

A New Generation Reinvents Philanthropy

Blogs, Social-Networking Sites
Give 20-Somethings a Means
To Push, Fund Favorite Causes

By RACHEL EMMA SILVERMAN
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Joe Alamo didn't set out to become a do-gooder. But late last year, when the Geneva, N.Y., Web designer was surfing on MySpace, he chanced onto the profile of Kiva.org, a nonprofit that allows people to make zero-interest "microfinance" loans over the Internet to needy entrepreneurs in developing countries.

Soon after, Mr. Alamo not only became a lender through Kiva, but he also started a new Web site, Kivafriends.org, devoted to Kiva enthusiasts. He also now volunteers to run Kiva's MySpace page. "This is the first time I've ever gotten so involved with a charity," says Mr. Alamo, now 30 years old.

Young donors and volunteers, snubbing traditional appeals such as direct mail and phone calls, are satisfying their philanthropic urges on the Internet. They're increasingly turning to blogs and social-networking Web sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, to spread the word about -- and raise funds for -- their favorite nonprofits and causes. They're sending Web-based fund-raising pitches to their friends and families, encouraging them, in turn, to forward the appeals to their own contacts.

At the same time, a growing number of charities -- ranging from start-ups to established names such as the Salvation Army -- are launching profiles on popular social-networking sites, hoping that young people will link up to the pages. Some are also encouraging bloggers to mention the causes on their sites, raising thousands of dollars in small donations from readers.

Many of the nonprofits that have embraced social networking are themselves run by people in their 20s and 30s, who already spend a good portion of their lives online. Some of them also appeal to donors by offering them tangible results of their gifts by directly linking contributors with recipients.

Social-networking sites, for their part, are offering new tools to help attract nonprofits and contributors. In May, a social-action start-up called Project Agape launched a new program on Facebook called "Causes," in which users can create online communities to advocate for various issues, charities and political candidates. Since then, the program has attracted more than 2.5 million Facebook users, raising some \$300,000 for nonprofits and politicians, says Joe Green, 24, the project's co-founder.

That move comes after MySpace -- which already hosts thousands of nonprofits' profiles -- launched its "Impact" awards late last year, honoring individuals and nonprofit groups that have successfully used the site to make a difference. MySpace members vote on the winners, who get \$10,000.

Visitors to another social-networking site, Change.org, which also launched in May, can join "virtual foundations" of peers dedicated to specific causes, such as fighting AIDS in Africa, and raise money for the charities or political candidates that support those issues. So far, its 30,000 members have raised nearly \$50,000, says founder Ben Rattray, 27. Before launching the site, Mr. Rattray had never made a charitable donation, finding charities' traditional pitches to be "unengaging."

Some young philanthropists are turning to "viral fund raising" -- sending appeals to their network of contacts that are forwarded on to others -- to maximize the power of small donations. Users of SixDegrees.org, a program launched by nonprofit site Network for Good, can create a "charity badge" listing their favorite cause and send it out to their acquaintances. The badge keeps a running tally of how much has been raised and how many donors have contributed. Since the program was launched in January, users have created some 6,000 charity badges, raising some \$740,000.

"When you're young and starting out, it's very difficult to take this meager paycheck you have and donate part of it to something else," says Samantha Millman, 26, of Los Angeles, who works for a real-estate investment firm.

Several months ago, Ms. Millman created a badge on behalf of Bet Tzedek -- the House of Justice, a legal-aid program in Los Angeles. "I basically blasted everyone I knew," says Ms. Millman, raising more than \$15,000 from 406 donors. "I was not only surprised by the dollar amount, but to have 400 people somehow hearing about this through word of mouth was phenomenal," she says, adding that many of the donations were for just \$10.

Bloggers are also pounding the drums for their favorite causes. Sarah D. Bunting, 34, who writes Tomato Nation, a culture and humor blog, offered to shave her head if her readers donated \$30,000 to DonorsChoose.org, a charity that allows contributors to directly purchase school supplies for needy classrooms. The funds were raised within days. (For a video of Ms. Bunting's head being shorn last year, go to www.tinyurl.com/32svqs.) DonorsChoose.org now features a "Blogger Challenge" on its site where bloggers compete to raise money among their readers.

Established charities, to be sure, have long had programs targeted to young donors, and many of them, especially health-related causes, have used peer-to-peer fund raising to help raise money, often in connection with races and other sporting events. But many of these charities either tend to target wealthier donors or are focused on occasional events, rather than on ongoing operations.

Charitable Connections

Younger people are increasingly turning to social-networking Web sites, blogs and other tools--including the ones listed below--to pool resources and promote their favorite causes.

Name	Comment
Apps.Facebook.com/causes	Popular new program on Facebook in which users create pages advocating various issues, charities and political candidates.
Change.org	Visitors can join "virtual foundations" of peers dedicated to specific causes.
DoSomething.org	Nonprofit which seeks to get young people more involved in social action.
Firstgiving.com	Provides online fundraising pages to raise money for favorite nonprofits.
GiveMeaning.com	People can list projects they are trying to raise money for, and visitors can contribute funds.
Impact.MySpace.com	MySpace's new "Impact" channel and awards, featuring nonprofits, social-action causes and political advocacy.
Kiva.org	Popular microfinance nonprofit allows visitors to make small zero-interest loans online to entrepreneurs in developing countries.
SixDegrees.org	Users can create "charity badges" listing their favorite causes and send them out to raise funds among their acquaintances.

Sources: WSJ research

Some of the newer Web-based nonprofits, such as DonorsChoose and Kiva, are attractive because contributors say they allow them to connect directly with their recipients. Donors or lenders can hand over money directly to, respectively, teachers and students in urban public schools or individual entrepreneurs in developing countries, rather than sending a check that ends up with an abstract recipient.

"You can donate money to a charity, but it seems like it just goes into a pile and you never know what really goes on there," says Mr. Alamo, the Kiva lender. "With Kiva, you just pick someone out and lend to them directly and watch what they do and how they succeed. That was the main appeal."

Kiva, which started in the fall of 2005, has already drawn more than 89,600 lenders who have lent \$10 million. Mr. Alamo's Kivafriends.org Web site has attracted about 600 members since it was launched in March.

Some older charities are grappling with how to best take advantage of social-networking sites. The Salvation Army, for instance, has had a MySpace profile for "Red Kettle," its online persona, since last year. But the site has only roughly 80 online "friends," or people who have linked to it. (By contrast, Kiva has some 7,000 online friends on MySpace.)

Melissa Temme, 28 years old, a Salvation Army spokeswoman who came up with the MySpace page, says that in order to be successful on social-networking sites, charities need to spend a lot of time updating content and communicating with members, which can be difficult for a stretched nonprofit staff. "There has to be a certain level of interaction with other people and their pages," she says.

In order to keep its online postings up-to-date, DoSomething.org, which seeks to get young people involved in social action, enlisted an Ohio University college student. "We're trying to use social networking as much as possible," says Aria Finger, 24, DoSomething's business development director. "We want to reach young people where they already are." The charity boasts roughly 5,500 MySpace friends and more than 2,200 on Facebook.

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