

The Importance of Social Media and Online Presence for Nonprofits: A Study of Social  
Networking for a 501(c)(3) Cat Shelter

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### Abstract

Social media campaigns can make or break nonprofits and nonprofits have to handle their social media presence differently than big businesses or corporations. There are several pros and cons associated with a social media presence, and nonprofits have to focus on their reputation as well as sharing their organizational goals via a virtual world. This paper explores the pros and cons to social media, the history of social media, and the different strategies for management of social networking for animal welfare related nonprofits. Recommendations are given after research, networking, and tracking of social media site visits were examined the summer of 2018. Additional research, social media page updates, and more historical data is imperative to drawing conclusions with the methods started in this paper.

*Keywords: Social media strategies, history of social media, pros and cons of social media, nonprofits use of social media, cat shelter*

## The Importance of Social Media and Online Presence for Nonprofits: A Study of Social Networking for a 501(c)(3) Cat Shelter

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the best social media strategies for animal welfare nonprofits. Successful social media strategies are associated with increased membership to the organization, the outreach of the organization's message, and increased volunteerism, donations, and support from the community (Sisson, 2017). Working directly with The Scratching Post (TSP), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit cat shelter in Cincinnati, Ohio, this paper explores the different social media strategies for animal welfare organizations and strategies to keep in mind when updating or creating a social media presence for nonprofit organizations.

A 501(c)(3) organization is any charitable corporation or institution which is exempt from the federal income tax (Hopkins, 2011). TSP is a public charity organization which receives a substantial part of its income from donors and the general public (L. Reihcamp, personal communication, June 21, 2018). In order to maintain their 501(c)(3) status, TSP must obtain at least one third of its revenue in the form of public donations (Ellen, 2017). 501(c)(3) organizations are heavily regulated by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in the United States and lack of compliance to IRS requirements can cause an organization to lose their public charity status (Ellen, 2017). Therefore, it is of utmost importance for TSP to encourage public donations and maintain annually at least 33% of its revenue from donations or risk losing tax-exempt status.

TSP only has one desktop computer in their shelter. The internet, although accessible via Wi-Fi, is slow and unreliable. This seems to be on trend with other nonprofit organizations, as data suggests that only 45% of nonprofit workers use a computer on a routine basis (Miller, 2016). The majority of the work done at TSP is focused on the care of the cats, from cleaning

rooms, to socializing cats, to working with potential adopters to find the right cat for their home. There is very little emphasis on information technology (IT) and most volunteers are not involved at all in any IT function while present at TSP. Twenty-seven percent of nonprofit organizations in the United States rely solely on volunteers to develop, update, and maintain their social media campaigns (Hackler & Saxton, 2007). Eighty-six percent of nonprofits with less than \$1 million dollars of annual revenue rely on friends or volunteers to moderate social media campaigns (Hackler & Saxton, 2007). With TSP's annual revenue nowhere near \$1 million dollars, the shelter is highly dependent on volunteers to assist with anything above tasks associated with ensuring the welfare of their shelter cats, including their social media campaigns.

### **History of Social Media**

Social media in its purest form is just another type of written word or communication. Long-distance communication between people before the invention of the telegraph in 1792 was up to the speed of a horse and a delivery service (McFadden, 2017). The pneumatic tube or pneumatic post was developed in 1865 and increased the speed of communication between people, at least across short distances (McFadden, 2017). While distance always added in time for the message to go from sender to recipient, the advent of the radio and then telephone showed the world what instant communication is and why it is an important invention (McFadden, 2017).

### **Communication Technology Platforms**

After the 1940's set in motion the technological need for social media to become reality, the first web-based program for the exchange of emails started in 1966 (Kuo & Garcia-Luna-Aceves, 1985). The invention of UserNet in 1979 allowed people to communicate for the first time across a virtual platform, hosting a virtual newsletter, articles, or updates to a post of followers (Kuo & Garcia-Luna-Aceves, 1985). The decade of 1980s showed the first computers

for personal, at home use, and communication technology started to get much closer to what it is today (Lewis, 1994). General Electric created The Well and GENie, the first online services created which were used well into the 1990's (McFadden, 2017). The GENie was in its purest form, an online platform to share information for colleagues working across General Electric. It included the ability to send email and share information for business purposes, but also was a mainframe for online gaming development (McFadden, 2017). GENie can be credited with the multiplayer online gaming programs which have continued to develop over time. GENie was also the first online platform used for 911/emergency services to communicate virtually and was the technological infrastructure behind Roundtables, a service through GENie which was equipped with a live message board, chat room, and access to various files or information important for specific businesses (McFadden, 2017).

