

<http://philanthropy.com/premium/articles/v20/i14/14000701.htm>

Finding Their Voice

Grant makers seek new ways to share stories

By Marty Michaels

Jonathan Fanton has solved a conundrum that plagues many nonprofit leaders: He's found a way to be in many places at the same time. While he leads the John D. and Catherine T.

MacArthur Foundation, in Chicago, he also runs meetings in Second Life, the online world. As Jonathan MacFound, his "avatar," or digital character, he has led discussions on topics such as civil liberties and the role that grant makers can play in using virtual interaction to promote social change.

While many consider virtual worlds "play," the foundation is serious about exploring their potential for engaging young adults and educating people about philanthropy and the work of the foundation and its grantees. For example, last June MacArthur made a \$550,000 grant to the University of Southern California's Center on Public Diplomacy to help it promote virtual conversations about education, human rights, migration, and other topics — and about how foundations can remedy social problems.

While the MacArthur foundation's presence in Second Life is a cutting-edge communications tool, it is just one of many increasingly sophisticated techniques that grant makers are using to reach people who do not know much about them. At the same time, many foundations are rethinking their communications departments, hiring professionals from large public-relations firms and people with experience in interactive technologies — often referred to as Web 2.0 — that the grant makers hope will lend themselves to discussions that far outstrip anything a traditional annual report can provoke. Many of the larger foundations say that they want to encourage honest, two-way communication about both successes and failures, and that doing so can only lend more credibility to their efforts.

Among the approaches:

- Last June, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation hired Heidi Sinclair, chief executive of Burson-Marsteller Europe, to be its chief communications officer, a new position. And when the foundation's new headquarters opens in late 2010 or early 2011 on prime real estate across from the Space Needle in downtown Seattle, the facility will include a 15,000-square-foot visitors' center with displays that will describe the foundation's global work.
- In March the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, in Miami, named Marc Fest, founder of QuickBrowse.com, as its new vice president of communications. (QuickBrowse is a Web service that enables Internet users to combine frequently viewed Web pages into a single page.) The foundation has also hired its first "online-community manager."

In addition, the fund created a short video advertising its 2008 Knight News Challenge — which in mid-May will award up to \$5-million to 17 projects that seek to use blogs and other digital efforts to unite residents of cities and towns in ways that local newspapers traditionally have done. The video about the competition was translated into 11 languages and broadcast by MTV and YouTube around the world, doubling to 3,000 the number of applications it had received in the 2007 competition.

- The John Templeton Foundation, in West Conshohocken, Pa., has given \$10-million to start the Philanthropy Project, which will produce a \$5-million film and use other visual media to tell positive stories

about the work that foundations do. Templeton has hired Michael Guillen, who served as chief science correspondent at ABC News for 14 years, to head the project, which will be based in Los Angeles.

Scrutiny and Mystery

Foundations' efforts to be more strategic and expansive in their communications efforts are in part a response to the relative ease of using online approaches, but also a sign that grant makers face increased scrutiny and demands for accountability from lawmakers, the news media, and the public.

Moreover, many experts say, most people don't have the foggiest notion what foundations are or what social purpose they serve; consequently, many grant makers feel the need to get the word out about their missions. Only 11 percent of Americans could correctly name one foundation, according to a 2003 study commissioned by the Council on Foundations and conducted by Wirthlin Worldwide. And while that figure has probably risen because of news reports on the Gates foundation, many say that public awareness remains low.

"There's an increasing recognition that for too long too many foundations have operated in the dark," says Bruce Trachtenberg, executive director of the Communications Network, in New York, a group that represents public-relations officials at foundations. "There's just a general lack of understanding about what foundations do, so it puts the pressure on everybody to be much more transparent."

The network has grown accordingly, says Mr. Trachtenberg, from approximately 75 members in mid-2006 to nearly 250 at present, and has a Facebook page, with 150 "friends," that it uses to inform its constituents.

Joel L. Fleishman, professor of public-policy studies and law at Duke University, says new technologies "are the driver of the process."

"As a few foundations start taking the initiative, other foundations will suddenly see that it doesn't cause fire and brimstone to rain on their heads if they admit what everybody already knows, which is that they're not perfect," says Mr. Fleishman. "And the fact that there are technologies evolving in such rapid ways, ways in which you can create better Web sites and more ways of interacting, is adding fuel to the fire."

While many grant seekers have long pressed foundations to do a better job of communicating, some charity leaders say the efforts are not all focused on the right things. For example, some grant seekers say they want to see more-timely information about grants that have been awarded. And many worry that the spending on communications will reduce the overall amount of money available to nonprofit groups. Says Aaron Dorfman, executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, in Washington: "One could question whether dollars are best spent on communications or on giving out more money in grants, and I'd argue that most grantees would rather see more funding."

'Dream List'

Many foundations nationwide are using an array of multimedia technologies to tell their stories and those of their grantees, as well as to illuminate public-policy issues. Some are using low-key approaches, such as e-mail or relatively simple Web sites, but many hope to expand their efforts soon.

For instance, Josie Burke, director of communications at the El Pomar Foundation, in Colorado Springs, joined the foundation last May as its first full-time communications staff member. She's working to overhaul the foundation's Web site, concocting a "dream list" of features by perusing other foundations' sites. And in another relatively low-tech move, Ms. Burke hopes to follow the lead of the Daniels Fund, in Denver, which persuaded local television and radio stations to broadcast segments about the work of grant recipients on a regular basis.

