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LinkedIn: Key Principles and Best Practices for Online Networking & Advocacy by Nonprofit Organizations

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LinkedIn:

Key Principles and Best Practices

for Online Networking & Advocacy by Nonprofit Organizations

A Leadership Action Project

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For

A Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership

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Abstract

This research investigated the question: *What are the key strategic principles and the best practices of using LinkedIn for online interactive engagement and networking that nonprofit advocacy organizations can utilize to bolster constituent activism in support of shared goals?* The methodology included a comprehensive literature review as well as a series of formal and informal conversations with thought leaders and practitioners of online advocacy. Analysis of research data provided the basis for recommendations and considerations for nonprofit organizations contemplating LinkedIn's potential value for advocacy and networking efforts. These principles, best practices, recommendations and considerations for using LinkedIn's networking toolset establish a framework for nonprofits to assess LinkedIn. The author recommends that advocacy organizations consider LinkedIn's capabilities in the context of their mission, goals, culture and constituents. Among the research findings is the conclusion that LinkedIn is an exceptional social media platform in a number of respects, including the comprehensive amount of data LinkedIn contains and the sophisticated tools LinkedIn provides to mine and refine that data. LinkedIn consequently enables advocacy organizations to map strategic relationships and to customize their interaction with various segments of their audience.

Keywords: activism, advocacy, engagement, LinkedIn, networking, nonprofit, relationships

Purpose of the Research

Nonprofit advocacy organizations depend on networking, relationships and participation to fuel their activities. Over the last decade or so, societal changes and the emergence of global connectivity through social media and Web 2.0 tools have opened up new dimensions to networking, relationships and participation for advocacy organizations. Of course, many advocacy organizations already integrate social media into their programs and activities, but LinkedIn currently tends to be used somewhat less than some other forms of social media.

The LinkedIn platform is structured on a foundation of networking, connections and information. This structure would seem to be a natural fit for advocacy work, but nonprofits have been slower to incorporate LinkedIn into their efforts than other social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

This research action project investigated the utility of LinkedIn for nonprofit advocacy work. The highlighted principles, practices and considerations presented herein are intended to provide a framework for individual nonprofits to assess the value of utilizing LinkedIn in their advocacy activities.

Researcher Premises and Biases

A premise of this research is that the ubiquity of Web 2.0 and other socio-cultural forces are inalterably modifying the way people interact, not just with each other, but also with organizations, networks, causes, and society as a whole. Even before the full blown development of Web 2.0, Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* documented changes in the nature of social interaction driven by technological and generational shifts (2000). Activist nonprofit organizations may be challenged to maintain their relevance in the social media world of Web 2.0, as affiliations with constituents grow increasingly expedient. Beth Kanter and Allison Fine state in *The Networked Nonprofit*, "We need nonprofit organizations, but we need them to become different, better, and more effective at engaging supporters and addressing social problems than they have been" (2010, p. 18).

At the same time, social media tools have broadened the reach and scope of networking to global proportions. Organizational networks and relationships can now be forged on a scale that was not previously practical.

Societal changes present both opportunities and challenges to nonprofit organizations seeking to unite people around shared interests and goals. Individual affiliations with organizations are becoming more transient. Sustaining activist-oriented nonprofit organizations may increasingly depend on establishing and maintaining interactive networks and relationships through actively engaging in listening conversations with their established supporters as well as with previously unconnected others whose interests are reflected in the organization's work. According to Putnam, "Many Americans continue to claim that we are 'members' of various organizations, but most Americans no longer spend much time in community organizations – we've stopped doing committee work, stopped serving as officers, and stopped going to meetings" (2000, pp. 63-64).

A general premise of this research is that building and sustaining interactive relationships to generate tangible activities that advance mutual interests is a goal of nonprofit advocacy organizations. In other words, mobilizing constituents is typically an essential component of advocacy campaigns. According to Diana Scearce of the Monitor Institute, "Tapping into network connections is becoming the norm for social change makers, whether they're mapping influential relationships for advocacy campaign, coordinating a protest to fight climate change or spreading on approach to community engagement" (2011, p. 11).

Constituents increasingly expect a variety of opportunities to interact and engage with organizations. A second premise of this research is that most nonprofit advocacy organizations are likely to benefit from utilizing some social media for interacting with constituents. Kanter and Fine defined *social media* as the "array of digital tools such as instant messaging, text messaging**,** blogs, videos, and social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace that are inexpensive and easy-to-use" (2010, p. 5).

For nonprofit leaders the issues addressed by this project relate to mission-critical strategies regarding how to optimize organizational relationships and networks. What kinds of relationships and networks does your organization want and need to accomplish its goals? How do social media in general and LinkedIn in particular fit into your engagement strategies? Are there distinct segments within your audience that your organization should tailor interactions with to align more closely with each segment's interests?

A third premise I brought to this project was a community organizer's intuition that LinkedIn's networking and relationship mapping tools could energize analysis of constituent data in order to identify and parse audience segments for targeting purposes in advocacy campaigns. For example, LinkedIn enables identifying and making professional connections to others via a matrix of demographic characteristics such as employers (past and present), educational institutions, locale (e.g., one or more metropolitan areas), job descriptions, skills, "affinity groups" (organized around professional and other interests), etc. LinkedIn also identifies potential connections for networking as "2nd Degree," "3rd Degree" and/or "Group" based on relationships to each user's direct connections ("1st Degree") and membership in

Groups. A primary interest as I designed this action project was investigating the potential for LinkedIn's relationship mapping tools to enable nonprofits to conduct sophisticated targeting and outreach to LinkedIn members who may share common interests with particular organizations or on issues.

Specifically, I believe nonprofit organizations and others stand to benefit from identification of key principles and best practices for LinkedIn's toolset by being able to bolster their relationships with their constituents through strategically rethinking and enhancing their avenues for constituent participation, networking and action. This action project identifies principles and best practices of online interactive engagement and networking for nonprofits as a means for deepening relationships with constituents.

By design, this research project focuses on LinkedIn specifically because I wanted to evaluate LinkedIn's unique capacities for networking and relationship mapping as potential advocacy tools. I believe LinkedIn is an underutilized resource. My research investigates how cause-oriented nonprofit organizations can effectively and realistically incorporate LinkedIn as a component of their larger strategies to promote and garner active participation by constituents and networks in pursuit of their public policy and social justice goals. I approached this project with the sense that LinkedIn might be a powerful complement to advocacy efforts rather than a stand-alone tool in its own right. In other words, I wanted to explore whether LinkedIn would add value to existing advocacy campaigns. I felt all along LinkedIn's use would have to be inseparably integrated into the overall communication, advocacy and engagement strategies of individual organizations to be most beneficial.

A report by the Monitor Institute, a leading think tank and a proponent for leveraging networks to catalyze social change on a large scale, points out the value in Web 2.0 relationship mapping tools:

> The development of affordable and user-friendly tools for data capture and social network analysis now allows us to visualize the previously invisible web of relationships between people and organizations. Social network maps can help to shift our mental models; seeing social networks helps us understand our connections to others in new ways and to take action based on that knowledge. (Scearce, Kasper, & Grant, 2009, p. 5)

When an organization connects with an individual it opens up the possibility of interacting not only with that one person, but with that person's 1^{st}, 2^{nd} and 3^{rd} degree network connections as well. LinkedIn's relationship mapping illuminates social, professional and academic connectivity for networking purposes.

From the outset of this project, I set out to identify organizational considerations for nonprofits that seek to gauge LinkedIn's potential value and practicality. I also sought to produce a "snapshot" of best LinkedIn practices related to interactive engagement in programmatic activities derived from the research findings. I dubbed these best practices a snapshot because applications of online media tools are ephemeral and born of situational circumstances. Practices continuously change and evolve, so my assessment reflects a fixed point in time – the first calendar quarter of 2012. The fleeting nature of applied social media practices led me to also search for key principles of effective online engagement and networking. Principles provide a more enduring foundation on which to experiment with innovative practices.

Integrity standards for academic research require me to disclose my personal interests, motivations and reasons for undertaking this action project. I have had a passion for community and political advocacy since first learning about this sort of work as an undergraduate studying with the late Paul Wellstone. I have been professionally involved ever since with community advocacy, social justice issues, and organizational change.

Most recently, I spent 23 years with the Minnesota Nurses Association in a variety of roles that included overseeing policy and political work, leading strategic planning efforts, managing technology and membership systems, carrying out research issues and corporations, and so forth. Prior to that, I was a community organizer for approximately 10 years.

My background and experiences led me to bring to this research an ardent interest in forms of populist participation that deepen interactive connections and that expand and connect networks of activists. I passionately believe in the power of action-oriented collective or community-based problem-solving approaches facilitated by nonprofit organizations to address issues of public policy and social justice.

I must also confess that prior to contemplating this research I had not kept up with all the enhancements LinkedIn has made in the last few years. Once I began to explore LinkedIn more closely, I very quickly began to wonder if the data, networking and relationship mapping tools might be suitable for advocacy purposes.

Finally, before and during this project a number of far-flung web-based movements that illustrate the extraordinary power and reach of social media advocacy have intrigued me. Examples include Arab Spring, the continuing political turmoil in Wisconsin, the Occupy Movement, the Susan G. Komen - Planned Parenthood fiasco, the Stop SOPA campaign, and the Kony 2012 effort. Each of these uprisings has been decentralized, participatory and grassroots oriented.

For all these reasons, I sensed this could be a relevant and timely research project. My intent with this project is to spur strategic thinking and practical applications by nonprofit advocacy organizations, their leaders, and their constituents as they co-create and coordinate their efforts to make change.

Analysis of Conceptual Context

Authentic Interactive Networking and Relationships

Interactive relationships provide a crucial concept for this project. Relationships are intrinsically interactive, so using the term “interactive” may seem redundant. I did so intentionally to highlight the two-way nature of relationships. Josh Leatherman underscores the primacy of relationships in his fittingly titled article “Essential rule #1: Social media is relational, not transactional” when he writes, “Authentic relationships are built on dialogue and mutual benefit” (Leatherman, 2011, Social media produces the highest return-on-relationship, and the lowest return-on-salesmanship section). Whether engaging with constituents online or in person, authentic human interactions are critical for productive relationships.

The literature uses an assortment of terms to describe the process of generating activism through relationships. Among these are engagement, mobilization, participation, conversation, networking and organizing. All these terms occur frequently in literature on political, labor and community organizing. Very often, they are used in conjunction with modifiers such as community or grassroots. When discussing social media specifically, virtual, online and web-based are also recurring modifiers.

For purposes of this project, *relationships* refer to interaction between nonprofit organizations and their constituents. I define *constituents* quite expansively to include any person, group or organization that shares common interests with the goals of a nonprofit organization. Constituents, sometimes used interchangeably with *audience* or *stakeholders*, take on a variety of forms, such as members, donors, volunteers, funders and coalition partners. A collection or aggregation of interactive relationships constitutes a *network*.

The World Wide Web and the 2.0 Paradigm

Another pervasive concept in this project was the term *Web 2.0*. Web 2.0 suggests a user-oriented Internet that is interactive and democratic with an open architecture that encourages participation. *The Nonprofit Marketing Guide* defines Web 2.0 as the "second generation of the World Wide Web, which includes many more tools for online conversation and collaboration (social media)" (Miller, 2010, p. 217). With open access to an array of Web 2.0 social media tools, virtually anyone today with a computer and a connection to the Internet can cast themselves as a journalist, a blogger, a photographer, a film, theater or music critic, and so on. Web 2.0 also enables anyone with passion for a cause to become an activist or an organizer. All of this is possible with or without direct formal associations with cause-oriented organizations.

Mansfield labels Web 2.0 *the Social Web*, as opposed to *the Static Web* or Web 1.0 (2012). Web 2.0 communications are omni-directional rather than unilateral. Web 2.0 means that almost any digital content or communication may be easily reiterated, ricocheted or repurposed through a plethora of communication channels and conceivably may appear before an almost infinite number of people. A simple discussion that begins between two or three people may evolve into a multi-faceted conversation among thousands. Web 2.0 interactions always carry the potential, and to a certain extent the risk, of taking on a life of their own and playing out across multiple networks and stages. This epitomizes the immense reach of Web 2.0 social media.

Web 1.0 generally refers to the earliest iterations of the Internet when it principally functioned as a one-way broadcast medium and content was closely guarded. Web 1.0 was cast in the style of classic print, radio and television outbound marketing and communication. By contrast, interactive dialogue, participation and decentralization characterize Web 2.0.

According to Li, Shirky and others, publisher Tim O'Reilly popularized the term Web 2.0 around 2004 (Li, 2011; Shirky, 2008). Just a few years later, the news media reported extensively on social media activism as a key component of Barack Obama's successful 2008 run for the Presidency (Aaker & Smith, 2010; Hickins, 2008; Miller, 2010). By 2011, President Obama conducted a series of online town hall meetings hosted respectively by social media giants Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn (Epstein, 2011).