### **The Advent of Chat Rooms**

In 1994, the program, The Palace, was released to the consumer. The Palace was a chat room server which allowed users from all over the world to talk to one another in an open messaging system where each user picked out their own avatar and had the ability to speak anonymously across the internet (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Sixdegrees.com was not far behind The Palace, and in 1997 Sixdegrees.com allowed for users to upload their own profile pictures and network with others from across the globe (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Sixdegrees.com was shut down in 2001, but paved the way for other social media sites like Facebook to take hold (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

### **Mass Communication, Blogs, and Primitive Social Media**

MoveOn.org was started in 1998 as a way to spread around petitions against the impeachment of Bill Clinton (Carly, 2011). MoveOn.org quickly became a platform to

encourage internet activism around hot button political topics such as petitions discouraging United States military involvement, and spreading awareness of political fundraisers (Carly, 2011). In 1999, the first blogging sites were being developed online, and LiveJournal was launched (Gaudeul & Giannetti, 2013). LiveJournal is still popular today, but was one of the first sites built around the constant updating and sharing of personal information around a specific topic to a specific group of users (Gaudeul & Giannetti, 2013). It was the first online program to encourage users to follow one another and create specific groups based on interests, hobbies, or similarities (Gaudeul & Giannetti, 2013).

The first ever commercial advertisement-funded website for social media was launched in 2000. LunarStorm was created for teenagers and kids in Sweden for purposes of communication and sharing of information (Clark, 2006). While LunarStorm was shut down in 2010 (Clark, 2006), it still provided the basis of commercial advertisements on social media and piloted the way that the social media platforms of today receive revenue (McFadden, 2017). In 2001, Wikipedia was born, and is today's most popular general reference site online (Bridgewater, 2017). While Wikipedia is not a type of social media, but is a nonprofit platform, it is still an online-community of users sharing the same passions and goals (Bridgewater, 2017).

The early 2000's showed the advent of Friendster, LastFM, LinkedIn, WordPress, and MySpace, all online platforms centered around the idea of sharing life experiences, networking, and music reviews to practically unlimited audiences (McFadden, 2017). Photobucket and Flickr appeared in 2003 as the first online platforms created to upload, host, and share large amounts of photographs between friends, family members, and the world (McFadden, 2017). SecondLife, one of the first widely popular multiplayer online role-playing games also launched in 2003 which still continues to be popular today (Berger, Jucker, & Locher, 2016).

**Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube**

The year 2004 saw the launch of the then Harvard edition of Facebook followed by the launch of YouTube in 2005 (Good, 2013). YouTube was completely different than the other platforms that had been launched prior, as it focused on videos and vines, which are 6-second short segments of a video, a craze which would soon become massively popular (McFadden, 2017). Facebook in 2004 was widely used as a method of instant messaging and now is one of the most popular ways for voice and video calling across the globe (Shontell, 2014). In 2006, Twitter and the redesigned Facebook were launched (Good, 2013), and to this day they are still the two most popular social media sites in existence (McFadden, 2017). Facebook is the sixth most visited site across the entire web (McFadden, 2017). Twitter was the first online platform that allowed the general public to follow and interact with celebrities and politicians (Roiu, 2016).

Instagram was launched in 2008 and was created as a platform to post photos and vines to friends and family (Bruner, 2016). Instagram also gave users the option to follow celebrities and receive constant and up-to-date information from organizations around the world (Gee, 2016). Pinterest also launched in 2008 and served as a virtual dream board (Bercovici, 2014). Users could pin ideas, wishes, and dreams to a virtual board and organize their interests in an intuitive and shareable way (Bercovici, 2014). Pinterest allowed users to share recipes, fashion advice, interior design ideas, crafting instructions, and so much more. To the user base of over 80% women, Pinterest also specifically modifies and incorporates advertisements which its users have showed interest in before or have a high chance of purchasing (Bercovici, 2014).

**Impact of Social Media on Businesses**

Around 2008, businesses and organizations started to realize the impact that social media can have on their advertising abilities (McFadden, 2017). The costs of social media advertisements when compared to the advertisements in print media, television, or radio, are substantially lower (Smith, 2017). Social media advertisements can also be programed to reach an organization's target audience, and increases interest in a good or service quickly and directly to applicable customers. There are real-time performance analysis capabilities for social media as well. An organization can try multiple strategies on social media and track in real-time which one(s) are the worth the investment of time and money. Social media is an excellent venue for nonprofits to spread brand awareness by using social media platforms to find the right audience, post visuals or eye-catching status updates that increase stakeholder engagement, and encourage shares of the post, encourage direct conversations between stakeholder and organization, and have built-in ways to measure the success of the campaign (Smith, 2017).

