

## **Five Good Ideas about Web 2.0: Innovation in Action**

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I was asked to speak on Web 2.0, which to me is about social innovation and how change happens. I want to share my story, which is about successes and failures in social innovation after a decade spent in the trenches supporting social change organizations with the web – and changing along with the web. I will eventually get to Web 2.0 and my 5 Good Ideas, but I ask that first you follow me on my journey.

My company was started in 1993 to help support the environmental movement with new media tools. We built Greenpeace's very first website and did a lot of work for Environment Canada. But most of our clients were small, innovative organizations and companies that most of you have probably never heard of. In various ways they were trying to make the world a better place, much like you.

We survived the dot com boom and bust. We built a lot of websites, which was a lot of fun in the beginning. No one really knew what the web was, how to succeed or how to take advantage of it. We got a lot of business at that time.

But creating a business supporting social change was a struggle. We are a for-profit company and receive no philanthropic support, yet we donate a lot of our services and engage in many activities above and beyond what a normal business would do. So we've had to re-invent ourselves as a business four times or so. And I've had to re-invent myself as a leader too. It hasn't been easy, but I've learned a lot. So I hope to share some of that past learning and experience today and how it relates to the web.

But first I'd like to tell you what I learned about the social change sector through the daily practice of building around 400 websites over the years. And, why we've moved out of building websites, which I'll get into. So these were my observations of the social sector:

- It was publishing a *lot* of data! But data wasn't going to save the world.
- Many organizations didn't know who their audience was and were reluctant even to decide. They didn't know what the audience wanted, thought or needed. So they were struggling to meet that need.
- A lot of organizations were trying to do too many things at the same time, with few links between their different programs and services. I know this because I design Information Architecture for products and service mix, and find out what actual programs, services and staffing are behind each 'idea' of what an organization does. A business would never survive with half a dozen products, all different and half of them flailing, with little in common on a functional level.
- The people in non-profits were amazing: passionate, caring and visionary. But they were also often under-supported, under-trained, under-paid and over-worked. They were also likely to have more responsibility than their experience should permit. For example, you might find some-one with responsibility for a complicated communications budget with only a Master's degree in communications.
- It became apparent that not many people were actually visiting the websites we were building for organizations. There weren't many feedback loops helping us monitor the usage and popularity of the sites. We were just building, launching and then moving on.

- As a company, our work suffered. We weren't investing in our own innovation, or in developing our staff; we were doing things the way we had always done them. And the end results we were producing weren't having the impact we had once seen earlier in our history.

This all came to the fore about two years ago. I couldn't face building another website. What would it achieve? Here I was - a supposed social innovator, committed to changing the world, taking scarce money out of the social change sector and producing work that was neither of a high standard or particularly transformative. I wasn't sure it was even making an impact.

It was a dark time for me, but I had to face it. I considered killing off the company and even my identity as a CEO and social change leader. I had to realign myself with my own personal mission, and this meant taking time to ask questions of myself and others. I sought a lot of advice, support and help. In the end, I let it all go.

But happily, it came back! At the same time as Web 2.0 has re-invigorated the web sector - bringing it back to its roots - I've emerged re-energized and re-inspired, doing work in a new way. My practice is now mostly strategy – helping organizations plan and own websites, tools and campaigns that are living, breathing representatives of their whole organization to the outside world, that serve their mission and are sustainable, and have a chance for success.

I tell you this because what I've learned is to be successful, you have to ground first. Are you clear on who you are - your purpose, impact and stories? How do you prove that impact? Who do you serve and what do they need? What do you do better than anyone else (and how you can prove it)?

Web 2.0 has brought other exciting changes and questions: how to involve others in meaningful ways in your work and break down traditional barriers? How can the web help you listen and learn? And how can you work within an ecosystem of other organizations to achieve success that serves the whole?

Everything grows from that solid core. If it isn't there, I can't get involved. It's just another website, and it will likely fail.

So let's put all this back into a web 2.0 context. We live in a time of great change, great crisis, and great opportunity. We all feel these changes, yet surprisingly the traditional leaders in our society don't talk about them much. For the record, I'm an optimist on where this is all going.