The Obama Campaign became an early and highly visible adopter and innovator of social media activism. The campaign's efforts popularized and helped to crystallize core principles of Web 2.0 practices (Aaker & Smith, 2010; Cogburn & Espinoza-Vasquez, 2011; Delaney, 2009; Lutz, 2009). For example, Obama's campaign broadly dispersed information throughout a network of supportive activists and then empowered them to act on that information as they saw fit without the campaign imposing prescribed constraints. The Obama Campaign evidently placed great faith and confidence in the interactive relationships it had developed with its grassroots supporters.

The significance of this Web 2.0 approach is that when employing social media to foster activism, formal organizational structures may give way to autonomous aggregations of people who come together around a specific purpose or event. The Obama Campaign utilized a highly distributed model of activism. Old style rigid central control of message and activity are much less appropriate for engaging constituents in the Web 2.0 world. Strategic decision-makers need to grasp how fully fundamentally stakeholder interactions have evolved because of Web 2.0 generated changes in social behaviors. As stated in a Forbes article, “Whether you call it Web 2.0, the social Web or any other neologism, the new network economy is about communities, collaboration, peer production and user-generated content” (Ross, 2009).

The differentiation between 1.0 versus 2.0 provides an overarching frame of reference and a key paradigm for this research project. Lisa Graham-Peterson made a similar point in her Organizational Leadership thesis:

> We are told to look for transparency, authenticity, collaboration and participation. But also revealed is a lively dialogue that these themes are not limited to Web 2.0, but apply broadly across a whole new spectrum of 2.0’s – PR 2.0, Business 2.0, World 2.0 Deconstruct it down to its core: *We need to think differently about all of it.* And to focus attention only on the technology is like hearing every other word in a very important conversation. (2009, p. 52)

The paradigm based on this “new spectrum of 2.0’s” extends further still. Shama Hyder Kabani differentiates traditional marketing from online marketing in *The Zen of Social Media Marketing*. Kabani cites characteristics such as market domination, tight message control and pursuit of leads to traditional 1.0 marketing approaches. In contrast, social media marketing exemplifies attributes such as community creation, relinquishing tight message control and nurturing interactive relationships (2010, p. 34). The most contemporary marketing strategies have transformed from a singular focus on one-way dissemination channels such as print, radio and television to incorporate relational interactive channels such as computers and mobile phones. The 2.0 paradigm is apt here as well: *Marketing 1.0 versus Marketing 2.0*.

These 2.0 ideas are not entirely new. A hot topic of discussion in labor and community organizing circles for roughly three decades has revolved around the issues related to a *service model* versus an *organizing model* of advocacy. The service model emphasizes centralized control of resources and information in order to bestow services on the constituents of an organization. The organizing model exemplifies a more populist and participative approach in that it emphasizes distributed information and resources in order to shift skills, power and influence to the grassroots levels of an organization (Banks & Metzgar, 1989, pp. 47-54; Glass, 2002, p. 38). For labor organizations, this discussion frames a spectrum of *Unionism 1.0 versus Unionism 2.0* approaches.

A 2009 Monitor Institute report describes the use of social media to weave together networks that pursue shared interests as "working wikily." The authors posit characteristics of "openness, transparency, decentralized decision-making, and distributed action" to juxtapose "working wikily" with utilizing traditional organizational structures to organize and network (Scearce, et al., 2009, p. 1). Once again extending the 2.0 model, I characterize the Monitor Institute's working wikily differentiation as *Networking 1.0 versus Networking 2.0*.

Nonprofit 2.0 Organizations

Numerous social media thought leaders such as Diana Scearce, Beth Kanter, Allison Fine, Kivi Leroux Miller, Clay Shirky and Charlene Li suggest that nonprofit organizations need to actively undergo transformations analogous to changes the Internet and marketing have experienced (Kanter &

Fine, 2010; Li, 2011; Miller, 2010; Scearce, 2011; Shirky, 2008). This suggests a change model of intentional organizational metamorphosis from *Nonprofit 1.0 to Nonprofit 2.0*.

As the Web 2.0 toolset and networking capabilities continue to develop, organizations may need to evolve structurally and operationally into new forms that are less centralized and more closely resemble loose-knit webs or networks. Kanter, Fine, Scearce, Shirky and others point to several environmental, technological and social factors that they believe make adaptation and transformation by nonprofit organizations imperative.

The need for nonprofits to adapt to changes in social norms and behaviors is a popular refrain among social media thought leaders. Netcentric Campaigns, for instance, hosts the very informative Advocacy 2.0 wiki which says “increasingly group formation is taking place in the countless thousands of listservs, meetup groups, social network forums, and other groups that do not seek formal nonprofit status” (2009). This is also consistent with what Scearce labels *the network mindset* (2011; 2009). Maintaining vibrant individual affiliations is a growing concern for nonprofit organizations, as it is with institutions in general.

Kanter and Fine suggest that nonprofit organizations need to reconstitute themselves as *Networked Nonprofits* if they wish to thrive in a Web 2.0 world (Kanter & Fine, 2010). The authors provide the following Networked Nonprofit characteristics:

> Networked Nonprofits are simple and transparent organizations. They are easy for outsiders to get in and insiders to get out. They engage people in shaping and sharing their work in order to raise awareness of social issues, organize communities to provide services, or advocate for legislation….
>
> Networked Nonprofits don’t work harder or longer than other organizations, they work differently. They engage in conversations with people beyond their walls–lots of

> conversations–to build relationships that spread their work through the network. Incorporating relationship building as a core responsibility of all staffers fundamentally changes their to-do lists. Working this way is only possible because of the advent of social media. (2010, p. 3)

It would seem that social media help drive changes in the nature of organization-constituent relations, but also offer alternative forms of engagement and interaction.

The LinkedIn Platform

LinkedIn is just one of many social media platforms or toolsets that comprise the Web 2.0 cosmos. Philosophically and in practice, LinkedIn is more professionally oriented than Facebook. In fact, LinkedIn promotes itself as the *professional networking* social media platform. With that characterization in mind, the LinkedIn Corporation has steadily added features and functionality to its platform to make it far more than just an employment related networking tool.

The progress LinkedIn is making is readily apparent to observers of LinkedIn. Barbara Rozgonyi of WiredPRWorks says unequivocally, "We recommend LinkedIn as the foundational social network. Whether or not LinkedIn is where you spend most of your social media time, it may be the most important in terms of corporate social equity" (Tabaka, 2012).

As of June 2011, LinkedIn became the second largest social media platform after Facebook (Womack, 2011). Founded in 2003, LinkedIn has enjoyed unprecedented growth with new members signing on at a rate of two every second (Askanase, 2011b). At the end of the third quarter of 2011, LinkedIn recorded more than 85 million unique visitors to its website each month (LinkedIn Corporation, 2011). LinkedIn announced in February 2012 that it had surpassed 150 million users worldwide (Wasserman, 2012).

Still, LinkedIn is often narrowly pigeonholed as a single-purpose social media platform with the sole function of "linking" employment recruiters with potential candidates for hire. Well-informed social media, marketing and advocacy strategists increasingly utilize the LinkedIn platform for non-employment purposes such as networking, communication, marketing, engagement, and Customer Relationship Management (CRM). Smith describes LinkedIn's CRM functions in a manner consistent with state of the art communication, marketing and engagement theories: "The trick is to understand LinkedIn not as an all-encompassing marketing tool, but rather, as a customer relationship management tool…. The tenets of a good CRM system are open communications and efficient corporate responses. LinkedIn's discussion groups provide just that" (Smith, 2011).

There are indications that perceptions regarding the functionality have begun to shift. A recent survey of LinkedIn users found that 70.3% found *people searching and information gathering* useful, 58.4% found *company searching and related information gathering* useful, and 43.9% found *reviewing "who knows who" in your first degree network* was useful. (Breitbarth, 2012).

The LinkedIn Corporation demonstrated its strong interest in working with the nonprofit sector in May 2011 by forming LinkedIn Nonprofit Solutions under its LinkedIn for Good brand (Askanase, 2011b). The company also launched an official LinkedIn Group, Nonprofits in Success, on November 19, 2011. LinkedIn now employs staff dedicated to nonprofits interests and needs, and supports a nonprofit learning center "with great pointers, ideas and resources for maximizing a nonprofit's presence on the site. The learning center offers examples and best practices about how nonprofit professionals and nonprofit organizations can take advantage of LinkedIn" (Askanase, 2011b). Nonprofits can also take advantage of features like LinkedIn's Event module to promote and track RSVPs related to organizational events and gatherings.

Like any social media platform, users on LinkedIn have established informal cultural norms. Groups tend be largely self-policing. Users are able to flag posts for the curator's attention if they feel comments are inappropriate. It is acceptable to post to bolster your professional visibility, but content is expected to be relevant and substantive. Blatant market promotions and fishing for clients are widely deemed to be in poor taste within the LinkedIn user community.

Research Question and Methodology

Research Question

My leadership action project addressed the continuing interest that many nonprofit advocacy organizations have in actively engaging constituents and evaluated the extent to which LinkedIn can and should be an effective tool in the social media toolboxes of such organizations. The extent to which nonprofit organizations can utilize LinkedIn to make their advocacy efforts more effective is the foundational dimension of this leadership action project. The formal research question I posed was this: *What are the key strategic principles and the best practices of using LinkedIn for online interactive engagement and networking that nonprofit advocacy organizations can utilize to bolster constituent activism in support of shared goals?*

Methodology

This action project evaluated the utility of LinkedIn tools to bolster interactive networks and relationships in order to inspire more effective activism and increased participation of stakeholders and/or the public in nonprofit organizational activities. The focus on advocacy nonprofits stems from my own professional experience within that sector. I focused particularly on the advocacy efforts of nonprofit organizations that strive to address social justice issues in some fashion. Although nonprofit fundraising and development work were not a specific focus of this research, those functions did surface as another way that nonprofits might use LinkedIn.

I designed this project with cause or issue oriented nonprofits that seek social change through activism, engagement and advocacy specifically in mind, as opposed to nonprofits that solely concentrate on delivery of services. I did so in order to best isolate and assess the potential value of LinkedIn tools in direct relationship to advocacy efforts. This is not meant to suggest that non-advocacy organizations might not benefit from LinkedIn tools as well, but that issue was beyond the scope of this project.

To determine best general practices and principles, my research extended beyond the nonprofit sector to consider innovative applications from for-profit marketing firms and political campaigns as well as to explore uses from other settings that might be adaptable for application by nonprofits. Marketers in particular publish extensive material on interactive social media engagement.

I designed this project to assess the research question through two primary research methods:

- review of relevant literature, including online sources such as electronic journals and web logs (blogs)
- qualitative interviews with key thought leaders and a mix of selected practitioners

While not originally planned, a third productive method, personal communications, materialized as I conducted the research. I describe these methods and my rationale for employing them below.

Review of relevant literature.

I extensively reviewed relevant literature. Critical topics involved a combination of social media theories and practices, advocacy engagement by nonprofit organizations, and specific applications of the LinkedIn platform and toolset. Key terms that shaped the literature review included *activism, advocacy, conversation, crowdsourcing, engagement, relational marketing, networking, nonprofit, online, organizing, participation, relationships, Web 2.0* and *wikis*.

The literature review provided information to identify recurring themes and to compare and contrast commonalities and differences in the use of LinkedIn and other social media vehicles for advocacy purposes. The literature review also enabled me to further develop the theoretical underpinnings of interactive online networking and engagement as described in the Conceptual Context section of this report. The literature not only provided the design foundation for this research project, but also helped shape the project's analysis and findings. I conducted the bulk of the literature review in the early stages of the research, but continued monitoring the literature for significant developments throughout the project. Online sources proved especially helpful for tracking the latest developments.

Qualitative interviews: key thought leaders and practitioners.

I conducted interviews with a purposeful selection of key thought leaders and a cross-section of experienced practitioners regarding online networking, advocacy and engagement activities between January 27 and February 22, 2012. I selected interview subjects from one of two groupings: *Thought Leaders* and *Practitioners*. I sought interviews with subjects that provided expertise, experience and innovation with online activism and the key principles associated with social media marketing, advocacy and engagement. I utilized methods based on what King and Horrocks label *qualitative research interviews*, as well as *semi-structured interviews* as described by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill to plan and conduct the interviews (2010, pp. 1-3; 2009, p. 320). Using open-ended questions and a conversational style, I was able to discuss major topic areas with each interview participant.

With the permission of each subject, I created an audio recording of each interview. I supplemented the recording with handwritten notes I took using the interview tool (see Appendix A, Qualitative Interview Guide Tool) during the interviews. I offered each of the interview subjects an Executive Summary of the final research report. Beyond that, participants received neither direct benefits nor any kind of remuneration for participation in this study. Each interview subject waived a formal offer of anonymity in reporting the research findings. That is why they are identified in these findings. As a condition of participation, I agreed to destroy all original records and materials, including interview recordings, transcripts and notes within a year after the completion of the research report and presentation.

Thought leader interviews.

My primary focus in the Thought Leader interviews was to get their opinions and observations regarding core principles of online engagement and networking, as well as any examples they could cite of nonprofits utilizing best practices. The Thought Leader interviews were conducted by telephone as neither subject resided locally.

The first Thought Leader I interviewed was Diana Scearce of the Monitor Institute. Scearce is the primary author of several publications on networking, including *Catalyzing Networks for Social Change* and *Working Wikily* (Scearce, 2011; Scearce, Kasper, & Grant, 2010). Scearce works extensively with foundations and nonprofit organizations.