### **Benefits of Social Media**

A successful social media campaign can be used to effectively network and promote goals and objectives of a nonprofit to the masses (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). With the advent of social media, organizations can now virtually share concepts and ideas around marketing and nonprofit needs as well as immediately address customer complaints or issues. Online presence for nonprofits also means that customers have a direct line to addressing questions around associated fees, hours of operation, reviews from previous customers, and geographical locations (Spors, 2008). Social media can also be used as an online avenue to interact with other organizations, stakeholders, and encourage engagement within their communities all via a virtual infrastructure (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). Social media also helps organizations with branding, and by earnestly managing a nonprofit's online presence, organizations can use social media as a



venue to develop their brand, grow visibility, and differentiate their organizational goals from competitors (Harris & Rea, 2011).

### **Active Communication**

An active social media campaign allows for nonprofits to participate in conversations with other nonprofits who share a similar goal. Engaging in social media also allows nonprofits with opportunities to seek business ventures in leading-edge ways, and the ability to learn about themselves, their community, and where they can make the greatest impact (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). Active social media campaigns also provide the nonprofit with the opportunity to keep in touch with their suppliers, donors, and supporters (Mallet & Cruz, 2010). Social media campaigns do best with occasional, sincere posts, versus daily numerous updates that feel like a bombardment to stakeholders (Carboni & Maxwell, 2015). Therefore, even a social media campaign with only a part-time social media manager can still be successful for nonprofits.

### **Advertisement Capabilities**

Social media can also be used by nonprofits to create and advertise events such as open houses, silent auctions, or food events. With nearly half of small businesses and nonprofits failing within the first five years of opening, social media campaigns can be the difference between maintaining the organization and having to close its doors (Cronin-Gilmore, 2012). The people who start nonprofits have a vast amount of knowledge around the goal of the organization, but often lack the ability to market their needs (Tanja & Toombs, 2014). Technology and social media give these organizations a cost-effective, easy-to-use system to share their goals, attract stakeholders, and spread the word about their passions.

### **Cons of Social Media**

Research indicates that in 2012, only twenty-six percent of nonprofits utilized social media effectively and acquired new customers or stakeholders via their social media campaigns (Bakeman & Hanson, 2012). Small businesses and nonprofits admit to feeling lost and confused as to which social media strategies are the best for their organization and indicate that there is a sense of seclusion and loneliness when trying to initiate a social media campaign (Zhang & Hamilton, 2009).

### **Implementation Limitations / Engagement Expectations**

Implementation of a social media campaign takes significant effort and dedication in order to create a strong virtual stakeholder base (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). As stated above, successful social media campaigns encourage open communication between stakeholders and the organization, which puts response time and response quality pressures on the organization to keep the conversation going. For most organizations, the main objective of social media is to increase traffic or awareness to their cause, and while social media can be a great device for this, the campaign requires substantial commitment from staff and volunteers. Wallace (2012) stated that customers and stakeholders are out there on social media talking about societal concerns, and it would behoove nonprofit organizations to find, and join in on these conversations.

### **Time Commitment of Social Media**

While the cost and fees associated with using social media is negligible for these organizations, nonprofits often lack marketing or public relations departments and are found relying on volunteers or overworked staff to initiate and manage social media campaigns (Bakeman & Hanson, 2012). Once a social media campaign is up and running, the work does not stop. Active social media campaigns require consistent and frequent check-ins, responding to stakeholders, and trying to stay afront of any bad reviews or comments. Social media is an

unstoppable trend for today's businesses and nonprofits across the board, and in order to stay competitive and current with the times, nonprofits have to address the need for a strong social media campaign in a world transformed by social technologies (Li & Bernhoff, 2011).

### **Negative Reviews / Preserving Reputations**

Social media can be a great way to encourage conversation, but can also be a platform for significant public complaints and hits to a nonprofit's reputation. A nonprofit's social media presence has to be a positive experience for their stakeholders, which can be challenging due to the free flow nature of communication on these sites (Uzelac, 2011). The best way for organizations to safeguard their reputations online is to take preventative measures, remove any accidental or damaging content, and engage stakeholders (Brynley-Jones, 2011). Preventative measures, such as using quality monitoring techniques, frequently changing passwords, and having a plan for situations that could get out of control are paramount (Brynley-Jones, 2011). Adequately training multiple people in an organization to know how to deal with negative reviews or crisis situations is also key. Having staff trained to know how to deal with any malicious or suspicious postings or links is also critical to maintaining a positive online reputation. Ensuring adequate numbers of staff are available and trained to deal with angry customers is also a great safeguard to making sure no dirty laundry is aired via social media platforms. Any negative feedback from stakeholders should be met with an air of understanding, facts, and humanness, regardless of the feedback (Brynley-Jones, 2011).