Gara LaMarche, president of the Atlantic Philanthropies, also relies mainly on modest means to communicate with the public, writing a biweekly column that is sent by e-mail to more than 2,000 people. Recent topics have included integrated education for Catholic and Protestant students in Northern Ireland, efforts to abolish the death penalty in Texas, and public-health programs to curb bicycle-related injuries and deaths in Vietnam. The issues are

disparate, but all relate to Atlantic grantees and its mission.

Mr. LaMarche says he receives approximately 50 responses to each column. "Right now, I respond to people who e-mail me, but it's just between the two of us. It's not a public exchange, but we're working to make it more interactive."

At the Council of Michigan Foundations, Vicki Rosenberg strives to keep her 400 member foundations thinking about how best to harness different technologies to achieve their goals. The council's membership comprises such large grant makers as the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, which is conducting a search for a new-media manager who will help the foundation use Web 2.0 approaches, including video streaming, RSS feeds, and social-networking systems.

But Ms. Rosenberg, who serves as vice president for education, communications, and external relations, says that isn't the norm: "Most of our members don't have a professional communications person on their staff. They're doing it on their own or they're doing the minimum — putting out an annual report."

The council first introduced extensive programs on strategic communications four years ago at its annual conference, which attracts about 700 people, and last summer created the only state affiliate of the Communications Network. In June, it will hold a course presented by Andy Goodman, author of *Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes*, that will explore how foundations can take a Web 2.0 approach.

"With the Web universe being so incredibly full," says Ms. Rosenberg, "you have to understand your audience, what message you're trying to communicate, and how best to do that — and as more and more people look to the Web and to connect, there's an explosive growth in the competition for people's minds and energy."

'A Conversation'

The Knight foundation has also embraced Web 2.0 technologies. Says Alberto Ibarguen, Knight's chief executive, "It's no longer a case of 'I write and you read,' but of having a mind-set of having a conversation."

He adds: "Accordingly, some of the ways in which we do our grant making also have to be different — in part, because they can be. You can have a conversation with 50 people you've never met and discuss an idea about the digital delivery of news and information to a certain region and each of them can add something to the conversation before you begin to spend one penny."

Mr. Fest, an Internet entrepreneur and former journalist, joined the Knight foundation in March 2007 and was promoted a year later to vice president of communications. He has redesigned the foundation's [Web site](#) and helped create and market the Knight News Challenge contest and the more recent Knight Arts Partnership, which received 1,622 online applications from artists and arts groups in South Florida. The foundation will review the entries and invite selected applicants to submit full proposals, with winners scheduled to be announced this fall.

Mr. Fest also sees great possibilities for blogs, message boards, and "possibly other tools to engage people we haven't even thought of yet." He recently persuaded the foundation to hire an online-community manager, a new position, after talking to others who have built online communities.

"We found that this is not a trivial thing to do, that it takes a lot of staff time," says Mr. Fest. "What everyone is starting to grasp is that if you want to keep up with the rapid change around you, you also have to practice rapid-fire change and experimentation, and that takes a mind-set and culture that praises trial and error, and, when something fails, that is also praised and not frowned upon."

Mr. Trachtenberg, of the Communications Network, says that many grant makers are grappling with the same issues.

"At least you have some level of measurement greater than throwing something into the mail or issuing a press release," he says. "You can see who's downloading what, who's leaving comments, how many hits you're getting,

but all that just shows that something's happening.

What's the right mix, what's the level of investment that makes sense? And then there's the big, unanswered question: Does any of this work? Are we reaching our audiences?

As anyone in the commercial sector will tell you, it takes a lot more work to find out who's behind those clicks. I don't think anyone's there yet, but that's the question people are asking."

Other observers are also asking similar questions, including who ultimately benefits from the new wave of communication approaches.

Gary Bass, executive director of OMB Watch, in Washington, says that although he hasn't yet seen such stepped-up efforts benefit the charitable world as a whole, the potential is there.

"The technologies don't in and of themselves create change, or accountability, or better service or performance, but are tools that can be harnessed for those purposes," says Mr. Bass.

In particular, he says, there needs to be more experimentation and a better critique of how foundations use social-networking tools.

"As an example, your trustees make decisions about who gets grants. In a social-networking context, that would be anathema, the opposite of community control. The concept of social networking is to create new kinds of dynamics of communication and the formation of new kinds of groups.

"It may be that foundations are indeed trying to foster that and that may be well and good. But it may be a tool that is best employed not by the foundations, but by the grantees doing the work."

Senior-Level Jobs

Meanwhile, the growing emphasis on communications has prompted many foundations to add new high-level jobs.

"The big change is that foundations are investing and bringing in senior people and having them report to the president or to a senior team," says Kristen Grimm, president of Spitfire Strategies, a Washington firm that foundations and nonprofit groups hire to help them use communications to promote social change. "This is very different than having someone who just churns out press releases or e-newsletters. They are realizing that they need this senior expertise in-house. They don't always want to have to outsource it to a firm."

Dean A. Zerbe, managing director of the Washington office of the Alliant Group, a Houston tax-consulting company, says that if this is accompanied by spending large sums on public-relations efforts, lawmakers might ask questions.

"Every public-relations dollar is one less that could be used to help the poor, doing the things that Congress intended to benefit from charitable giving," says Mr. Zerbe, who in February left his job as an aide to Sen. Charles Grassley, the Iowa Republican who formerly chaired the Finance Committee.

Adds Mr. Zerbe: "If foundation boards don't ask these tough questions, Congress and the news media will."

Or as Steve Gunderson, president of the Council on Foundations, in Arlington, Va., explains it: "There's increased scrutiny, and either we — philanthropy — will define ourselves, or others will define us. As we grow in size and leadership, we also grow in responsibility and share with the public who we are, what our priorities are and are not, so we don't misrepresent ourselves, create any false hopes, or not be honest partners."