Unfortunately, two of the Thought Leader interviews I had scheduled, one with a representative of LinkedIn and another with a prominent author-blogger, did not ultimately take place.

The LinkedIn representative, however, was instrumental in arranging an interview with Larry Eason of DotOrgPower, who works with numerous nonprofit groups on advocacy campaigns and ballot initiatives. As it turned out, I would now classify Eason as both a Thought Leader and a leading user-practitioner of LinkedIn tools and strategies.

Practitioner interviews.

I conducted interviews with six practitioners who are using LinkedIn to varying degrees in their social media work. Four of those participants were staff members of Minnesota nonprofit organizations. In addition, I interviewed two curators of Minnesota-based Groups on LinkedIn. One of these Practitioner interviews was conducted by telephone while the others were conducted in person.

For the nonprofit interviews, I selected Minnesota organizations of varying size and activity by using LinkedIn's Company Search feature. For this purpose, I constructed a search using the industry criterion *Nonprofit Organization Management*, and the location criteria *Headquarters Only* combined with identified Minnesota areas to establish the universe of Minnesota-based nonprofit organizations. As of December 7, 2011, this search yielded a universe based on area and number of employees of 313 organizations as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Minnesota-based Nonprofit Organizations by Area and Employee Size, December 7, 2011

	Size: Number of Employees								
Areas in Minnesota	1-10	11-50	51-200	201-500	501-1000	1001-5000	5001-10,000	10,000+	TOTALS
Greater Minneapolis-St. Paul	132	91	46	12	4	5	0	0	290
St. Cloud	5	4	0	1	0	0	0	0	10
Duluth	2	5	0	2	0	0	0	0	9
Rochester	3	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
Totals	142	101	46	15	4	5	0	0	313
Percentage	45.4%	32.3%	14.7%	4.8%	1.3%	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%

A separate valuable search variable indicating nonprofit LinkedIn presence was the *number of followers* identified with each organization. Table 2 indicates number of followers in place of geographic area used in Table 1.

Table 2										
Minnesota-based Nonprofit Organizations by Employee Size and Number of Followers, December 7, 2011										
	Size: Number of Employees									
Number of Followers	1-10	11-50	51-200	201-500	501-1000	1001-5000	5001-10,000	10,000+	TOTALS	Percent
1-50	133	77	26	8	0	2	0	0	246	79.6%
51-100	3	15	7	3	1	0	0	0	29	9.4%
101-1000	2	9	13	4	3	3	0	0	34	11.0%
1001-5000	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
5000+	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%
Totals	138	101	46	15	4	5	0	0	309	100.0%
Percent	44.7%	32.7%	14.9%	4.9%	1.3%	1.6%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	

The matrices in Table 1 and Table 2 provided me with variables to select diverse nonprofits that had some organizational presence on LinkedIn.

I limited the universe of possible nonprofit interviews to Minnesota organizations that had at least 100 followers on LinkedIn. Although users may choose to follow organizations for any number of reasons, I hypothesized that the 100-follower threshold might indicate a more intentionally visible organizational presence on LinkedIn. As a final selection filter, I examined company profile information of each organization for indicators of advocacy activity.

LinkedIn's search capabilities provided insight into the level of Minnesota's nonprofit presence on the platform. Nevertheless, I encountered a few limitations in using those search tools for this purpose. Certain nonprofits – Minnesotans United for All Families and TakeAction Minnesota are two examples as of February 2012 – have not created LinkedIn Company Pages and do not appear in the search results above. Company profiles include fields for both *industry* and *type* in LinkedIn, but only the industry field is accessible for a company search. This is regrettable as every nonprofit organization I am aware of is classified as a *nonprofit* in the type field. An imperfect alternative search criterion is "Nonprofit Organization Management" in the industry field, but a number of nonprofits self-identify in other industry categories. Wellstone Action, for example, bears an industry classification of Political Organization. The flip side of this problem is that a few consulting firms that specialize in the nonprofit sector classify themselves in the Nonprofit Organization Management industry even though this category consists predominately of nonprofit organizations. Finally, the universe size fluctuates somewhat depending on which search criteria are employed. Note the difference in overall Minnesota totals in Tables 1 (313 nonprofits) and table 2 (309 nonprofits), for instance. This fluctuation may stem from incomplete records or values that fall outside the established ranges. Due to these factors, I am certain I failed to identify a certain number of Minnesota nonprofits with LinkedIn Company Pages.

Table 3 shows the Minnesota nonprofit advocacy organizations whose staff participated in interviews as well as the selection criteria data associated with their organizations.

Table 3
Minnesota-based Nonprofit Advocacy Organizations Selected for Interviews, January 15, 2012

Organization	**Size (number of employees)**	**Followers**	**Employees on LinkedIn**
Clean Water Action	51 - 100	281	144
Minnesota Council of Nonprofits	11 - 50	308	34
Wellstone Action	11 - 50	138	39

I conducted interviews with Sara McLoone, Grassroots Project Director with Clean Water Action; Jon Pratt, Executive Director, and Christine Durand, Communications and Marketing Director with the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits; and Sara Beth Mueller, Director of Communications and Marketing with Wellstone Action. I focused these interviews on the individual experiences, practices and views of the participants. Participant responses should therefore be considered personal opinion and do not necessarily reflect official organizational stances.

In addition to nonprofit organization leaders, I interviewed two curators of active Minnesota-based LinkedIn Groups. Lisa Hendrickson administers LinkedMinnesota, the largest Minnesota networking Group on LinkedIn with more than 22,000 members. Steve Braker curates multiple LinkedIn Groups, including the approximately 900-member Nonprofit Minnesota. I included Group curators for their LinkedIn expertise and the integral roles they play in promoting active engagement and networking within their Groups. I asked them to share their views on online engagement principles in general and which specific practices have successfully engaged people for them and which have not.

Interviews topics and analysis.

The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions organized into the following clusters:

- fundamental principles of online-oriented engagement and advocacy
- best practices for engaging constituents using Web 2.0/social media tools
- specific applications of the LinkedIn platform and toolset
- measures and evaluation criteria for online networking, engagement, participation and actions
- interview logistics and purpose of the research

See the interview tool in Appendix A for additional background information.

I analyzed the interviews by listening to the interview recordings to compile extensive notes. From those notes, I identified recurring ideas and themes. I then compared those ideas and themes with the content from the reviewed literature. I based this process on methodologies described in *Interviews in Qualitative Research* (King & Horrocks, 2010) and *Research Methods for Business Students* (Saunders, et al., 2009).

Personal communications: unplanned casual conversations and dialogue.

In addition to the originally planned data collection methods described above, during the course of this project I found myself engaging in impromptu casual conversations with numerous acquaintances regarding my research. Taken as whole, these conversations proved to be productive enough to reference them as an additional data source. These conversations led me to some of the more innovative practitioners and applications of LinkedIn. The personal communications enriched the overall project dataset.

The individuals who participated in these personal communications included a director of new media campaigns for a large labor union, a director of university and college alumni relations and development, and a few employees of peace and human rights organizations. I treated these conversations as "off the record," so with one exception I will keep their identities confidential.

I did, however, seek and receive permission from Donald Hale, the university alumni development officer, to disclose our discussion regarding some of his LinkedIn experiences and practices. Hale was an early innovator of LinkedIn networking and has actively integrated LinkedIn into his work since 2007. Hale initially used LinkedIn as Director of Alumni Relations and Development at the Rollins College Crummer Graduate School of Business in Winter Park, FL. In 2011, Hale became the Director of Gift Planning at the University of Central Florida in Orlando where he continues to utilize LinkedIn for alumni networking and development purposes.

Validity

As previously noted, I brought researcher biases to this project, as well as several premises. Foremost among these is the presumption that this action project would determine that

LinkedIn does indeed have utility for nonprofit advocacy organizations in engaging their constituents. To a certain extent, which principles are deemed *key* and which practices are deemed *best* are subjective matters of opinion. I analyzed the data for recurring patterns and themes, but it is unrealistic to expect unanimity regarding each of the research findings and conclusions. Additionally, each nonprofit organization, its culture, and its constituents are unique. The degree to which LinkedIn might therefore advance their particular goals will vary accordingly.

I based my interpretations and conclusions on a preponderance of my research evidence. I supported the validity and reliability of my findings and conclusions by employing several strategies and procedures suggested by Creswell and/or Maxwell (2009; 2005). These strategies and procedures are described below and include triangulation, comparison, respondent verification, negative or discrepant information, rich data and descriptions, and regular debriefings with my Research Advisor, Lisa Graham-Peterson.

Triangulation

Consistent themes and recurring patterns identified through varied sources and research methods will strengthened the validity of the findings.

Comparison

I analyzed and compared data within each method, as well as across methods for consistent themes and recurring patterns.

Respondent Verification

To avoid misinterpretation or misunderstanding of interview data, I shared exact quotes, summary information and conclusions directly derived from individual interviews with the subjects and in order to verify the information's accuracy.

Negative or Discrepant Information

I watched for and made special note throughout the research and data collection process of information, examples, concepts and opinions that run contrary to the prevailing views of thought leaders on specific topics and/or to my own beliefs, understandings and conclusions.

Rich Data and Descriptions

I recorded and took notes during interviews, compiled more extensive notes during repeated listens to interview recordings as soon as possible following each interview, and I thoroughly check audio recordings and notes to verify any direct quotes or data cited in the report for accuracy. I employed these procedures for purposes of both validity and reliability.

Research Advisor Debriefing

I met regularly with my Research Advisor, Lisa Graham-Peterson, to review and discuss the progress of the qualitative research for potential validity threats. Creswell labels this strategy "peer debriefing" (2009, p. 192).

Findings and Interpretation

The data I collected yielded remarkably consistent themes across the three research methods. This consistency allowed me to discern a set of overarching principles regarding effective networking and engagement for advocacy organizations. In addition, I analyzed the data to identify several best practices for utilizing LinkedIn in support of advocacy efforts. The examples of best practices simultaneously exemplify the key principles of networking and engagement as well.

The research illustrated ways in which LinkedIn's features and tools are useful for advocacy purposes. Particularly outstanding among the features of the LinkedIn platform are its repository of rich data and the tools it provides to mine and utilize these data for networking and advocacy.

Effective advocacy campaigns around issues, causes and candidates invariably involve bringing people together around shared interests, synergistically increasing the capacity, power and influence of disparate individuals. Connecting people is the soul of advocacy-based organizing or networking for change. Social media platforms provide the infrastructure and tools to extend webs of relationships and connections geometrically, if not exponentially, because many-to-many, or network-to-network, relationships become attainable.

I began this project with a focus on relationships between organizations and their constituents, in both an individual one-to-one dimension and a collective one-to-many dimension. Such relationships remain necessary for nonprofit advocacy and engagement, but it soon became clear that social media platforms such as LinkedIn open a third, relational dimension as well. Social media authority Brian Solis captured this expanded dimensionality of

Web 2.0 social media in his frequently cited definition: "Social Media is the democratization of information, transforming people from content readers into publishers. It is the shift from a broadcast mechanism, one-to-many, to a many-to-many model, rooted in conversations between authors, people, and peers" (Solis, 2010). In human terms, the many-to-many model allows for network-to-network connections on a scale difficult to imagine without Web 2.0 tools.

Solis' observation that social media open up the possibility of many-to-many relationships underscores the heart of social media's real value to nonprofit advocacy organizations. LinkedIn's ability to map extended relationships makes it extraordinarily useful in this regard.

As stated earlier, I came to this project with a community organizing and advocacy perspective that emphasizes bringing people together to take action in pursuit of common interests and goals. LinkedIn offers tremendous strategic value in extending the reach and "surface area" (Eason, 2011) of advocacy organizations beyond one-to-one and one-to-many relationships to also participate in many-to-many relationships. This capability makes LinkedIn a powerful base-building and organizing tool.

LinkedIn's networking power is a game changer for nonprofit organizations that rely on people power to propel their activities. LinkedIn is exceptionally strong among social media platforms for advocacy networking because its infrastructure enables network-to-network, or many-to-many, relationships. Strategically building new relationships with second and third degree connections using network mapping, as well as with the members of shared Groups, is feasible to an extent that would previously have been impractical.

Scearce described the value of network mapping as follows in *Catalyzing Networks for Social Change*: "Network maps can reveal current and potential network resources, providing important insight for all stakeholders into how a project might be organized to maximize existing assets and engage key stakeholders" (2011, p. 16).

Larry Eason pointed out that traditional organizing methods can now be applied in new ways using LinkedIn. "This is an enhancement of old-school networking. In fact, you need to really understand how to network effectively in order to really tap into LinkedIn. All the things you did before to deepen and build relationships you still do now." LinkedIn offers additional information and leverage for such work.

Marketing literature provided considerable insight regarding online networking and engagement. Relational marketing principles and practices of social marketing came up frequently in the interviews as well. Interview participants consistently emphasized the importance of relationship-based interactions for networking and engagement. Various Marketing 2.0 terms, including transactional versus relational, outbound versus inbound, and push versus pull were used to describe state of the art approaches to interactive engagement.

For the most part my research confirmed what I expected to find from the outset of this project. Nevertheless, the data did yield some results I had not anticipated.