### **Security Concerns**

Alongside how easy it is to share information about a nonprofit's mission or goal, is the risk of this information falling into the hands of potential attackers. Nonprofits must use social media strategies that place an emphasis on the security of the user's privacy and safeguarding of

personal data (Urstadt & Grifantini, 2008). Frigyes Karinty pointed out in 1929 that everything and everyone is connected by only “six degrees of separation,” and this means that regardless of what nonprofits post on their social media, they could be posting information directly into or only a chain or two away from sharing information with criminals or identity thieves (Paek, Bae, Hove, & Yu, 2011). Nonprofits can be held accountable for information posted on their site, and if a hacker leaves a link or a harmful download on the social media page, stakeholders can tarnish a nonprofit’s social media campaign if stakeholders start falling victim to privacy risks (Cohen, 2016). Social media campaigns have to balance being open and available for their stakeholders alongside of having control over the conversations and what information is posted for all to see (Urstadt & Grifantini, 2008).

### **Methods**

Using publicly accessible, free to use Similarweb software, I recorded a baseline of visits to <https://www.thescratchingpost.org/> for site traffic between April 1, 2018 and May 31, 2018. I also gathered information via Similarweb on the site traffic for The League for Animal Welfare (<https://www.lfaw.org/>), Ohio Alley Cat Rescue (<https://www.ohioalleycat.org/>), and Heartt Animal Refuge (<https://www.hearttanimalrefuge.com/>), which are additional nonprofit animal welfare organizations in the Cincinnati area. The information gathered from Similarweb showed the total site visitors during a specific timeframe, organic website traffic, direct website traffic, traffic from social media pages, the average duration viewers spend on the site, and the bounce rate (Table 1).

Website traffic to a specific site can happen through many different routes. Organic website traffic is traffic to a site which was via another site, like a search engine (Ruby, 2017). Direct website traffic is when the user types the website’s URL directly into the browser or by

clicking a bookmark (Ruby, 2017). Social media hits are a type of organic traffic, where the user has clicked on a site from a social media page (Ruby, 2017). The bounce rate of a webpage is the amount of site visitors who enter a site and then leave the site, rather than staying to explore other pages within the same home web page (Halita & Bufnea, 2014).

Starting in early June 2018, I attempted to update TSP's Facebook and Instagram pages. However, access to TSP's direct website was not accomplished, and work on their Facebook page came to a halt before it started due to a lack of organization with the Facebook password and login information. Access to the Instagram page was finally achieved in late July, 2018. All progress has been slow, as most decisions have to be discussed with the board of TSP which can take weeks to hear results. While waiting for approvals/login information from the board, I created a new Facebook page for The Meow Mart, the gift shop/cat boutique/pet store associated with TSP. The number of visitors to the Meow Mart's site will be tracked and compared to sales numbers, however results will only be preliminary for several months and not included in this version of this paper. The Facebook page for The Meow Mart went live on June 14th, 2018.

In addition to assisting with updating and renovating the current social media pages for TSP, networking opportunities arose from this research. Correspondence between The League for Animal Welfare (LFAW), Ohio Alley Cat Rescue (OAR), and Heartt Animal Refuge (HAR) was started by asking questions around the specific social media strategies, lessons learned, and tips and tricks of each nonprofit. While correspondence with OAR and HAR was not met with open arms, LFAW was very responsive and interested in this project. Similar web activity reports were still conducted and analyzed for this paper for OAR and HAR shelters, but networking and specific information about their social media strategies is not included in this paper.

LFAW uses Facebook as their main social media platform. On their page, they post every few days, usually posts encouraging stakeholders to post photos of their pets, sharing pet related events around Cincinnati, or posts with cute animal trivia. They have a spotlight animal every week, called the “Staff’s Pick,” which spotlights a different adoptable pet at the shelter each week with a short bio on the animal. They also post biweekly videos created by their staff on topics such as training, the best beds to purchase, the best litter boxes, etc. Their Facebook page frequently references and directs viewers to their main web page, which is updated at least once weekly. This webpage has a current listing of all adoptable animals at the shelter, with short bios and photos of each one. They have two volunteers and one part-time staff member who are involved with their online presence. The staff member helps organize the social media To Do list, and the volunteers often work remotely on updating available animals on their website or adding posts to their Facebook page.