While there are massive forces resisting change and keeping the current system intact, social change has moved from the margins to the mainstream. Mohammed Yunis won the Nobel prize; Fortune Magazine ran a major feature on social entrepreneurship; massive companies like Nike are starting to use their powers for good. There is a new focus on social innovation as a legitimate activity to promote, just like innovation in the business and especially technology sector.

There is so much new energy, new ideas, and new thinking going on! Which is good, because change is an all hands on deck thing, and let's face it, the way we've been doing things has not been working. Let's explore why:

- Attention is the new scarcity. Citizens are over-marketed to and there is too much choice for everything – from products to charities and services. They don't believe or

trust traditional institutions anymore and are seeking out new sources or information to learn about the world. And they don't listen as closely because they're tired of media spin and advertisements interrupting their lives.

- People expect more from our organizations. They want instant access and demand authentic, accurate up-to date information. They also want to control their interactions with organizations.
- People see more, particularly in terms of the interconnections between different issues. They believe that the world isn't getting better at the rate it should be. There is a process of democratization of knowledge and a general awakening to the need to get involved and make a difference.
- Citizens want to have impact. The old way of contributing, which was to send a check once a year to a charity and receive a newsletter recounting all the good work that's been carried out, is not enough anymore. People now want to get their hands dirty, get more involved and see measurable results. They want to make a difference but don't know how, and many of our organizations don't have ways of integrating their energy and ideas. Web 2.0 engages people who are looking for meaning and shows them the impact of their involvement
- They are seeking new models that approach problems in new ways. Our sectors are still rigid and separate, predictable. We need to respond with new models, new collaborations, and true cross-sectoral approaches.

It's time to re-create a culture in our sectors – whether business, private, social service, non-profit - of innovation, risk taking, and accepting failure in order to learn. Like I said where I was a few years back - many of us are stuck in a rut during the most important challenge of our lives, perhaps of our global history.

We don't know what to do, but it's a time to try anything. And recent research and success stories may point the way. So let's get back to how web tools, and underlying 'web thinking,' fit my optimism.

So why care about the web, much less 'the new web?' Basically every organization I worked with wanted to achieve more or less the same things:

- Reach more people
- Engage them in new ways
- Raise more funds
- Have impact on their mission

In the case of social service organizations, who aren't doing constituency building or fundraising, from what I gather you are looking to:

- Disseminate ideas and information better; getting them into the hands of those who can use them to produce better social outcomes
- Collaborate and share knowledge with peers more effectively
- Understand the changing world around you better and receive feedback on how you are doing
- Impact your social mission

What I've found is that web tools can help organizations and the people inside and outside them become more connected, collaborative, innovative, and more effective. I'll show you how.

Web 1.0 is publishing. This meant getting information out to more and more people and improving access to knowledge.

Web 2.0, however, is a conversation. At the core, this is the way that the average person can be re-connected into the work of improving our world. Some people are still trying to manipulate Web 2.0, as they did Web 1.0, by using it to push out more information and reach more people. Ultimately this will fail because a conversation has to be two-way.

#### Quick overview of Web 2.0 Tools

- Blogs: expressing and engaging. Blogs unlock the door to an insider's view of our organizations, their success and failures. Most blogs also give the reader an opportunity to respond.
- Rich Media: compelling storytelling. This is about using podcasts and video to tell stories and put out your message. It can be expensive but it doesn't have to be. Shooting a video and putting it on YouTube costs about a dollar.
- Social Networking / Facebook: building relationships and making connections
- Social Bookmarks and Wikis – knowledge sharing and collaborating
- RSS Feeds: staying connected
- Online Communities: tying it all together

There are some amazing stories of innovation and success. New models; new ideas; new people. Here are some examples:

- The Salvation Army website ([www.salvationarmy.ca](http://www.salvationarmy.ca)) provides genuine information and stories about real people. This kind of story telling makes their work engaging and accessible.
- Nabuur ([www.nabuur.com](http://www.nabuur.com)) is a concept that turns international development on its head. It connects the needs of communities in developing countries with the ideas, expertise and resources of volunteers all over the globe. It cuts out the 'middle man' i.e. the development agency, and puts the information and impact in the hands of individual people.
- The UN Foundation's Nothing but Nets campaign ([www.nothingbutnets.net](http://www.nothingbutnets.net)) is extremely participative and allows for compelling storytelling. The top posting on the site is from a young girl who has raised enough funds to buy several bed nets. Huge risk for UNF, and they are learning.
- In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina local people set up a Wiki/ Collaboration site aimed at sharing information, resources and getting help to people who needed it most.
- One social networking site ([www.think.mtv.com](http://www.think.mtv.com)) attempts to involve young people in social change issues. Their demographic is young people who would like to be more involved but haven't found their 'access point' just yet.

However, I must stress that you can't get these results with tools alone. The tools will help you but in order for them to be successful you really need to change the *culture* of your organization and the way you think. And you can't do this alone – older professionals, who tend to hold positions of power, need to incorporate the fresh, new ideas of younger professionals if they are avoid falling by the wayside.

So here's my best take on 'Web Thinking':

- Collaboration – inside organizations, among organizations and across sectors. This not an easy state to live but it can produce fantastic results.
- Transparency – being authentic, be real, be timely. You do not always have to present a polished, finished product to the outside world. Being upfront about difficulties and weakness makes you more vulnerable but it also makes you more real.
- Participation – engaging people (especially new people; i.e. not just the usual suspects) meaningfully in your work. One example of meaningful participation is a piece of research by the American Civil Liberties Union. Instead of employing external full-time researchers they simply asked their members to volunteer some of their time. The process was rewarding for participants and the results meaningful.
- Listening – being open, soliciting feedback, and being ready to hear what comes back. There's no point in engaging people if the final decision has already been made.

If you are not this, you can have all technology in the world and achieve little success. What I have found is that what works on the web is what works in living systems. The behaviours, techniques, and mindset behind the web are the same as those behind successful social change.

What can the social change sector do?

### **1. Stories Matter**

Speak passionately about the things that matter to you and give voice to those you serve. Tell your stories better, and if you can't, due to a lack of capacity or funding, partner with people who can.

- Balance your data with stories. Research has shown that people are more affected by stories than data.
- Get creative! Podcasts, videos and flash movies are all likely to grab the attention of your audience.
- Tell stories about solutions and impacts, not issues or your campaigns

### **2. Give to get.**

If your organization is serious about Web 2.0 it really has to be committed to the process and be prepared to make the investment, both in time and resources. A half-hearted attempt is bound to fail.

### **3. Let go of control**

Putting information into the public domain and inviting comment is a risk – and one that you need to be prepared to make. Whilst it is natural to want to mitigate the risk while maximizing the benefit, there will undoubtedly be a shift in power and control from your organization towards its audience and clients.

Collaborate, don't dominate the agenda. Ask for help. Trust that 'the people' have something useful to offer - you'll be amazed at the results.

- Be the change. Get your hands dirty. The only way to truly learn is to do. Be in your community, not apart from it. Don't be 'separate'.
- "This is not a good time for control freaks" – Eric Young

#### **4. Try new things and be radical.**

Be flexible in your approach and don't be afraid of failing – you will learn from your failures and move forwards. Likewise, don't expect perfection from others, especially at the first attempt.

Find a way to integrate new energy from different movements and sectors. Young people may have more ideas and enthusiasm for new technologies; likewise the corporate sector may be more advanced. So invite these people onboard and get some feedback and fresh opinions. Seek out those audiences who don't agree with you or don't get you. Their feedback is important information on how you can make your programs more relevant to their worlds.

#### **5. Execute Well**

Take it one step at a time and seek excellence in every thing you do. Don't profile every program you've ever offered – instead, promote what is working well and has the most energy.

- Bear in mind that the default state of most online communities is failure. So ensure that you are asking for help from others, engaging advisors and stakeholders and getting as much feedback as possible. Don't be afraid of negative feedback as this is likely to help you more than positive feedback.
- Trust that new sources of funding and support will emerge. Capital follows ideas, success and results.