I originally chose not to make nonprofit fundraising programs a core focus of this research, for example, because a largely separate and distinct body of literature exists on that topic. Fundraising applications of LinkedIn are undoubtedly viable, however, and can certainly be an integral component of advocacy work. Donald Hale's work provides a useful illustration. Hale has been an advocate for higher education by inviting private support from alumni and friends for students, faculty and programs for many years. Hale has made use of LinkedIn an integral part of his development work since 2007. As a leader of the Rollins College Masters Alumni Association, Hale developed an alumni group that includes a high percentage of graduates from that program. Alumni are active in several major cities and typically coordinate one or two gatherings or events per year in each of those metropolitan areas. Hale uses LinkedIn in similar ways in his current role with the University of Central Florida, the second largest university in the country.

My assumption regarding the 100-follower threshold used to identify nonprofits for interviews also did not necessarily correlate with a more active organizational presence on LinkedIn. The Minnesota Council of Nonprofits (MCN) hosts and manages a LinkedIn Group, also named the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, which includes more than 600 LinkedIn users. Beyond that, however, none of the three Minnesota nonprofits I interviewed were actively encouraging LinkedIn members to follow their organizations.

I found LinkedIn to be something of a social media genre-buster. LinkedIn is a social media platform, but its culture has a pronounced orientation toward professional and education-based networks. Highly frivolous posts are not kindly received on LinkedIn and clash with the norms of the platform. Individual profiles become intertwined and cross-linked with employer Company Pages as well as with educational institutions and with organizations at which they volunteer. Personal and professional interests are both present among LinkedIn's Groups. LinkedIn is a marriage of personal and organizational, social and professional, vocational and avocational. As the prevalence of Company Pages grows on LinkedIn, the lines separating personal and professional identities become something of a moving target. Organizations need to be attentive to the interplay between personal and professional personas when utilizing LinkedIn.

> It's very important to understand that on LinkedIn, there is no separation of the personal and professional. You use your personal profile both to build your personal brand and promote your nonprofit to the LinkedIn community. Your personal identity and your

nonprofit brand are inextricably combined inside the LinkedIn community. (Mansfield, 2012, p. 138)

Based on my data I now think of LinkedIn as the *relational database* of social media. Why? First and foremost, LinkedIn is about relationships. LinkedIn provides access to data on more than 160 million users, and these data can be searched, sorted, filtered and parsed with advanced data tools.

Databases are built on one-to-one and one-to-many relationships. Relational databases differ from flat-file databases in that they accommodate many-to-many relationships. As pointed out by social media guru Brian Solis, Web 2.0 shifts conversations from a "one-to-many, to a many-to-many model." LinkedIn provides great tools for revealing and building network-to-network relationships.

While my findings and recommendations focus primarily on the LinkedIn platform, any practical use of its toolset should be closely tied to the overall communication, social media and engagement goals of individual organizations.

Principles of online networking and engagement

The pervasiveness of the 2.0 paradigm described earlier was affirmed repeatedly by the research data. The 2.0 concepts of relational interactivity, attentiveness to audience or community, transparency and multi-channel networking proved to be ubiquitous throughout this research project even though those concepts were articulated in multiple ways. These concepts guided the identification of the core online networking and engagement principles.

The principles of online networking and engagement are for all practical purposes not much different from the principles of off-line networking and engagement. Building authentic interactive relationships, selflessly helping others, paying attention to others' needs and interests, and advancing shared goals by bringing people together are concepts proven over time to be productive for nonprofit organizations. While these core principles are not new, in recognition of applying them to online interactions, I give them 2.0 labels:

- 2.0 Relationships
- 2.0 Altruism
- 2.0 Communications
- 2.0 Organizing

2.0 Relationships.

The principle of 2.0 Relationships is based on being genuine, responsive, accessible and attentive in interactions with others. 2.0 Relationships are characterized by collaboration, co-creation, authenticity, openness and transparency. Relationships drive effective networking, engagement and advocacy. This means that advocacy nonprofits must embed 2.0 Relationships into their organizational cultures and operations.

LinkedIn data bolster 2.0 Relationships because the data provide knowledge about the backgrounds and interests of connections, followers and networks. In addition, LinkedIn offers various forms of interaction among network ecosystems.

2.0 Altruism.

A persistent theme in the research data was that the best way to initiate new online relationships was to extend help or advice to groups or other users. Eason believes the best way to build relationships is to "go help somebody." Harvey Mackay calls this the "golden rule of networking" and advises doing it with no expectation of reciprocity: "You must give without keeping score. No *quid pro quo*" (2012). 2.0 Altruism means offering assistance selflessly with a "pay it forward" mindset. While paying it forward should be done without expectation of payback, it can often lead in practice to further interaction and new connections if the advice or help proves to be useful. LinkedIn's founder Reid Hoffman echoes this point:

> Old-school networkers are transactional. They pursue relationships, thinking solely about what other people can do for them. Relationship builders, on the other hand, try to help others first. They don't keep score. And they prioritize high-quality relationships over a large number of connections. (Hoffman & Casnocha, 2012)

LinkedIn Answers as well as Group discussions offer opportunities to put the 2.0 Altruism principle into practice. It can also happen within existing connection networks by offering introductions between connections who do not already know each other, as well as by recommending organizations and individuals.

Maintaining a humble stance is advisable in online interactions as opposed to behaving in an overly self-centered fashion. Regardless of how virtuous an organization's cause may be, advocacy groups should remain cognizant that they are not the center of the universe.

2.0 Communications.

The prime rule of 2.0 Communications is to remember that online interaction is not about computers connecting with computers. 2.0 Communications consist of people connecting with people.

Being an attentive and empathetic listener is critical to authentic communication. References to people's needs, interests and values help build mutual trust and open the door to dialogue and conversation. Sara Beth Mueller of Wellstone Action pointed out the importance of connecting with people around shared values and interests. The more an organization gets to know its community or constituents, the greater the likelihood it can customize and tailor communication based on needs, interests and values of individuals or groups of like-minded individuals. This is why audience segmentation is a tenant of relational marketing and 2.0 Communications. Bullas states the benefits of audience segmentation as follows: “The art of successful communicating and engagement involves selecting the right audience and providing them with information and content that resonates with their needs and wants” (2012).

The necessity of integrating and layering online and off-line interactions through a variety of communication channels came up repeatedly in the interviews and in the literature. Building and maintaining authentic relationships and active networks should incorporate interaction through a number of channels, not the least of which is traditional forms of direct contact. Organizational goals, culture and resources should drive the choice of social media first and foremost rather than any “bells and whistles” a social media platform might offer. For online interaction, it is neither necessary nor advisable for organizations to utilize any of the available social media platforms without first articulating a clear purpose for doing so. “Begin with the problem you’re trying to solve and then identify tools that may help, not the other way around” (Scearce, et al., 2009, p. 13). Reiterating content and communication via multiple channels does however increase the likelihood of attracting attention and interaction.

2.0 Organizing.

The principle of 2.0 Organizing is based on the fundamental community organizing premise that advocacy organizations can increase their power, their influence and their resources through networking, connecting and base-building. This principle surfaced time after time in the research data. “In order to reap the benefit of social media, every nonprofit must put in its time building a base” (Durand & Cici, 2011). Kanter and Fine stated this premise very succinctly: “Social media power social networks for social change” (2010, p. 9). Scearce put it this way: “Tapping into network connections is becoming the norm for social change makers, whether they're mapping influential relationships for an advocacy campaign, coordinating a protest to fight climate change or spreading an approach to community engagement" (2011, p. 11). Eason observed that building organizational capacity in this way yields long-term benefits for advocacy organizations.

Many advocacy organizations devote resources to organizing, but global connectivity means that networks no longer need to be constrained by geographic proximity. For this reason, organizations are also able to take on issues of greater complexity by joining forces with other networks with compatible interests. In other words, organizations are truly able to think globally and act locally. As the Occupy movement has demonstrated, local activities can be staged simultaneously in locations around the world.

LinkedIn's value is not so much as tool to disseminate information to followers, connections and networks, but as a way to listen, learn and interact with followers, connections and networks. For that reason, it can be a powerful tool for building an organization's power and influence.

Applying 2.0 principles of networking and engagement effectively requires resources and organizational commitment regardless of whether the principles are being practiced online or offline. Professor of Communications & Social Media Tina McCorkindale offers organizations this advice:

> If you are going to be out there in the social media sphere, you need to be listening, you have to answer the questions people ask of you through social media. If issues or questions go unanswered, that breaks the relationship. If they can't manage the space, they really shouldn't be using the space. (Mielach, 2012)

LinkedIn: Mother Lode of Data and Information

The foundational aspect of LinkedIn for nonprofits to understand is the tremendous value that is inherent in the mother lode of data that resides within the platform. Most notably individual profiles, company information, LinkedIn Groups, connection information, LinkedIn Answers, and LinkedIn Today comprise a gold mine of information that is available to be mined. The value of much of the LinkedIn data is further enhanced because the data are updated on a regular basis.

The data in individual profiles on LinkedIn tend to be exceptionally rich and robust. LinkedIn reminds users quite persistently if they have incomplete profiles. Users maximize their opportunities for networking when they provide information about ties with workplaces and employers, educational institutions, volunteer activities, geographic areas, as well as their skills and interests. Professional employment information typically provides position titles, seniority or longevity, position descriptions and indications of advancement within a company. These data all figure prominently in LinkedIn's networking algorithms and search capabilities.

The amount of detailed information available through LinkedIn on companies or organizations is not only steadily growing, but it is also increasingly accessible. This is partly due to relatively new LinkedIn features such as Company Pages, company status updates, and "follow company" hyperlink buttons.

Like individual users, companies are sharing tremendous amounts of information about who they are and what they do. An especially powerful feature of each Company Page is that it includes a products and services tab that can be customized based on user demographics. Companies can create up to 30 variations of their products and services tab (Vaughn, 2012a). Which modification of that tab the user will see depends on the profile-based criteria the company has used to parse segments of its audience. Most users would view the default products and services tab, unless profile-based characteristics trigger a view of an alternate products and services tab.

In addition to their Company Pages, organizations are able to post status updates to LinkedIn. Such posts appear as network updates in the homepage stream for anyone who follows that company. Companies can configure LinkedIn's news module to post status updates automatically when the companies are featured in news reports. Similarly, companies can also automatically feed their blog posts to their LinkedIn status updates (Vaughn, 2011, 2012a).

As is the case with individual profiles, Company Pages can also feature recommendations or endorsements from supporters. With LinkedIn's *raison d'être* based on networks and connections, this "word of mouth" feature holds great potential value for organizations.

Creating events in LinkedIn is another way to interact with constituents. Individuals are able to get event details, indicate they plan to attend, or simply follow the event for information purposes.

LinkedIn also generates a statistical dashboard associated with every Company Page. The company dashboard includes employee statistics on job functions, years of experience, education levels and universities. Profile data of board members and volunteers may be included in "employee" statistics. This occurs because LinkedIn automatically links employees, as well as stakeholders or volunteers to a company when an individual indicates such an association in their profile. This is one way that individual profile data are co-mingled with company data in LinkedIn. As this is the case, it presents opportunities for organizations to publicly acknowledge or showcase key contributors or rock stars to their network connections and followers.

LinkedIn Groups contribute additional data to the LinkedIn mother lode. Groups afford users with opportunities to connect with other users they might not have contact with otherwise. Groups function somewhat like blogs or discussion boards. Conversations or discussions occur through posts and comments.

LinkedIn Groups generally organize around shared issues, professions or institutional affiliations based on employment, or education. As it does for Company Pages, LinkedIn generates a statistical dashboard for each of its Groups. Dashboard statistics provide aggregate information on the Group's composition, location, industry, and activities.

LinkedIn's individual profiles, Company Pages, and Group conversations are each valuable resources in their own right. LinkedIn further enriches its information repository by linking or "connecting the dots" between individuals and companies. This goes above and beyond the individual-to-individual and individual-to-group connections that LinkedIn also provides.

LinkedIn Answers allows users to post questions that any member can respond to in an open forum. LinkedIn Today is the platform's internal news and information stream. Users are able to customize this newsfeed to their particular tastes and interests based on topics, industries and sources.

The components just described collectively comprise the bulk of LinkedIn's data mother lode. A central finding of this research is that the potential value of LinkedIn's mother lode to advocacy organizations is extraordinary if organizations are willing to mine, prospect and act on the data that resides therein.

Data Mining and Prospecting Tools

LinkedIn provides a number of tools to help mine data. LinkedIn's toolset falls into three primary categories:

- searching, sorting, filtering and parsing data
- mapping connections and relationships
- scanning the environment or ecosystem for information

Data mining tools allow users to sift out relevant information and to discard data they do not need.

LinkedIn's search engine can be used to locate individuals, companies, groups, events, and answers. The advanced search engine adds compound filtering on multiple fields. Advanced searches can also be saved and may be configured to send updated results by e-mail to the user.

LinkedIn's mapping tools reveal relationships and interconnections within the LinkedIn ecosystem. Any individual user is likely to have a combination of 1^{st}, 2^{nd} and 3^{rd} degree individual connections, as well as company and Group relationships. The more networked individuals and organizations are on LinkedIn, the more mapping information will be accessible to them. This means the power of the mapping functions is proportional to the number of connections, followers and the overall size of the extended network.