In contrast, TSP posts updates of new kittens to the shelter, or elder cats who have passed, but only once a week or so. These posts often include a blurry or out of focus photograph of an animal. They also post photos of donations or volunteers with cats, but these photos do not encourage stakeholder engagement like the posts by LFAW. PetFinder is updated typically on Thursdays, but does not remain as current or up to date as the available animals on LFAW’s website. There is very little mention or reference to TSP’s main website through their Facebook posts, and zero mention of The Meow Mart or associated Facebook page on any social media posts to date by TSP.

I conducted another Similarweb analysis of the four different organizations’ webpages between June 1, 2018 and July 31, 2018 (Table 2). The results/discussion section explores the differences in website users between April/May 2018 and June/July 2018 for these sites.

### **Results and Discussion**

The information gathered from the Similarweb report for April to May of 2018 showed that TSP needs to find a way to maintain guests on their webpage, as the bounce rate for TSP's website was the highest of all the nonprofit animal welfare organizations researched at 41.09% of visitors bouncing after visiting the site in April to May of 2018 (Table 1). Positives about the Similarweb report in Table 1 are that TSP has the second highest site visitors of the four nonprofits researched, with approximately 21,793 site visits between April to May of 2018. Negatively, however, the results from this Similarweb report showed that there was no web traffic to TSP's website through social media posts, links, or networking. TSP's social media pages should encourage visitors to visit their website and learn more about their organization, or incorporate more information on their social media pages about the organization's missions, goals, and successful outcomes.

Table 1. *Public Traffic Data from SimilarWeb.com April - May 2018*

Organization	Site Visitors	Organic Traffic	Direct Traffic	Social Media Traffic	Average Visit Duration (minutes)	Bounce Rate
<b>The Scratching Post</b>	21,793	96.12%	3.88%	0.00%	00:02:00	41.09%
<b>League for Animal Welfare</b>	24,862	33.93%	55.67%	4.47%	00:02:39	17.75%
<b>Ohio Alley Cat Refuge</b>	20,861	63.68%	21.56%	12.54%	00:01:21	22.19%
<b>Heartt Animal Refuge</b>	5,110	54.07%	45.93%	0.00%	00:00:24	30.37%

For the Similarweb data gathered between June 1 and July 31, of 2018, the results indicate that the total number of visitors to TSP's webpage had declined by 629 hits (Table 2). Organic site traffic increased by 4%, making all direct and social media traffic at 0.00%. The average site visit duration decreased by 8 seconds from April to May's report, while the bounce rate decreased by a percent. In contrast, LFAW's site had 5,515 fewer site visitors from June - July 2018 compared to April - May 2018. The average site visit duration increased by 18 seconds for LFAW, and the site traffic from social media pages increased by 2%.



Table 2. *Traffic Data from SimilarWeb.com June - July 2018*

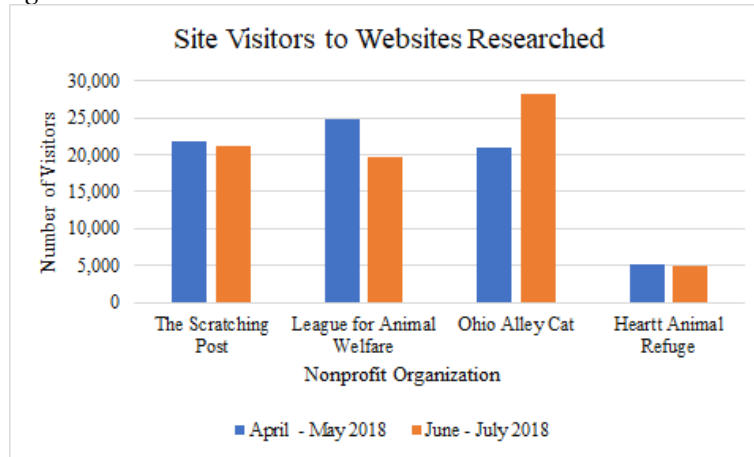
Organization	Site Visitors	Organic Traffic	Direct Traffic	Social Media Traffic	Average Visit Duration (minutes)	Bounce Rate
<b>The Scratching Post</b>	21,164	100.00%	0.00%	0.00%	00:01:52	40.21%
<b>League for Animal Welfare</b>	19,711	29.21%	49.59%	6.03%	00:02:57	14.42%
<b>Ohio Alley Cat Refuge</b>	28,313	58.24%	23.75%	15.71%	00:01:30	28.97%
<b>Heartt Animal Refuge</b>	5,004	50.41%	49.59%	0.00%	00:00:31	34.96%

The social media contact at LFAW was not sure why there was a decline in the number of visitors to their main webpage in June/July 2018 (Figure 1). It was brainstormed that perhaps nicer weather, summer activities, and students being off school could decrease the amount of time people spend in front of a computer during these months. It could also mean that LFAW's Facebook and other social media posts were not encouraging visitors to their website as much as posts in previous months. For most cat shelters, the summer months are when most kittens are available for adoption, so perhaps the posts on LFAW's Facebook pages of kittens and other available cats were enough to bring in visitors to their shelter, but visitors did not feel the need to also view the main web page before going to the shelter. Since no changes were able to be made to TSP's social media accounts, there is no explanation for the declination in site viewers, except possibly the same ideas surrounding the decline in LFAW's website hits.

