

## Charities see potential, risk with social networks

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(AP) -- Meredith Bowen was getting tired of requests from Facebook friends to exchange make-believe pansies, daffodils and tiny cartoon characters for her "(Lil) Green Patch," a virtual garden that sprouted on her social-networking page about a year ago.

She was ready to delete it, until she learned The Nature Conservancy was getting a portion of the ad revenue generated by the game.

"I've saved like 133 square feet of rainforest," the 31-year-old Holt resident said.

Bowen illustrates both the potential upside and downside for charitable causes hoping to cash in on the popularity of social-networking sites such as [Facebook](#) and News Corp.'s MySpace.

With millions of users worldwide, the sites would seem fertile ground for fundraising experiments - especially ones where users aren't asked to make direct contributions.

But it's far from certain that social networking will prove as effective as more traditional fundraising methods such as direct mail, telephone solicitation and even e-mails to past donors.

One hurdle to overcome is the sheer deluge of information online.

As Facebook users are bombarded with invitations to send and receive

virtual beers, throw snowballs, sign petitions and take quizzes, applications benefiting charities can seem like just another silly game.

"I get so many of those requests," said Nicole Marble, 23, who works at Michigan State University. "Sometimes I pay attention to them, but with a lot of them I'm just clicking 'Ignore, Ignore, Ignore.'"

She took only minor interest in (Lil) Green Patch until learning recently from a reporter that the game's promise to help save rainforests and fight global warming was genuine.

"I'll probably look into it a little more now," Marble said. "I just finished tending my garden, whatever that really means."

Many appeals on social networks have drawn lots of attention but few dollars.

"You often see where 20,000 people have joined a cause and it's raised \$200," said Jim Tobin, president of Ignite Social Media, a promotional company in Cary, N.C.

The (Lil) Green Patch game has done better than most, generating \$162,150 in little more than a year, said Sue Citro, digital membership director for The Nature Conservancy. It is among the most popular applications that Facebook can add to their profiles, with nearly 6 million active users monthly, according to Facebook.

Players plant virtual "gardens" with flowers and fruits sent by friends and send plants to them in return. Ads are shown alongside the game. Green Patch Inc., the Mountain View, Calif., developer of the game, donates a portion of ad revenue to The Nature Conservancy's rainforest preservation campaign.

It's yet another avenue for raising money and awareness, supplementing direct online contributions generated by running ads and sending e-mail to past donors. Social networks can potentially be more effective because they are cheaper and involve referrals from friends.

"A lot of the world is transitioning to using not just the Internet, but the socially connected Internet," said David King, Green Patch's founder. "We see this as the beginning of a whole movement where people are able to connect with each other and with foundations representing the causes that are important to them."

Despite being among the more lucrative Facebook applications, (Lil) Green Patch accounts for less than 3 percent of The Nature Conservancy's online fundraising - which itself generates just 10 percent of all individual donations to the group, Citro said.

Yet the conservancy is less concerned with raising big bucks than with planting seeds for future support from the younger generation active on social networks.

"It's really a great branding tool," Citro said. "It's helping spread the word, educating people about our organization and its mission."

The group recommends its social-networking activities to past donors who cannot afford to give cash because of the bad economy but still want to help, she said.

Even if social-networking sites draw relatively little money now, it's imperative for nonprofits to explore them, said Melissa Brown, associate director of research for the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University.

Surveys by the center show that direct mail and phone solicitation have

become less successful in recent years, while Internet fundraising has risen steadily. As more users gravitate to social networks, it makes sense for nonprofit groups to follow.

"This is a time for experimenting with the social networking, figuring out how it can work for your organization," Brown said.

The Humane Society of the United States used a Facebook application to promote this year's "Spay Day" drive in support of spaying and neutering.

The campaign invited people to upload photos of their pets to a Humane Society Web site and solicit contributions from family, friends and others. A Facebook application - and other interactive "widgets," or small programs for blogs and [MySpace](#) pages - helped participants reach more potential donors.

The "Spay Day" drive raised \$600,000 from about 40,000 participants, said Carie Lewis, the Humane Society's Internet marketing manager. It's uncertain how much was generated through Facebook. But this year's campaign, the first to use the application and other widgets, was more successful than previous ones. In 2008, the 31,000 participants raised only \$72,000.

NCM Fathom Events, an entertainment company based in Centennial, Colo., sponsored a four-day fundraiser in March for the anti-poverty group CARE using another rapidly growing site, Twitter.

For every "tweet," or short message, supporting the campaign, Fathom Events made a pledge. The "tweet-a-thon" raised \$5,000 for CARE, said Tobin, whose company promoted it.

Social-networking sites "lower the fundraising barrier," offering

nonprofits an inexpensive way to reach mass audiences, Tobin said.

"Before, you had to have a budget for advertising space," he said. "What you need to have now is a really good idea that people gravitate toward. If you have that and make it fun or pull at the right heartstrings, you can get a lot of activity going."

One potential pitfall: "Donor fatigue" might set in as [social-networking](#) sites become increasingly cluttered with pleas for help from do-gooders, said Lee Rainie, director of the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

As people's time and wallets are stretched ever thinner, they could decide that installing an application is their "charitable good deed for the day," leaving them less inclined to write a check or volunteer at the soup kitchen, Rainie said.

"This is making the battle for people's contributions and charity endeavors and volunteer time all the more competitive and brutal," he said.

Marble, one of the (Lil) Green Patch players, said she appreciates that the game is simple to use and doesn't badger her to send cash. She just hopes the requests to swap plants don't get out of hand.

"If it gets too much, I might consider uninstalling or just clicking the 'ignore' button on all of them," she said. "But that hasn't happened yet, so I'm still playing."

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