

Sue Fidler Ltd **e-consultancy for charities**

Protecting the brand

Third Sector 08/08/07

While debate continues about the uses of sites such as MySpace, Bebo and Facebook there is little doubt about their popularity. In the UK alone tens of thousands use them daily and the numbers are growing.

Many feel that these sites are either fads which will pass or be superseded, or dangerous threats to personal information security. Whether either or both are true does not change the fact that they are here and now and a large part of the UK population is using them. While the audience of some of these sites may be predominantly teenagers others are attracting the over 35's in hoards.

These are critical audiences to fundraising and campaigning charities. The younger audiences are our future supporters and one which every fundraiser and campaigner want to reach. The over 35's are entering the prime donor age group. So, whatever we may individually think of these site, it is critical that charities are represented in these new communities and to these internet age audiences.

Creating a 'page' on these sites is well within the capabilities of many of our supporters, whether they be donors, volunteers, regional or community group members. People are 'helpfully' creating pages for their favourite charities in order to spread the word or to form communities and meet fellow advocates.

And therein lies the threat. If a helpful supporter creates a page you have no control on the brand, the message or the content of that page. You may not even know it exists. The sector are gradually learning that it must manage its online brand in the same way it manages offline, but as yet we largely haven't recognised or responded to this new medium.

Of course the supporters think they are helping. But how they represent the charity, what they say and how they use the space is beyond your control.

So in exactly the same way as it is crucial for a charity to own its URL, charities should seriously consider creating a simple presence on the main community sites in order to control the brand and message in the public view. A simple page with a logo, a link to your site/contact details and a paragraph "about us" will protect the charity brand.

Given many of these sites create a URL which includes the page name, do you really want somebody else controlling www.myspace.com/yourcharityname?

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