> Based on sampled data, the average LinkedIn member has access to over 9,000 people via their 2^{nd} degree network. That represents, on average, access to opportunities and connections in over 6,000 companies and organizations in 130 industries via 2^{nd} degree connections that can be reached by an introduction. (Sharma, 2012)

Audience-specific content and interactions can be enhanced through audience parsing or segmentation. Aggregations of profile characteristics may be assembled into prototypes for this purpose that LinkedIn calls *personas*. Nonprofits that dedicate resources to analyzing their audience can customize communications and interactions by parsing their audience into segments based on common characteristics. Pollitt states the case for segmentation bluntly: “Campaigns which ignore this segmentation are destined to provide little, if any, return” (2011).

Audience segmentation can be achieved by studying user profiles individually or by identifying clusters that occur by location, employers, colleges and universities, LinkedIn Groups, and so forth. In April 2012, LinkedIn released an enhanced feature that allows companies to target updates to their followers by being able to “create hyper-focused follower lists – based on several targeting criteria, including Industry, Seniority, Job Function, Company Size, Non-company Employees, and Geography – to which they can deliver highly relevant content to increase engagement” (Finn, 2012; Vaughn, 2012b). Users are also able to cluster their connections by *tagging* user profiles to parse their contacts into clusters of their own design. Criteria-based algorithms are accessible on LinkedIn that enable customized content and advertising to appear to various audience segments as well.

> Effective relationship marketing relies heavily on information technologies such as computer databases that record customer’s tastes, price preferences, and lifestyles along with the increase of electronic communications. This technology helps companies become one-to-one marketers that gather customer specific information and provide individually customized goods and services. The firms target their marketing programs to appropriate groups, rather than relying on mass-marketing campaigns. Companies

who study their customers' preferences and react accordingly gain distinct competitive advantages. (Mir, 2009)

Finally, LinkedIn offers multiple tools for scanning the environment or ecosystem. The homepage feed for instance is triggered by status updates from individual connections and from companies followed. Belonging to Groups generates wall posts based on activities and discussions in that Group. Users can also opt to receive daily or weekly digest e-mail from each of their Groups.

The LinkedIn Today feed also appears on the main page or wall. Users are able to customize the feed according to preferred industries, sources and topics. Users can also set up LinkedIn Today to send them e-mail.

Transforming Raw Data into Advocacy Power

A key finding of this research is that advocacy organizations are able to use these tools to refine raw data in LinkedIn and convert it into actionable information. It is important to reiterate that the toolsets and features available to organizational LinkedIn users differ somewhat from those available to individual users. To optimize LinkedIn's value in advocacy work requires utilizing both user types.

Many nonprofits are interested in base building and cultivating new relationships. Diana Scearce refers to this as *network weaving* and Larry Eason dubs it *intentional networking* and refers to the value of adding to the "surface area" of network connections (Eason, 2011; Scearce, 2011). Many nonprofits simply refer to these activities as organizing.

Listening and learning are essential practices in building relationships and connections. LinkedIn provides 2.0 organizing tools for this purpose. Listening, learning and relationship building are possible through interactions and paying attention to individual posts, profile data, and connections. Roz Lemieux of Fission Strategy observes that social media provides criteria to focus on the most productive relationships:

> When you combine what you already know about a person -- for example they're a donor that lives in San Francisco and -- with what they're talking about on social media -- for example they're worried about climate change -- sometimes it turns out you only need to talk to 50 people or even 5, to get real-world results. (Lemieux, 2012)

Constituent-oriented nonprofits can deepen existing relationships with awareness of these data. They can also unearth new relationships among company followers and interactions within Groups.

Organizations may tailor customized content with any clusters they have tagged within their connections. Organizations can define criteria-based personas in order to trigger customized products and services tabs on their Company Page. Similarly, organizations can place persona-driven advertisements on LinkedIn. Utilizing LinkedIn advertisements means that a customized ad appears for any LinkedIn user that meets previously established persona criteria. Organizations adhere to advertising budgets by predetermining daily spending caps. In other words, advertisements stop appearing each day once the daily budget threshold is reached. Organizations may purchase LinkedIn advertisements on either a pay per click (PPC) method or a cost per thousand impressions (CPM) method.

Best practices using LinkedIn for advocacy

I struggled initially to discover organizations innovatively experimenting with how LinkedIn tools could enhance their work. I eventually identified several organizations using

LinkedIn to push the envelope with creative applications. All of these examples actually come from people I had not met before this project began. Fittingly, I connected to each of them through LinkedIn networking.

I should note that the nature of the LinkedIn platform means that best practices currently involve coordination of activities using both individual and organizational profiles. This is because the tools available to individuals vary somewhat from the tools available to organizations.

Best practices highlight the previously identified 2.0 principles. These include engaging in dialogue and conversation rather than simply one-way messaging. Best practices also tend to involve a layered mix of interactive channels including face-to-face connections. As with any web 2.0 communication, best practices utilize content that is substantive and to the extent reasonably possible, tailored to specific audience segments.

Advocacy via LinkedIn and other Web 2.0 channels should only be undertaken deliberately and with a clear sense of purpose and desired outcomes. Organizations should secure understanding and buy-in from their key stakeholders regarding the strategy and tactics they wish to use. Social media strategies are increasingly sophisticated and complex, so building a consensual foundation among stakeholders is critical.

The examples below highlight practices that might serve advocacy organizations well: base building and intentional networking, strategic and tactical relationship building, audience segmented targeting, integrating multiple communications channels and data sets, and evaluating success and failure. As is true with any method of community interaction, organizational goals, strategies, values and culture should align with the tools an organization employs in its campaigns. In other words, before using LinkedIn it is vital to have a clear purpose and a desired outcome that advance organizational goals and that fit the particular intended audience.

Intentional networking.

Nonprofit advocacy organizations frequently devote significant resources to expanding their base of support in order to increase their power and influence. This involves not just individuals, but aligning with compatible organizational partners as well. Diana Scearce speaks of this work as weaving networks, while Larry Eason refers to it as intentional networking. Just as it is advantageous to have a well-developed LinkedIn network for job searching or job recruiting, a strategically constructed network can also be invaluable in advocacy campaigns for influencing decision-makers.

Larry Eason is among the most innovative practitioners of advocacy using LinkedIn. Eason describes himself as an evangelist for the power of strategic networking to help organizations reach their goals. As president and founder of digital strategy and communications firm DotOrgPower, Eason works with organizational leaders to “increase their reach, access and influence through intentional networking.” Eason has worked with nonprofits and on ballot campaigns since 1984 and won the national Golden Dot Award for Best Statewide Internet Campaign for his work to pass California Proposition 63, the Mental Health Services Act.

Eason’s work exemplifies many LinkedIn best practices. Eason described the process he uses working with organizational stakeholders in a coordinated and deliberate fashion to build their base of connections through LinkedIn. This process begins with each stakeholder building up their own LinkedIn profiles. Especially during the initial network building stage, Eason says “there is lots of low hanging fruit to be had.”

It is important that these stakeholders fully grasp the purpose and potential organizational benefit of developing their profiles. “Once groups of people are connected to each other, the opportunity to coordinate resources and action increases exponentially” (Scearce, 2011, p. 8).

In addition to making connections on LinkedIn, the stakeholders also highlight their association with the organization by becoming followers and by indicating their roles as board members, volunteers, employees, donors, etc. in their LinkedIn profiles. All of this adds to their organization’s online presence and extends its network reach. Eason refers to this as expanding the “surface area” of an organization, a term Eason attributes to Tim O’Reilly (2011).

Nonprofits are also able to extend their surface area through showcasing organizational work, leadership, knowledge and proficiency. Status updates, Group conversations and LinkedIn Answers all provide forums for sharing knowledge and information. Leaders, volunteers, and staff can amplify and echo organizational or constituent communications from their own profiles (Askanase, 2011a; Corliss & Khavinson, 2012; Vaughn, 2011).

Identifying strategic and tactical connectivity.

Intentional networking goes beyond merely reaching out through LinkedIn to existing acquaintances. Eason works directly with organizational stakeholders to identify strategic potential connections from the perspective of the organization’s mission and goals. Eason draws on the collective knowledge of the stakeholder group by leading exercises that pinpoint key individuals and institutions with decision-making authority or influence related to the organization’s goals. The stakeholder group then brainstorms on how they might build connections to and network with those individuals and institutions. This process once again underscores the importance of mixing online tools with face-to-face interactions for building relationships and mining strategic data.

At this point in the process, LinkedIn's robust search tools and relationship mapping capabilities become exceptionally invaluable. Relationship mapping essentially answers the questions such as "who is connected to whom?" and "who is connected to which decision-makers?"

Nonprofit organizations can also demonstrate their expertise or "thought leadership" in their subject areas (Durham, 2012; Shaughnessy, 2011). "Social media allows both the creators and curators content to attain thought leadership simply by being active contributors and sharers of information. LinkedIn is no different" (Hubspot, 2012, p. 38).

Dave Gowel, CEO of RockTech and self-described "LinkedIn Jedi" describes LinkedIn as a relation filter:

> I think one of the key ways to think about it is really a relationship filter, that when you put in all the relationships that you already have, it allows you to see the ones that you could have more easily, or get information about potential ones. That's the real element of LinkedIn that I think is not really utilized. (Stanchak, 2012)

Advocacy groups can utilize LinkedIn's relationship mapping capacity for both intentional networking and for *powermapping*. Powermapping is a common community organizing technique similar to mind-mapping that identifies persons and institutions with decision-making authority and/or influence on particular issues. This is a portion of what political campaigns refer to as *opposition research*. Eason taps collective stakeholder knowledge as well as LinkedIn relationship data for advocacy purposes in his work with nonprofit organizations. Mining this data reveals associations and interconnections that are not otherwise readily apparent. LinkedIn's strength in revealing connections and relationships provides strategic and tactical information for planning advocacy campaigns.

According to Scearce:

> Social change makers and their constituencies, opponents and allies are all embedded in webs of connection. A first step in catalyzing a network is to better understand existing relationships, centers of power, intersecting issues and levers for change among all these parties. (2011, p. 14)

The use of tools such as stakeholder analysis and powermapping in advocacy campaigns certainly predates social media and Web 2.0. Revealing and understanding interconnections among the various stakeholders and interests arrayed around a particular issue, cause or candidate is standard procedure in many advocacy efforts. Eason cited an example of working through "friends of friends," using LinkedIn network connections, to rapidly win support from a city councilperson on a local issue.

Relationship analysis has both strategic and tactical value as it identifies decision-makers who possess power and authority to resolve problems. Stakeholder analysis and powermapping both consider proponents and opponents when assessing an issue. Most importantly, these tools identify persons and relationships that may have influence with critical decision-makers.

Unfortunately, there is no easy method to consolidate or overlay connection information from individual users to create a collective relationship map. Even so, LinkedIn does support importing and exporting of contact records. This makes it possible to consolidate collective connection information by exporting it into a database program. A reverse process is also possible. Organizational lists such as members, donors, volunteers, or even personal e-mail address books can be imported into LinkedIn. Depending on the extent and accuracy of the data imported, LinkedIn identifies who on the list has an existing LinkedIn profile and who does not.

An organization can easily invite anyone on the list with a LinkedIn account to connect at that point.

Eason is working with developers on software that can consolidate or “mash up” collective information from LinkedIn along with information from stakeholders and other sources to create an organizational “data vault.”

Audience segmented targeting.

A fundamental premise of 2.0 practices is “know thy audience” and interacting with them in a way that is cognizant of their values, interests, and connections. LinkedIn helps organizations know their constituents better. Because LinkedIn has database functionality, it has the capability of parsing or identifying constituent clusters or subgroups that share common interests or characteristics.

I mentioned earlier LinkedIn’s capabilities to target content and interaction to specific audience segments. This is possible by tagging contacts and establishing criteria-based personas for advertising or the products and services pages. Organizations can now also parse their Followers to provide customized status updates (Vaughn, 2012b). Status updates appear on an organization’s Company Page and appear in the feed of Followers as customized by personas. Customized products and services pages and advertising appears to any user matching the defined persona whether they are following an organization or not. Advertisements can be designed to reach new potential constituents.

A noteworthy example of this sort of targeting comes from the work of Donald Hale. Hale has used LinkedIn since 2007 to build dynamic alumni associations at two Florida educational institutions, Rollins College and the University of Central Florida. When Hale began this, he initially found that roughly 50% of Rollins MBA alumni had LinkedIn profiles.

Hale searched for and identified alumni, particularly those with executive leadership responsibilities, who had LinkedIn profiles. He then contacted them with a personalized invitation to connect on LinkedIn. Hale supplements his LinkedIn outreach with regular mail, e-mail, other social media, text messages, phone calls and live visits. The response Hale has gotten using this approach has been very enthusiastic.

As the alumni networks have grown, Hale has helped establish active alumni chapters in several major metropolitan areas. Hale works with these chapters to put on one or two events each year and often provides guest speakers or dignitaries to attend.