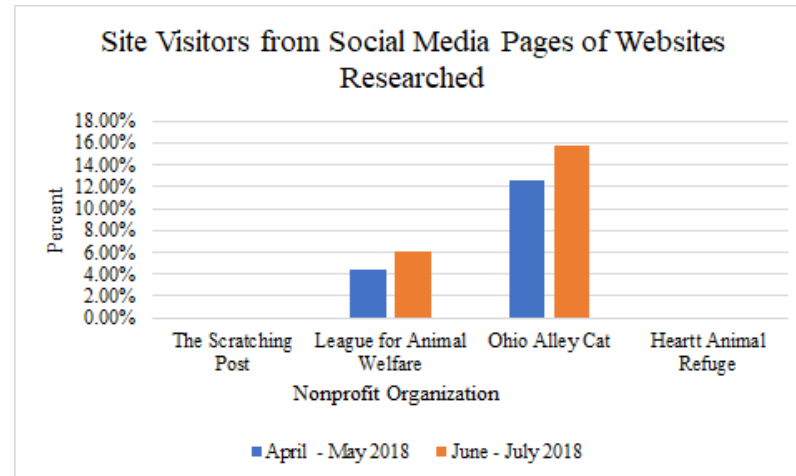
The most noticeable difference in number of site visitors to each site researched is the increase in site visitors for OAR (Figure 1). OAR was up 7,452 visitors from April/May 2018 to June/July 2018. This is a 26% increase, and it would have been interesting to hear if anything

different was done through their online communication or social networking strategies to account for this increase in site visitors.

*Figure 1. Number of Site Visitors to each website researched*



According to Figure 2, it would appear that OAR started adding more references to their webpage via their social media outlets, as there was an increase of 3% of site traffic coming from social media pages in June to July 2018 when compared to April to May 2018 figures. LFAW also saw an increase of web page hits from social media links (up 2%), however the LFAW social media coordinator did not think anything was done differently across the months researched. Figure 2 also shows that visitors to the web pages of TSP and HAR were not through social media posts. The hits to TSP and HAR's web pages were only through organic or direct traffic during all months researched.

*Figure 2. Percentage of Site Visitors to Websites Researched from Social Media Pages*

The Facebook page for the Meow Mart, as part of TSP, went live mid-June. Due to lack of data, Similarweb does not offer any analysis or data on this page as of early August, 2018. As the page ages, visitor traffic to the store and web page will be tracked using a similar approach as used in this paper for longer established webpages. Tracking social media usage and impact has to occur over a period of several months to truly see any results or draw legitimate conclusions.

### **Review of Existing Literature**

Nonprofit organizations have to approach their social media strategies differently than big businesses or corporations. Instead of trying to sell a product or service, nonprofits are often trying to address societal concerns or issues with limited resources, funding, and staff (Sisson, 2017). These societal concerns can range from public health topics and homelessness, to animal welfare and global warming. With the advent of social media in 1997 (Branham, 2017), nonprofits have the ability to use social media over more traditional marketing tactics to gain visibility to their cause, engage their stakeholders, and impact customer perceptions about their cause and organization (Taneja & Toombs, 2014). Social media allows nonprofits to share their beliefs, causes, and ways people can help in an efficient and cost-effective way quickly across the globe (Taneja & Toombs, 2014).

Nonprofits have to be smart about their online presence, and use social media to share their missions while at the same time helping the organization's reputation (Sisson, 2017). The number of nonprofits using social media has doubled since 2008 (Taneja & Toombs, 2014), and nonprofits need to focus efforts on social media campaigns and the impact that these campaigns can have on the organization's reputation (Hackler & Saxton, 2007).

Reputations provide nonprofits and businesses alike with a competitive edge over similar organizations (Fombrun, 1996). A nonprofit's reputation can significantly influence donor contributions of volunteer hours, monetary donations, and word of mouth networking. Of particular importance, the way a nonprofit organization manages the public perception of their cause is instrumental to the success of the organization (Fombrun, 1996). Successful nonprofits adjust their social media strategies as needed to keep up a positive reputation to their stakeholders (Fombrun & Rindova, 2000). A poorly executed social media strategy could damage an organization's reputation while at the same time, weakening the organization's social network opportunities and ties within their community (Hackler & Saxton, 2007).

