How Nonprofits Can Master AI and Social Platforms for Donor Engagement

Ben Murphy & Pam Ayers



In a recent article published by the **Rochester Business Journal**, Ben Murphy, Senior Advisor, and Pam Ayers, Executive Vice President of Strategic Initiatives at Empreinte Consulting, explore what responsible AI for nonprofits looks like in practice and how digital tools can strengthen donor engagement without replacing human connection.

In *How Nonprofits Can Master AI and Social Platforms for Donor Engagement*, Ben and Pam outline a disciplined approach to digital adoption, covering AI governance, staff literacy, and the value of choosing fewer platforms and using them well. The article also examines how segmented communication, authentic storytelling, and collective fundraising partnerships can deepen donor relationships, and offers practical guidance for leaders working through board hesitation around new technology.

The social sector has arrived at a critical evolutionary crossroads. Five years ago, digital tools like artificial intelligence were viewed as distant possibilities, while organizations relied heavily on human labor to draft content, track data, and execute administrative workflows. Today, the acceleration of digital adoption, paired with the ubiquity of accessible, low-cost tools like Canva, ChatGPT, and Notion, has given today's nonprofits more options for innovation and efficiency than ever before.

However, this rapid digital expansion occurs amidst an increasingly complex operational climate marked by changing donor perspectives, shifting post-pandemic foundation priorities, a tightening funding environment, and increasing societal need. To remain relevant and harness digital advancements to maximize community impact, modern nonprofits must look past the digital clatter and adopt a disciplined, value-driven framework for technology usage, audience engagement, and collaboration.

Navigating the AI Frontier: Trust, Governance, and Piloting

Artificial intelligence is an undeniably powerful tool, yet it introduces unique institutional risks, ranging from data confidentiality issues on Large Language Models (LLMs) to implicit algorithmic biases. The organizations leveraging AI most effectively treat it as a highly-skilled intern rather than a vending machine, meaning staff prompt their tools thoughtfully, review outputs critically, and strictly avoid a dehumanized "copy-paste" approach.

To successfully integrate AI without compromising operational integrity, leadership teams should center their strategy around four fundamental tenets:

- **Radical Transparency:** Donor trust can be remarkably fragile. Forward-thinking organizations maintain this trust by disclosing their AI use externally, such as adding a simple note like "This post was enhanced using Claude AI", even when not legally mandated.
- **Proactive Data Governance:** Data governance should be established before tools are integrated across teams. Organizations must explicitly define who owns the prompts, and mandate exactly what sensitive donor or client data is strictly prohibited from entering a public LLM.
- **Baseline Literacy:** Capacity building must come before the deployment of new software. Investing in baseline AI literacy across the entire staff, rather than just the Executive Director or communications lead, ensures that the whole team can actively participate in decisions around

use, flag potential risks, and contribute to shared innovation.

- **Intentional Piloting:** Avoid the urge to overhaul entire organizational systems at once. Instead, identify one or two low-risk administrative processes, such as drafting meeting summaries, generating initial donor acknowledgment letters, or outlining social media content, and pilot AI tools intentionally within those narrow bounds before attempting to scale.

Translating the Digital Landscape: Platform Intentionality

A common pitfall for nonprofits is platform fatigue: the exhausting belief that an organization must maintain an active presence across every digital channel. The remedy is intentionality; choosing to be excellent in fewer, highly strategic places. When mapping out a digital footprint, organizations should assign one clear purpose to each platform based on target demographics and concrete goals.

An organization's website serves as the foundational "home base" and brand hub; it must be mobile-optimized and rich with proof of impact, along with strong calls to action to convert traffic into support. Its audience includes a variety of stakeholders, including prospective donors, clients, and funders. Leadership should identify who the key target is for the website's purpose and tailor it there.

For outreach, email marketing remains the king of donor retention. It provides a direct, owned channel immune to tech changes, yielding the highest fundraising ROI for reaching existing donors, lapsed supporters, and active volunteers. For professional positioning, business-to-business communications, and credibility-building, LinkedIn is ideal for sharing mission impact and organizational developments directly with corporate sponsors, foundation funders, sector partners, and prospective board or executive leadership.

When connecting with younger generations, civic activists, and new volunteers or donors, Instagram & TikTok excel at high-engagement visual storytelling and awareness campaigns, prioritizing authentic short-form video content over polished graphics.