Hale calls LinkedIn a "game changer" because it allows him to follow how students are utilizing their education, to create aggregate profiles of the alumni population, and to identify individual professional success stories. Hale also finds LinkedIn valuable for tracking changes in people's individual e-mail addresses.

A different example of using LinkedIn personas for targeted communication involves an organizing campaign by a large national union. I spoke off the record with someone who directs online campaigns for this union. I learned that the union was considering an organizing campaign using targeted LinkedIn advertisements. The campaign strategy envisioned micro-targeting current and former employees of a particular multinational corporation within a defined geographic area. In addition to those criteria, the persona would be further refined by certain keywords appearing in job titles and position descriptions as a way to focus on specific employee classifications. The plan called for the union to work with LinkedIn's advertising department to refine the persona until the criteria produced a universe size the union wished to target for advertising. Once one or more personas were defined, advertisements would only display on pages of LinkedIn users who matched the specified persona characteristics. Using this advertising approach, the union would not have direct access to any individual profile data, but would have the ability to communicate directly with LinkedIn users matching the selection criteria.

Persona also allow for customized content on the products and services portion of an organization's Company Page. The Taproot Foundation is a nonprofit organization that makes business talent available to organizations working to improve society. As of this writing, Taproot has 2,570 followers and more than 800 employees on LinkedIn. Taproot rotates multiple banner images on its products and services page. Each banner image is a specific call to action that promotes one of the foundations programs, activities or events. Each image launches a distinct hyperlink with further information when clicked (Vaughn, 2012a, Product and Service Spotlight). As each product and services page may contain up to three rotating banner images and organizations may create up to 30 persona-based products and services pages, this is a powerful way to reach different audience segments using LinkedIn (Vaughn, 2012a, Products/Services Tab).

Assessing effects.

The final component of best practice is evaluating success and failure. Social media evaluation can be an elusive goal. Many authorities recommend a mix of quantitative and qualitative assessments for nonprofit evaluations because available quantitative metrics may not adequately capture the data necessary to gauge interaction and engagement (Paine, 2011, p. 15; Scearce, 2011, pp. 21-23; Schaefer, 2010; Verma, 2012). "There are two types of metrics you can measure on LinkedIn: *qualitative measurements* and *quantitative measurements*. The former is usually associated with the quality of your engagement, while the latter typically refers to numbers" (von Rosen, 2012).

Albert Einstein's cautionary advice is apropos: "Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted" (Johnson, 2012). "The most important thing to remember about any measurement program is that you become what you measure. Therefore, you want to define metrics that will help you become what you want to become" (Paine, 2011, p. 197).

Whatever an organization's desired outcomes might be, they need to be linked to organizational goals. Paine and Oien both point out that the ultimate purpose for using social media to have conversations and build relationships is to advance an organization's mission, causes or issues (2012; 2011, p. 197). Foley makes a similar observation: "Deciding how to measure your social media efforts can be a challenging undertaking. Number of likes? Number of followers? Level of engagement? Which measures are right for you? Believe it or not, these measures are virtually meaningless. In fact, all measures are meaningless — unless they are tied to your goals" (Foley, 2012).

Paine encourages nonprofits to develop measures of the nature and efficacy of organizational relationships (Paine, 2011, p. 191). Strong constituent recommendations would be a qualitative indicator appropriate for LinkedIn.

Kaushik suggests some quantitative metrics such as these may be helpful:

- Conversations: Do your posts connect with your audience? (Number of comments/replies per post)
- Amplification: How often is your content being passed along? (Number of retweets/shares per post)
- Applause: What does your audience like? (Number of favorites/likes per post)

(Oien, 2012).

The number of LinkedIn followers or "likes" an organization has offers a prime example of a measure that may have limited value. "Instead of organizations trying to superficially push these relationships and superficially push 'likes,' they really need to understand the audience, build the relationship and engage the audience" (Mielach, 2012). Several Minnesota nonprofits with more than 100 followers indicated their organizations did little to actively encourage users to follow them. So what do a relatively high number of followers actually tell us? Followers can range from strong organizational supporters to job seekers to sales people and to competitors.

MCN's Durand described the difficulty of assessing social media effectiveness during our interview:

> It's not just about growing those numbers, but it's about to what end. If it is in advocacy or fundraising, you set those measurable goals and try to tie results back to what you doing on those tools. And it is hard. It is really hard because those tools weren't set up and those measures aren't set up to equate to those. And in this world, we are all talking in a lot of different ways. (January 30, 2012)

This evaluation issue underscores the need for organizations to establish clear goals and desired outcomes from the use of social media platforms such as LinkedIn. If desired outcomes relate to engagement, interaction and online presence, it is best to utilize both quantitative and qualitative measures. In "Personalization: A key tenet of user engagement," Verma states this has the dual benefit of increasing an organization's understanding of its audience members:

> User engagement involves a mixture of quantitative and qualitative analysis. Quantitative analysis offers useful patterns and is generally more scalable and easier to conduct. User engagement also involves contextual study and ethnography. These

> provide information about people, but their routines are in daily life and what their needs are for which they visited the electronic website, physical store or workplace. (2012)

Scearce echoes Mr. Einstein in suggesting a mix of assessment types: "Many significant changes can't be measured immediately or in quantitative terms, and what can be measured may not always be what's most important. Instead, focus on how network participants and projects are contributing toward long-term aspirations" (2011, p. 23). Scearce also recommends that organizations set up feedback loops so that they can continuously monitor and learn from what activities produce the most desired responses (2011, p. 21).

Schaefer points out the need for appropriate qualitative assessment techniques:

> When you're struggling to measure the value of social media marketing in your company don't overlook the possibility of using qualitative stories from customers, employees and other stakeholders. They might be showing up every day in comments, reviews, and customer meetings. (2010)

In short, quantitative metrics are fine for as far as they go, but they generally do not completely reflect how well your organization is networking and engaging. Qualitative assessments help complete the evaluation picture.

Awareness gap.

The nonprofit interviews indicated that something of an awareness gap exists regarding LinkedIn's potential utility for advocacy work. Although there are some indications that awareness of LinkedIn is growing, recent enhancements and features added to the LinkedIn platform have not always landed prominently on nonprofit radars. A recent survey comparing LinkedIn use by nonprofits to use by small businesses indicates small businesses make greater use of LinkedIn. The percentages of small businesses using LinkedIn as a research database and to get introductions is roughly double the percentage for nonprofits (Halpert, Semple, & Stengel, 2012).

Christine Durand stated that MCN had determined a few years ago that other social media platforms seem to fit their particular audience better than LinkedIn:

> Of all the tools we invest less time in LinkedIn than the other tools that we are on. It is actually a little surprising because we are a professional association. You would think a tool that connects professionals would actually be a natural place for us. We did some evaluation of our audience several years ago and found that people weren't really connecting with us and they weren't expecting us there. They did not see LinkedIn as a place to connect with each other that much. Somewhat - but not as much as other places.

Durand and the other nonprofit interviewees all expressed great interest in learning more about tools and features that LinkedIn has added in the last one to two years. All of them confided that they might not have kept abreast of LinkedIn's latest platform developments. Nevertheless, as Mansfield points out, MCN's initial experience with LinkedIn may not be unusual among nonprofits:

> LinkedIn is a powerhouse in ROI [Return on Investment]. Unfortunately, most nonprofits that dabbled with LinkedIn groups in the early years did so incorrectly and abandoned their groups much too soon. Those that stuck around are beginning to reap the rewards of early adoption. (2012, p. 56)

This awareness gap may be attributable in part to LinkedIn making its name initially as a primarily employment related platform. Whatever the case, LinkedIn has steadily added members and features in recent years.

How-to advice and examples are readily available if organizations are purposeful in seeking out the information they need. Even so, a recent survey of LinkedIn users indicated

64.5% would improve their effectiveness if they understood the ways in which advanced users are using LinkedIn. Another 63.9% responded that developing a specific strategic plan for how to actually use LinkedIn would improve their effectiveness (Breitbarth, 2012).

Awareness and usage of LinkedIn by nonprofits may be on the upswing. As previously stated, LinkedIn now has a division to support nonprofit use of the platform. The 2012 Nonprofit Social Networking Report, released in early April, reported the percentage of nonprofits using LinkedIn increased from 30 percent in 2011 to 44 percent in 2012 (Common Knowledge, Nonprofit Technology Network, & Blackbaud, 2012).

Cautions.

As with any use of social media, organizations should be aware of potential risks. Nonprofits should be mindful of legal issues related to advocacy that supports specific legislation and/or endorses political candidates. Inconsistent or obsolete online content may tarnish an organization's reputation. Organizations may need to police inappropriate comments or behavior associated with their online presence. The possibility exists that certain posts or discussions may be perceived as controversial, divisive or offensive to some members of their audience. This includes official organizational posts, employees posting from their personal profiles, and posts from the public.

Because personal and organizational profiles tend to be entwined, organizations need to transparently address how personal and professional boundaries will be managed and incorporated into the culture of each organization. This raises an issue that warrants further research as companies expand their online presence and employees increasingly have responsibilities for posting to blogs and social media sites.

Because so much LinkedIn data is publically accessible, organizations may find their leaders, constituents and staff being "headhunted" by other organizations. Some users may perceive systematic analysis of profile data to be an intrusive Big Brother-like invasion of privacy. While one might assume that users are fully aware that they are making their profile information publically accessible, organizations are still well advised to be respectful in how they analyze profile data.

Even "free" social media like LinkedIn require commitment and resources to add value to organizational work. This means organizations should factor in opportunity costs associated with any such resources when contemplating the use of social media in their campaigns. As with other networking and engagement efforts, what an organization gets out of LinkedIn is proportional to what it puts in.

Visual conceptualization.

After completing the literature review, interviews and conversations on LinkedIn, I developed a visual conceptualization of my findings:

The foundation of LinkedIn is what I call the *mother lode*, which is comprised of the vast amount of information that LinkedIn brings together (see Figure 1). This includes rich individual and company profile data, information about connections and relationships, as well as other information such as status updates, posts and news items. The depth of information in LinkedIn is unique among social media platforms.

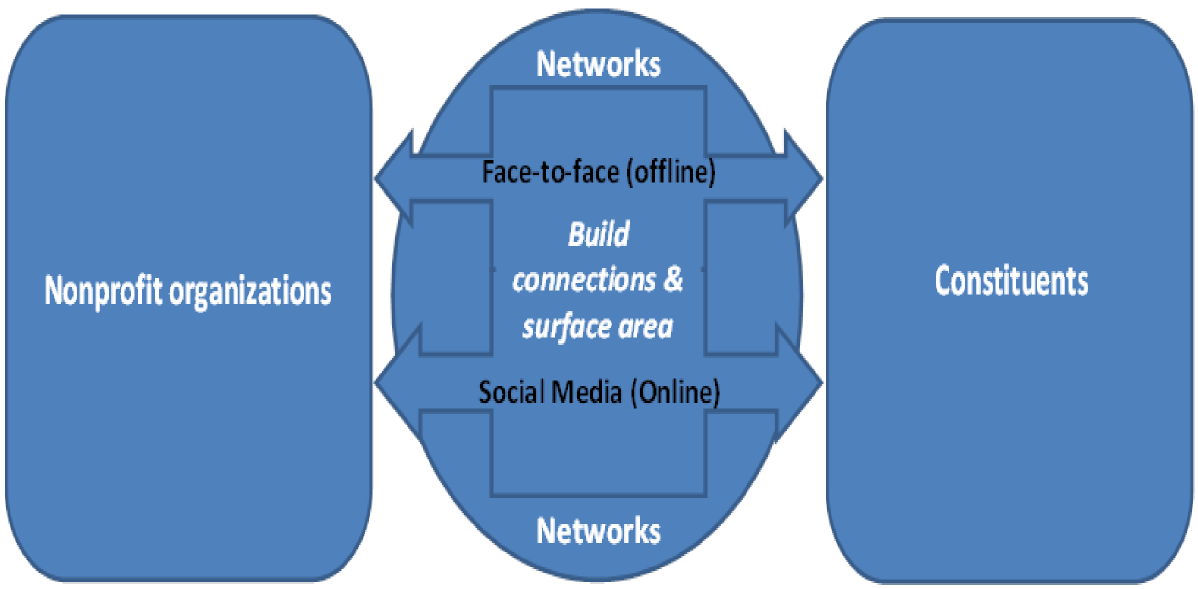
Figure 1. Mother Lode

To make all this raw information and data more useful and accessible, LinkedIn provides powerful *data mining tools* as shown in Figure 2. These tools include sophisticated searching, sorting, filtering and parsing capabilities. Relationship mapping essentially reveals who knows whom, and the LinkedIn platform offers various communication tools for listening, learning and building stronger relationships.

Figure 2. Data Mining Tools

Figure 3 represents nonprofit organizations, their constituents, and the networks and interactions that tie them together. The relationships between organizations and constituents should not occur solely online, but should include a mixture of channels for interaction, including direct person-to-person contact. This organizational-constituent relationship dynamic should vary and change depending on circumstances and the nature of the audience involved.