One of the most successful facets of a social media campaign for nonprofits is the ability to open up the lines of communication between the organization and organization's stakeholders (Lovejoy & Saxton, 2012). Social media campaigns can be used by nonprofits to encourage communications surrounding the societal concerns at hand by serving as an interactive feedback/discussion board. A strong social media presence is associated with influencing public perceptions of the organization and goal presented (Sisson, 2017). The largest difference between social media and marketing ways of the past is the ability for stakeholders and nonprofits to quickly discuss topics and engage customers. Viral marketing is able to reach

millions of people in a very short time span, and can be the main tool nonprofits use to share their organizational goals (Taneja & Toombs, 2014).

### **Next Steps at TSP**

While the initial goal of this project was to make changes to TSP's social media campaigns, the only changes that I was able to make were to the Meow Mart's Facebook page to this point. I was able to photograph the entire Meow Mart, create a new Facebook page, and start discussions with customers via Facebook about inventory, products, and operating hours. I was also able to find two more women with retail experience to volunteer in the Meow Mart from posts on Facebook. Since June 14, 2018, The Meow Mart's new Facebook page has gone from brand new to over 350 "likes," which shows support from the community and an interest in this store. It will be fascinating to watch The Meow Mart's Facebook page grow and become more popular as the site continues to be maintained and updated by myself and other volunteers.

Even though I have not had access or editing control on TSP's Facebook page yet, I have been able to provide some suggestions and training to the staff in regards to what to post on social media and how to handle negative reviews or angry customers. As part of this project, I have put together a short manual on suggestions for anyone making posts on behalf of TSP on any social media (Appendix I). This manual will continue to grow and evolve as I am able to get more experience with, and try out different strategies with TSP's social media pages.

Speaking with the social media coordinator at LFAW gave me significant insight into what other strategies TSP can try on their social media pages, such as posting random animal trivia questions or other types of posts to encourage stakeholder engagement, posting more visually appealing and in focus pictures of adoptable cats, and sponsoring a spotlight cat to focus on each week. I believe one of the best approaches TSP can have for their social media

campaign is to encourage conversations on their page and interact with stakeholders. LFAW does a great job at this particular aspect of having a social media presence, and active communication is something that the literature highly suggests nonprofits make a priority in their social media campaigns. Moving forward, posting updates or photos that encourage active communication on TSP's pages will be my top priority. The data collected from Similarweb shows that for LFAW, this approach in active communication is what sets LFAW's social media campaign above the other three nonprofits researched.

My plan is to train anyone who posts on TSP's behalf on social media to focus on posting well written, quality posts that encourage communication between TSP and the general public. Another main goal of TSP's social media campaign going forward will be to keep up to date posts on available cats for adoption in the shelter, posting clearer, more in focus photos of adoptable cats, and encouraging TSP volunteers to post wins for the shelter, such as a large donation, a busy adoption day, or any other positive milestone or announcement the shelter may have.

### **Conclusion and Reflection**

While the original intent for this project was to pull a baseline on website activity, incorporate changes to TSP's social media pages, and then pull another report on website activity to compare to baseline, this plan was not able to be carried out. I wish I had been able to make actual changes to TSP's Facebook and home web page, and have been able to track the impact of my social media strategies over the summer. However, even without practical applications, I still learned a significant amount from the research in this paper and from LFAW's social media coordinator that I can use to update TSP's accounts moving forward.

Thinking back to early June, my goals were a bit steep, as any updates to social media pages will take time to see results and results are preliminary for several months. A longer duration to evaluate change will yield the strongest feedback and be able to show better evidence in the success or failure of a social media strategy. Fortunately, this experience is honestly just starting out, and now I have the tools and information available to make the biggest and most positive impact on TSP's social media campaigns.

For a while, I was discouraged by the lack of communication by OAR and HAR and seemingly disinterest interest in this project. I was thinking we are all fighting towards the same goal, and I had hoped that there would be more interest in a collaboration or sharing of experiences. But what I did not really evaluate was the potential priorities of OAR and HAR. LFAW and TSP are fortunate, because they have people interested and committed to assisting with, and making changes to their social media campaigns. OAR and HAR may likely be faced with having to choose between a rock and a hard place, not having enough staff or volunteers to focus on a social media campaign and instead having to focus all resources on solely caring for the cats/maintaining the shelter. I plan to respond to all emails I sent to OAR and HAR with a brief summary of what I learned from this research, for them to keep in their back pocket whenever/if ever focusing on a social media strategy becomes a priority for these shelters.