Finally, Text/SMS serves as a high-engagement, direct communication tool with dramatically higher open rates than email. Managed via tools like Virtuous, it is best reserved for event attendees, urgent campaign advocates, and direct service clients.

Beyond these channels, search engine optimization (SEO) remains a highly underutilized asset in the nonprofit space. Increasingly, an organization's digital footprint is being scoured constantly by generative AI search engines. Refinement of SEO strategies to accommodate bot detection is now necessary for elevated placement in AI search results. Through the Google Ad Grants program, eligible nonprofits can access up to $10,000 per month in free search advertising. When implemented strategically, this program functions as a powerful, cost-free SEO/SEM tool that positions the organization directly in front of warm audiences actively searching for relevant local services or regional causes to support.

Increasing Donor Engagement through Storytelling and Partnerships

Technology alone cannot solve the structural challenges of a crowded nonprofit landscape; true engagement requires a blend of digitally-optimized efficiency and human connection. Lasting donor engagement is fundamentally a volume and relevance challenge. To stand out, organizations would benefit from moving away from broad, generic broadcasts to focusing on deeply disciplined, segmented communications.

Utilizing Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tools, including platforms like Little Green Light, Raiser's Edge, or Salesforce NPSP, allows teams to segment their contact lists so that supporters only receive updates regarding the specific programs they care about. Executing this type of personal touch strategy ensures outreach remains highly relevant.

Further, raw human storytelling serves as the ultimate cure for donor disconnect. Data consistently proves that donors give to people, not abstract programs. Authenticity outperforms high-end production. For instance, a raw 30-to-60-second video shot on a smartphone featuring a program participant or a passionate staff member will consistently drive deeper digital engagement than a slick, overly polished corporate graphic. In this realm, technology should singularly support the delivery of the narrative, never replacing the human voice.

Finally, organizations can push back against funding constraints by embracing collective fundraising coalitions. When regional nonprofits come together to co-design programs or approach institutional foundations as a unified coalition, they drastically reduce the redundancy donors are experiencing, pool administrative overhead, and position themselves to win larger, more competitive grants.

Building Operational Foundations and Managing Leadership Hesitation

For an organization to safely thrive in a highly digitized and tech-connected environment, specific

operational and governance fundamentals must be established as a non-negotiable standard. This infrastructure includes clear, comprehensive cybersecurity protocols (such as multi-factor authentication, strong password requirements, and phishing training) as well as an explicit Acceptable Use Guidance Document or Policy that clearly governs how staff interact with third-party software and AI applications.

When introducing these technologies, executive staff frequently encounter resistance from cautious boards or risk-averse leadership teams. To navigate this skepticism constructively, leaders should focus on five core approaches:

1. **Validate the Caution.** Leadership reluctance is rarely irrational. Nonprofits operate under tight fiduciary duties, strict licensing/accreditation rules, and fickle funding constraints. Not to mention, the penalties for data breaches can be severe. Reframe the discussion away from tech resistance and treat it as an exercise in responsible governance.

2. **Lead with Mission, Not Features.** Avoid pitching software for the sake of its technical newness. Instead, frame the proposal around a core organizational problem: "How can we give our case managers more time with clients and less time on documentation?" Skeptical leaders respond to mission alignment, not tech reactivity and excitement.

3. **Co-Create Policies Early.** Bring critics into the governance process from day one. A board member who actively participates in drafting the organization's AI risk and disclosure guidelines is far more likely to champion the eventual adoption of the tool than one who feels a complex policy was handed to them as a foregone conclusion. Also, integrate guidance into existing policies rather than starting from scratch. For example, add AI protocol to the organization's existing technology and ethics policies, rather than developing new stand-alone AI policies from scratch.

4. **Highlight the Cost of Inaction.** Staying completely on the sidelines of digital advancement is not a neutral stance; it carries an active operational cost, and future opportunity loss. Delaying necessary tech adoption ultimately compromises staff capacity, hurts future funding competitiveness, and threatens long-term sustainability.

5. **Report Back on the Wins.** Boards are often engaged before an innovation is deployed. And, as their role is to protect the organization, often engage on the topic through a more risk-averse lens. But they rarely hear back on what became of the initiative, so it's important those same individuals receive updates on how the innovation is going, what the successes have been, and how their support helped moved the organization forward.

By centering digital adoption in shared organizational values, executing disciplined communication across targeted platforms, and honoring the irreplaceable power of human-to-human relationships, nonprofits can successfully leverage modern technology to expand their mission far into the future.

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