Figure 3. Interactive Relationships – Organizations and Constituents



Finally, Figure 4 illustrates that as organizations move into action stages of campaigns, LinkedIn's powermapping and analytical tools can again be invaluable. Organizations that have engaged in intentional networking and building their surface area can look again for opportunities for new connections that advance their campaigns. Advocacy organizations can also target and analyze key decision-makers for these action stages to identify trusted connections and others with influence on each critical decision-maker.

Figure 4. LinkedIn Powermapping and Analytical Tools for Action

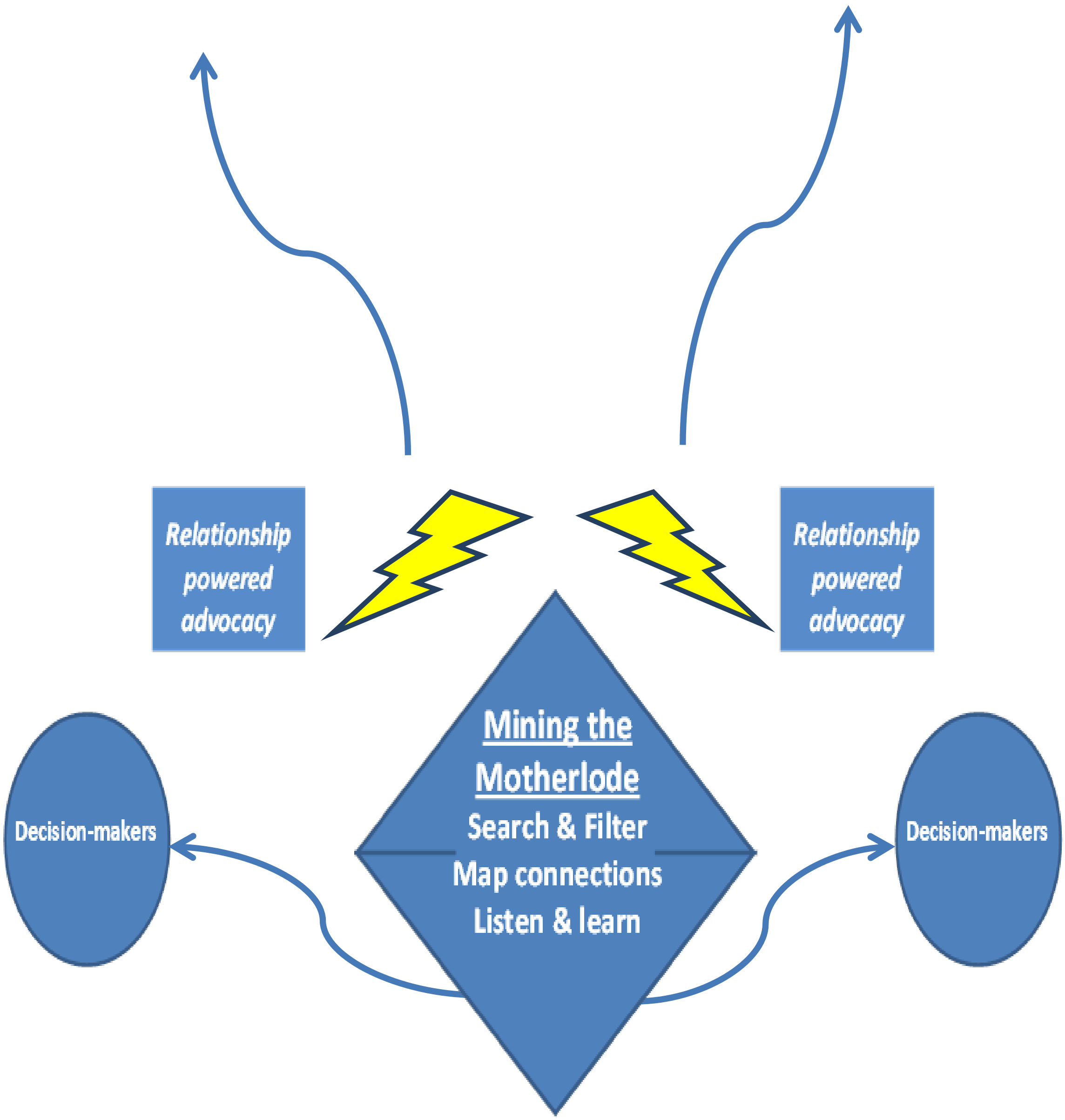
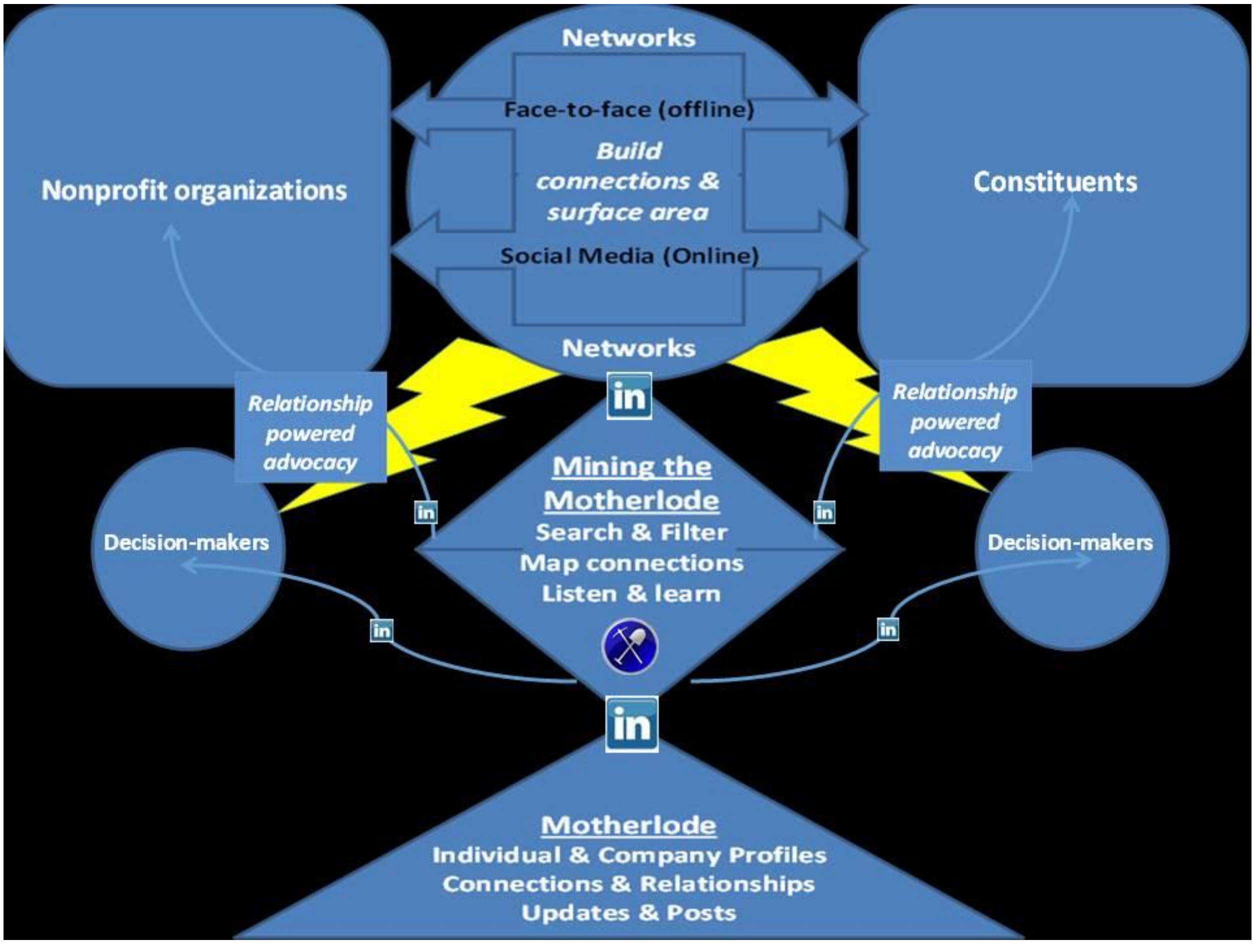


Figure 5 represents the entire visual conceptualization of LinkedIn for advocacy and networking.

Figure 5. LinkedIn for Advocacy and Networking



My original thought in developing this project was to examine how effective LinkedIn is for this organizational – constituent relational interaction and engagement process. Following research and analysis, I have concluded that in this specific regard LinkedIn is no more and no less effective than any number of other forms of social interaction and engagement. Any decision to use LinkedIn for ongoing interaction or to marshal constituent action depends largely on which communication channels will reach the intended audience most persuasively. Contrary to my preliminary presumption, the bottom two thirds of this diagram (the mother lode, the data mining tools and the relationship analytics) illustrate the truly exceptional components of LinkedIn for nonprofit advocacy and networking.

Summary and Recommendations

LinkedIn's infrastructure, data and features make it distinct, if not unique, among social media platforms. What Larry Eason terms the "mash up" of profile, company, industry and professional information compiled by LinkedIn constitutes a fertile mother lode of data. LinkedIn tools enable users to mine and utilize data to support advocacy efforts. LinkedIn enables far-reaching networking and reveals connections and relationships that might not otherwise be perceptible.

LinkedIn is a powerhouse for building connections, relationships and networks. This is where LinkedIn distinguishes itself from other social media platforms more commonly utilized by nonprofit advocacy organizations.

By intent and design, LinkedIn facilitates making new connections. These connections can of course be one-to-one, but because networks become more apparent on LinkedIn, new connections can also be one-to-many or many-to-many. This increases an organization's potential for networking geometrically, if not exponentially. LinkedIn's structure of connectivity transforms a two-dimensional networking playing field into a 3-D universe. Eason makes this case by pointing out it is not just individuals connecting, but also networks connecting with networks. Scearce describes utilizing a network mindset, "Working with a network mindset means *operating with an awareness of the webs of relationships you are embedded in*. It also means cultivating these relationships to achieve the impact you care about" (Scearce, 2011, p. 10).

Without question, nonprofit advocacy organizations can utilize LinkedIn in a number of ways to bolster their efforts to advance social change. LinkedIn is a repository of rich data and the platform provides various tools to mine and utilize these data in advocacy campaigns. Of course, it is essential that organizations have clearly thought-out goals, expectations and rationale for applying LinkedIn tools to their efforts.

As expected, my research enabled me to identify key strategic principles and some best practices of using LinkedIn for online interactive networking and engagement. I focused on current practices as well as the underlying principles of online engagement. The research indicated that nonprofit advocacy organizations can utilize LinkedIn to strengthen constituent activism and personalize interactions in support of shared goals. Additionally, the capacity to map relationships, connections and networks has tremendous strategic and tactical value for advocacy efforts.

Key principles of online networking and engagement are 2.0 versions of relationships, altruism, communications and organizing. These principles collectively exhibit characteristics of community, participation, distributed action, collaboration, transparency, responsiveness, populism, and magnanimity. Authentic human relationships are the heart of effective advocacy work.

This action project depicts best practices and applications that demonstrate successful uses of LinkedIn for nonprofit purposes. Practical applications documented in this report include intentional networking, identification of strategic and tactical connectivity; audience segmented targeting for communication and interaction, and assessment practices. These examples do not constitute an exhaustive list of practices, but rather to offer a glimpse of what is possible with LinkedIn.

Nonprofit organizations can utilize LinkedIn to become more familiar with their constituents. This LinkedIn capability holds great value for organizations that are committed to authentic constituent relationships. Among other features, LinkedIn's tools can certainly assist with development of customized audience-specific targeted communication and content.

LinkedIn's strategic analysis and networking tools can be effective for nonprofit purposes other than pure advocacy as well. As Donald Hale's alumni work illustrates, many nonprofits could expand their donor base or stakeholder network using LinkedIn. Networking for membership growth is another logical use of the LinkedIn platform.

Relationship-building and maintenance are not one-dimensional activities. No one-size-fits-all approach exists for relationship work. LinkedIn is one of many channels to build and nurture interactive relationships and networks. Most organizations will benefit from utilizing a layered mix of interaction channels based on their understanding of the segments with their audience. LinkedIn offers a more "no nonsense" environment than other channels such as Facebook or YouTube. Which social media vehicle to utilize in any given situation ultimately depends on the circumstances and on being a good fit for the intended audience.

Beyond already noted capabilities, LinkedIn provides a powerful but perhaps not exceptional engagement tool in terms of maintaining ongoing interactive relationships and mobilizing people to take action. In other words, LinkedIn provides tools for interaction that are comparable to Facebook, Twitter, web logs, and even email. Organizations that know and understand their audiences may determine that LinkedIn may or may not be the best final communication channel for catalyzing action, or it may be one of several. LinkedIn may not be the be-all and end-all tool for all audiences and all purposes. Organizations need to understand the situations, circumstances and audiences best suited for LinkedIn.

The evolving nature of organizational communications, relationships and networking suggests that many organizations could bolster their interactive relationships using various social media and using LinkedIn networking in particular. The literature presents a compelling case regarding the need for nonprofits to respond to fundamental shifts in the way constituents engage in today's world. The research suggests not so much an abandonment of old ways of interacting but rather a strategic extension to relationship management in response to changes in the culture and environment. 2.0 methods ideally supplement rather than replace 1.0 methods. Knowledge of an organization's audience and its interests is crucial. Openness and transparency are essential as well. Social media offer new channels for participation and networking, but the heart of the matter remains unchanged: at the end of the day authentic human relationships fundamentally drive action and participation. That point provides an essential truism for online advocacy.