All in all, while the original goals were not met, I still feel like great progress was achieved through this summer project. I feel my plan is solid moving forward with TSP's social media campaigns and I am excited to get started. The fact that I can track the success of my social media campaign across the next several months is a great way to make sure my approach is working, or try other strategies as discussed in this report. The research that went into this project just goes to show how critical a effective social media campaign can be to a nonprofit

and I am very encouraged that my newfound knowledge and interest in this topic will only have a positive impact on the awareness and networking of TSP and my master plan mission and goals.



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## Appendix I

### The Scratching Post's Social Media Manual

If you're reading this, thank you! It means you are interested in helping The Scratching Post update and maintain their social media presence. This is a big job with a lot of responsibilities, so here are a few guidelines to remember when posting or responding on social media:

- Address customer questions promptly and concisely. Direct customers to [www.thescratchingpost.org](http://www.thescratchingpost.org) if they have any questions around hours, locations, or directions. Don't hesitate to provide our phone number and/or a contact name if anyone has specific questions.
- When responding to questions around adoption fees, please always use the format, "as of [today's date], the adoption fee for a cat under the age of 5 years is XX dollars and the adoption fee for a cat over the age of 5 years is XX dollars."
- Remember that we do not hold cats for any reason, and we will not commit to reserving a cat for any person for any situation. Encourage the interested party to come visit during open adoption hours if they are interested in adoption.
- Never ever provide any veterinary advice through our site. Always refer clients immediately to a veterinarian. Don't discuss any medical conditions of our shelter cats unless specifically given the okay.
- Always remember The Golden Rule when responding to comments from the public. Be kind, nice, understanding, and only professional in your responses, no matter how upset or ugly a post may be. If you are unsure, don't post! Ask Kristen or Donna for assistance with how to deal with an upset poster. No dirty

laundry should be aired on social media, and any negative review or feedback should only be met with facts, humanness, and politeness.

- All negative feedback should be addressed quickly, so please make these posts your priority, and contact Kristen and/or Donna if you do not feel comfortable addressing the situation.
- If any post feels to be getting out of control and could be damaging to the reputation of The Scratching Post, please immediately contact Kristen and/or Donna who may suggest deleting the post.
- Never ever click a suspicious link or posting. When in doubt, ask!
  - Passwords will be changed the first of every month to increase the security of our social media pages. Please let Kristen know if you will be working on a social media page around the first of the month so she can share the updated password with you.
- If you feel someone is interested in adopting and would not be a good guardian for a cat from our shelter through comments on social media (i.e. they are displaying potential acts of violence or stating they are interested in getting a cat for inappropriate reasons), please let Donna or Jane know ASAP so they can keep an eye out for this person if they show up to adopt.
- Feel free to chime into discussions on any posts on our Facebook pages when the conversation is linked to the mission and goals of The Scratching Post. Encourage communication and ask questions! Use social media to encourage engagement

between us and potential clients, other shelters, and volunteers at The Scratching Post. Keep comments light, helpful, and informative.

- When posting, keep posts sincere and to the point. Check the Facebook page to make sure other people haven't posted that same day, too. According to research, social media campaigns do best with occasional, sincere posts, versus daily numerous updates that feel like a bombardment to users.
  - The Scratching Post is accountable for all information posted on their sites, and has to remain in control over the conversations on their pages and what information is posted. Never post anything that could be damaging to The Scratching Post's reputation.
  - Never post photos on our social media pages of clients, customers or visitors unless they have filled out the release form. While not imperative, it is highly preferred to ask any staff or volunteer if you can post a photo of them *before* posting.
  - Only post photos that are in focus and provide a benefit to the post.

Always remember that a successful social media campaign can be used to effectively network and promote the goals and objectives of our shelter. We have the ability to virtually interact with other organizations, stakeholders, and encourage engagement within our communities, and this responsibility should not be taken lightly! We appreciate your commitment to The Scratching Post and look forward to working on a successful social media campaign with you!

Facebook email login:

## IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR NONPROFITS

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Facebook password:

Instagram login:

Instagram password:

Main contacts:

Donna, Shelter Manager	Kristen, Social Media Guru and Adoption Counselor	Andrew, IT support
513-984-6369	513-484-3581	513-616-5668
Any questions regarding posts, comments, suspicious activity, or damaging comments Any questions regarding adoptions or questions around a specific cat	Any questions regarding posts, comments, suspicious activity, damaging comments, or general social media concerns Any concerns around potential adopters	Any questions about suspicious/concerning links, or access problems