussions are already happening, frameworks are already in place.' It is time to become actively involved in these conversations.

## **IDEAS TO ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE**

- Use blog technology to promote your organisation. This encourages responses, connects young people and engages people around specific events.
- Use the internet to enable young people to create their own projects and facilitate group discussions with their peers.
- Create connections and community discussions through poems, short stories or photography submitted by young people.
- Use existing online communities, such as ActNow and Bebo, to raise awareness of organisations.

- Share resources in a central location like ActNow or Bebo, to reduce the proliferation of messages online and lessen confusion.
- Use Skype for online counselling.
- Keep websites engaging and regularly updated to sustain interest and encourage development.
- Make use of subscription email systems to keep in touch with community.
- Use social networking sites to sell tickets for fundraising events.
- Use fundraising sites such as [www.everydayhero.com.au](http://www.everydayhero.com.au).
- Use existing social networking sites to maximise exposure and increase traffic to your organisation's website.
- Create applications for Facebook. For example, 'how to vote'.
- Get young people to develop safety programs for the internet and related technologies.
- Use YouTube to spread messages.
- Potential of Second Life program—for example, Victoria University's project envisioning what the world will look like in 2030. Can we use the concept more broadly?
- Podcasts and vodcasts to raise awareness and deliver content
- Create a platform, or use existing ones, for dialogue and user-generated content.
- For organisations focused on wellbeing, use the above ideas to spread knowledge before a crisis hits, so young people know support is available.

## CONTROL FREAKS

Engaging in an online world while at the same time balancing 'brand reputation' will be an ongoing challenge for organisations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Yet while exposing your organisation on the internet seems risky,



there are also countless opportunities to strengthen and evolve your brand.

Initiating and supporting conversations about social issues make an organisation appear relevant and trustworthy in the eyes of online users. There is a need for developing risk management systems and site guidelines, using terms like 'what to do' and 'what not to do' and publishing them on your site. Integral to managing risk is building a strong online community that trusts its members and is self-regulating. Part of this means ensuring there is an easy-to-use notification system for users to report negative or fake content. If unsupportive or misleading comments appear on a site, regard it as an opportunity to correct common misunderstandings. In reality, this may mean restructuring resources so that staff have time to moderate content. So take a deep breath. Engaging online is all about directing content, not controlling it.

## **KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES**

Concerns about how to keep up with technology changes whilst continuing to be responsible organisations were raised in Sydney and Melbourne. The most popular solution to this barrier was simple—to work together. By recognising what other organisations do well, you can partner together to maximise your collective impact. Using a central online location, such as ActNow, can create opportunities for 'knowledge brokering' and social networking between organisations. By sharing knowledge and success stories (and failures) and collaborating on events and campaigns, organisations can learn from and benefit each other.

A key approach to incorporating the internet into your existing work is to fight the urge to 'shut the door' and limit possibilities. Despite its daunting scope, the 'open source' nature of technology is a cause for optimism. For example, it opens up online forums and social networking sites for market research, creating hitherto unknown opportunities to tap into young peoples' views, feedback and

suggestions. Employing young people as interns to keep your website relevant was identified as a way to combine youth and technology in order to benefit both.

## DEALING WITH THE OLDIES

Unlike any other medium, the internet is constantly evolving. Keeping up with technology can be difficult, especially when you've got senior management preferring not to catch a ride on the internet superhighway. The sometimes sloth-like pace of senior management in adapting to new technology was a barrier identified in both Sydney and Melbourne. As one table in Melbourne concluded, it is impractical to wait for senior management to die to get on with things.



Selling the internet to senior management is like going to live in a foreign country—it's best if you know their language. Suggestions on how to do this included showing obvious short-term benefits, being outcomes focused, having a risk management strategy and displaying successful case studies. By focusing on successes, you minimise the notion of risk to a generation that after all, knows all about seeing the world through rose-coloured glasses. Demonstrating how something 'out there' in the technological cosmos is working and showing how it can be applied to your current projects will appeal to managers who are often also parents, keen to know how their kids think and process information. Running workshops for management with experts such as Rachel and inspiring young people can also drive home the possibilities of the internet.

However, everyone also recognised that working from the top-down can only go so far. In other words, you have to 'lead by example...without getting fired'. Help managers 'understand the why, not the how...the how comes later'. Once young

people are accessing, generating and moderating content online, you can use statistics to illustrate how many people go to the site, why they use it, etc. And if that doesn't work, there's always the trump card—'low costs, high returns'.



## ENGAGING THE DISENGAGED

Diversifying online audiences to include the disengaged and disadvantaged is the next challenge. Many social groups have little or no access to technology, which means youth programs centred on making the internet accessible, such as [Beanbag](#), are of the utmost importance. To reach different audiences, it is important to exploit and explore different mediums and formats, such as mobile phones and video games. Partnering with telecommunications companies to provide good deals to young people, especially when they are contacting community organisations, could also be helpful. Another solution could be to recognise existing technology uses and try to create bridges to link the technology to more people, for example, by streaming radio shows online and internet sites on mobiles. A program also exists ([meraki.com](#)) which allows people to donate their unused broadband to others. Opportunities to reach new audiences with technology designed to improve remain largely unexplored.

## Food for thought

**What does community mean for the next generation?**

**How does technology enable us to reach the disconnected?**

**How can we integrate the online and offline community for social action?**

## PHOTO LINKS

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