A consistent theme from the data was that engagement and relationship work are not about the tools, LinkedIn included. Authentic human relationships comprise the heart of effective engagement work. Culture, strategy, resources and knowledge of the audience should dictate which tools would be most effective in any given situation.

With those considerations, LinkedIn has plenty to offer to nonprofit organizations. LinkedIn's potential value is exceptionally great for advocacy organizations because they depend upon relationships with their constituents. LinkedIn is about multifaceted profiles, multi-dimensional connections and multiple ways for making that information actionable.

Nonprofits contemplating incorporating LinkedIn into their advocacy programs should be mindful of the principles and practices showcased in this action project. The use of any particular campaign tactics and tools, LinkedIn included, should fit both organizational goals and the intended audience. Effective online networking requires commitment and attentiveness to yield real benefit.

Organizations that believe LinkedIn might be a good fit should initially make their presence current: key stakeholders should complete their profiles and make sure those profiles are up to date and organizations should do the same for their Company Pages. Finally, discuss the value of networking with key stakeholders and begin making connections in an intentional way.

LinkedIn is an exceptional tool for advocacy base-building: organizing, connecting, and networking. LinkedIn is also a powerful analytical tool for strategic powermapping of relationships between stakeholders, decision-makers and influencers. Using LinkedIn is not so much an either or proposition for nonprofit advocacy organizations. It is more a matter of having a full set of tools in an organization's toolbox, provided the organization has sufficient resources to manage and maintain the LinkedIn platforms and tools. Successful networking contributes additional power and influence to campaigns. Mapping connections may enable organizations to unearth and focus on paths with the greatest likelihood of success.

In closing, LinkedIn provides powerful tools that can benefit nonprofit networking and advocacy campaigns. The LinkedIn platform is far more robust than it was even a couple of years ago. This report highlights creative applications of LinkedIn's tools that enhance advocacy campaigns. Other examples will continue to emerge. Advocacy organizations that have not recently assessed LinkedIn's capabilities might want to take a closer look.

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Appendix A: Qualitative Interview Guide Tool

Purpose of interview: To gather insights and opinions regarding the key strategic principles and the best practices of using LinkedIn for online interactive engagement and networking that nonprofit advocacy organizations can utilize to bolster constituent activism in support of shared goals

Questions	Follow up probes	Minutes
Objective 1: Interviewees identify principles of online engagement		
How would you describe the fundamental principles of online-oriented engagement and advocacy?	What principles of engaging your audience have been particularly effective for you? When you reflect on principles of engagement and participation, who or what are your biggest influences? Please describe any significant differences you see between online and "offline" principles. How widely are these principles understood and embraced by nonprofit leaders and practitioners in your view?	9 - 11
Objective 2: Interviewees share opinions on general best practices and supporting examples of online engagement		
What are the best practices for engaging constituents using Web 2.0/Social Media tools?	Please share one or two especially strong examples you know of. Who do you think of it as the best practitioners for online engagement? What successful practices are most widely used? What moves you personally to get engaged in online activity? What do find most frustrating about social media? What are the biggest practical hurdles that need to be overcome to engage people online? What promising new practices do you see on the horizon? Please describe your sense of whether nonprofits generally possess the structure, capacity and will to effectively engage constituents.	9 - 11
Objective 3: Interviewees describe their views on how do the principles and practices identified during interview specifically connect to use of LinkedIn		
What specific applications of the LinkedIn platform and toolset have or have not been productive for engagement and participation?	Please share some specific examples or experiences. Who do you think of it as the best practitioners of online engagement on LinkedIn ? Any organizations you would describe as LinkedIn rock stars? If so, which and why? [If not, rock stars on other platforms?] In your view, is LinkedIn more of a stand-alone or primary social media vehicle or more of a complementary vehicle to other tools and activities? How would you describe LinkedIn's strengths and weaknesses as a platform for engagement and advocacy? Why do you think some people view LinkedIn is a lesser vehicle for online engagement than Facebook or Twitter? Any principles or practices that are either particularly well suited or that don't work well on LinkedIn's platform? What are the biggest practical hurdles that need to be overcome to engage people using LinkedIn? Is there any advice you would give to LinkedIn regarding where it should focus in the next 1-3 years?	12 - 17
Objective 4: Learn more from interviewees about methods of measuring and evaluating online engagement		
How would you suggest that nonprofit organizations measure and evaluate online engagement, participation and actions by their constituents?	How would you describe the benefits and value of LinkedIn to a nonprofit board of directors or executive director? In an ideal world, what are the tangible signs of active engagement by an organization's constituents? Describe your view on the extent to which popular web-based metrics/analytics adequately measure engagement, participation and actions taken. Please describe any valid qualitative measures that you are aware of. Is it possible to measure intangible benefits? What do you see as the most important considerations for a nonprofit that seeks to engage constituents through social media? Why should nonprofits believe it possible to develop authentic relationships using social media?	9 - 11
Objective 5: Establish rapport with interviewees & ensure each understands the purpose of the research, the role they play in it, and their rights as interview subjects		
Do you have any questions regarding the purpose of the research, your role in it, or your rights as an interview subject?	How did you come to the field of nonprofit advocacy and social media? How would you describe your profession or your job? How frequently do you use LinkedIn? Consent form? Anonymity? Audiotaping/notes/records? Right to decline questions or withdraw from project? Anything else you would like to add? OK to follow up if questions arise? Phone? Email?	8 – 10 split over start & end

Question	Follow up probes	Notes 9-11 minutes
Objective 1: Interviewees identify principles of online engagement		
How would you describe the fundamental principles of online-oriented engagement and advocacy?	What principles of engaging your audience have been particularly effective for you? When you reflect on principles of engagement and participation, who or what are your biggest influences? Please describe any significant differences you see between online and "offline" principles. How widely are these principles understood and embraced by nonprofit leaders and practitioners in your view?	

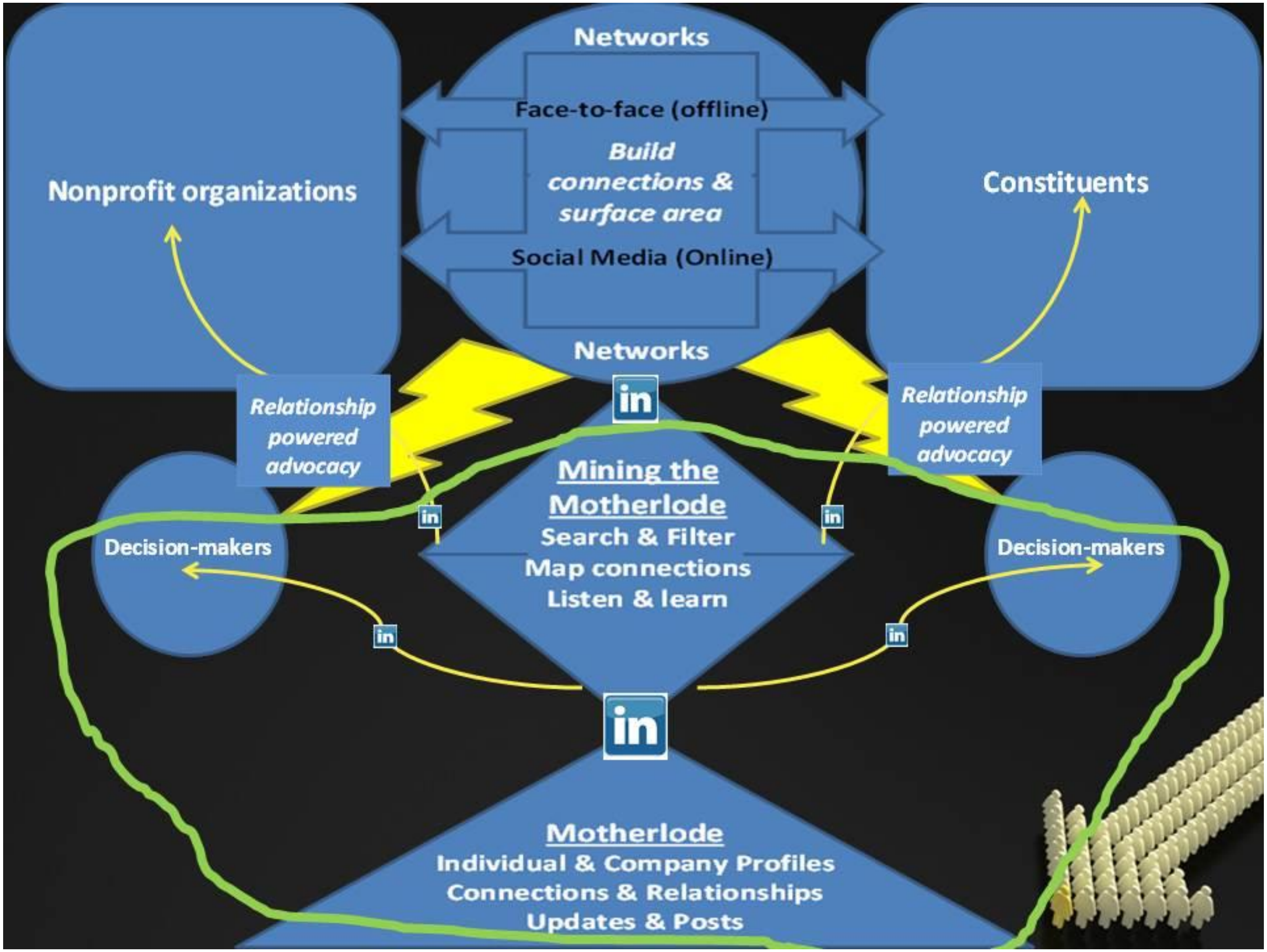
Question	Follow up probes	Notes 9-11 minutes
Objective 2: Interviewees share opinions on general best practices and supporting examples of online engagement		
What are the best practices for engaging constituents using Web 2.0/Social Media tools?	Please share one or two especially strong examples you know of. Who do you think of as the best practitioners for online engagement? What successful practices are most widely used? What moves you personally to get engaged in online activity? Which social media platforms are you most active with? What do find most frustrating about social media? What are the biggest practical hurdles that need to be overcome to engage people online? What promising new practices do you see on the horizon? Please describe your sense of whether nonprofits generally possess the structure, capacity and will to effectively engage constituents.	

Question	**Follow up probes**	**Notes** 12-17 minutes
Objective 3: Interviewees describe their views on how do the principles and practices identified during interview specifically connect to use of LinkedIn		
What specific applications of the LinkedIn platform and toolset have or have not been productive for engagement and participation?	What sorts of things motivate you to use LinkedIn for communication or engagement? Please share some specific examples or experiences. Who do you think of as the best practitioners of online engagement on LinkedIn ? Any organizations you would describe as LinkedIn rock stars or evangelists? If so, which and why? [If not, rock stars on other platforms?] In your view, is LinkedIn more of a stand-alone or primary social media vehicle or more of a complementary vehicle to other tools and activities? How would you describe LinkedIn's strengths and weaknesses as a platform for engagement and advocacy? What is your assessment of LinkedIn's networking & targeting capabilities? Why do you think some people view LinkedIn is a lesser vehicle for online engagement than Facebook or Twitter? Any principles or practices that are either particularly well suited or that don't work well on LinkedIn's platform? What are the biggest practical hurdles that need to be overcome to engage people using LinkedIn? Is there any advice you would give to LinkedIn regarding where it should focus in the next 1-3 years?	

Question	**Follow up probes**	**Notes** 9-11 minutes
Objective 4: Learn more from interviewees about methods of measuring and evaluating online engagement		
How would you suggest that nonprofit organizations measure and evaluate online engagement, participation and actions by their constituents?	Beyond the employment aspects of LinkedIn, how would describe the value and benefits of LinkedIn? How would you describe the benefits and value of LinkedIn to a nonprofit board of directors or executive director? In an ideal world, what are the tangible signs of active engagement by an organization's constituents? Describe your view on the extent to which popular web-based metrics/analytics adequately measure engagement, participation and actions taken. Please describe any valid qualitative measures that you are aware of. Is it possible to measure intangible benefits? What do you see as the most important considerations for a nonprofit that seeks to engage constituents through social media? Why should nonprofits believe it possible to develop authentic relationships using social media?	

Question	Follow up probes	Notes 8-10 minutes split over beginning & end
Objective 5: Establish rapport with interviewees & ensure each understands the purpose of the research, the role they play in it, and their rights as interview subjects		
Do you have any questions regarding the purpose of the research, your role in it, or your rights as an interview subject?	<u>Opening</u> Any questions about this project and its purpose? Consent form? Anonymity? Audiotaping/notes/records? Right to decline questions or withdraw from project? How did you come to the field of nonprofit advocacy and social media? How would you describe your profession or your job? How frequently do you use LinkedIn? <u>Closing</u> Anything else you would like to add? OK to follow up if questions arise? Phone? Email? Any final questions regarding this project? THANK YOU!	

Appendix B: LinkedIn Visual Conceptualization Flow Chart



Appendix C: Detailed Table of Contents