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Trump's Itchy Twitter Finger Making Charities Uneasy

By Rebecca Koenig



Nonprofits worry about three kinds of tweets from President Trump: lies, attacks, and even endorsements.

Donald Trump has added an unexpected role to the American presidency: Tweeter-in-Chief.

His 140-character dispatches are notable not just for their tone (aggressive) and time of composition (early morning) but also for their ability to move markets — at least momentarily — and steer public attention. A tweet about Lockheed Martin sent the aerospace company's stock down 5 percent. Another, about Toyota's plan to make cars at a new factory in Mexico, evaporated \$2 billion from the company's market value.

That has nonprofit leaders worried about what will happen if the president uses Twitter to target their organizations. It is not a far-fetched scenario: In 2012, businessman Trump did just that, slamming the executive directors of the U.S. Fund for Unicef and the American Red Cross over their pay — and citing incorrect compensation figures.

Now, such outbursts carry the weight of the most powerful perch in the world, and that unnerves nonprofits. As Erin Hennessy, vice president at

TVP Communications, notes, President Trump's tweets usher in "extreme scrutiny from the public."

Responding to nonprofits' fears, communications firms are scrambling to provide guidance on dealing with the president's digital bully pulpit. They're advising charities to draft social-media posts in anticipation of various possible scenarios, set up phone trees to expedite communication with major donors, and run drills testing their crisis-communications plans.

Full Court Press, which counts foundations such as the California Endowment and nonprofits including Alliance for Justice among its clients, held a staff meeting last week on the topic of Mr. Trump's tweets. The aim, principal Dan Cohen said, is to start "rebooting our social-media training for the new world order."

To adjust, charities must anticipate the president's tweets and craft careful responses in advance, experts say.

"Crisis management is all about preparing for the unpredictable," Ms. Hennessy says. "That's how we're advising folks to prepare for a presidential tweetstorm."

'Don't Feed the Trolls'

Three types of Trump tweets seem likely to pose problems for nonprofits: attacks, endorsements, and lies.

There's no one right way to respond to an attack, experts say, but there is a wrong way: Ignoring a presidential tweet is not an option.

"If the bully comes after you, you punch the bully in the nose," says Mr. Cohen, citing a lesson he learned in his previous career as a political consultant.

That doesn't necessarily mean responding with anger, he adds. Rather than fighting fire with fire, Mr. Cohen suggests nonprofit leaders "reach back into what drove you into this work in the first place" to find inspiration for a fitting response.

Experts say a nonprofit's mission should inform the strategy it selects to respond to an attack. Some progressive organizations like Planned Parenthood and the American Civil Liberties Union raised millions of dollars after adopting an adversarial tone that resonated with people unhappy with Mr. Trump's election. But such "rage fundraising," as consultant Beth Kanter calls it, might not be appropriate for other charities.

"It all comes down to who you are," Ms. Hennessy says. "If you're the ACLU, I think it fits with your mission, vision, and values. If you're the American Cancer Society, I think it's harder to make an argument that it fits with your mission, vision, and values."

A different tactic is to respond to an attack with compassionate language that neutralizes hateful rhetoric. "You win if you bring humanity to the discussion," Mr. Cohen says.

Regardless of what strategy seems most relevant to a particular organization, experts advise against picking a prolonged public fight on social media with President Trump or his Twitter followers.

"The general role is: Don't feed the trolls," says Ms. Kanter, co-author of *The Networked Nonprofit: Connecting With Social Media to Drive Change*.

Accepting an Endorsement

Because of the polarized political atmosphere, an endorsement from President Trump could also put nonprofits in an awkward position. For example, his tweet in support of L.L. Bean further inflamed critics of the clothing company who were calling for a boycott because a member of the Bean family contributed to Mr. Trump's campaign.

If the president tweets a supportive message about a charity, its leaders should be gracious but cautious, experts say. A dose of gentle humor may help a charity navigate between "taking the compliment but also standing for what is important" to its mission or values, Ms. Kanter says.

For organizations that tend to work with and receive money from progressive communities, a Twitter compliment from Mr. Trump could also be an opportunity to build relationships with his supporters, who have donations to offer and social-media support to give, Ms. Hennessy says.

After all, nonprofits are, by law, nonpartisan, and building "resilient nonpartisan networks gives you tremendous political power," Mr. Cohen says.

"For the most vocal board member who wants you to turn this into a negative, I would tell them to sit down," he says. "Take the opportunity to say to all of the traditional haters, 'He gave us a shout out! Let's talk about the bridges we have.' "

Correcting the Record

If the president or a member of his administration cites a nonprofit's work incorrectly, it's important to broadcast the facts, experts say.

"If you're going to have a president who is a prolific liar, you have to be prepared to be a prolific fact-checker," Mr. Cohen says.

For example, both before and after the election, Mr. Trump cited reports from the Pew Charitable Trust in making unsubstantiated claims about widespread voter fraud. In addition, after the inauguration, Sean Spicer, Mr. Trump's press secretary, incorrectly attributed a voter-registration statistic to the trust.

During the campaign season and after the inauguration, Pew responded with blog posts that don't mention Mr. Trump by name but aim to clarify its voter-roll data. The trust has also worked with reporters who are trying to check the facts.

"Our goal is always to fulfill our mission of informing the public," says Melissa Skolfield, the trust's senior vice president of communications. "We've always been committed to explaining our research fully and with appropriate context."

In 2012, Mr. Trump tweeted a rumor that Caryl Stern, chief executive of the U.S. Fund for UNICEF, drove a Rolls-Royce, implying that she was overpaid for her role as a charity leader. Ms. Stern quickly set the record straight, tweeting, "sorry no Rolls; only a Prius. Fire your fact checker and help us save kids lives." To the people who reacted to Mr. Trump's falsehood, UNICEF tweeted the link to a Snopes.com story that busted the Rolls-Royce myth.

Mr. Trump also criticized American Red Cross chief executive Gail McGovern, saying she made \$1 million in 2011 — a figure nearly double her compensation. Red Cross spokespeople tweeted correct information and links to the nonprofit's tax forms to people who responded to Mr. Trump's post. They also sent a note to his office refuting his claim.

Planning for All Possibilities

Nonprofits worried about finding themselves in Mr. Trump's cross hairs should undertake "scenario planning," Ms. Kanter advises, just as they do before big events such as giving days.

"If they haven't done so already, they probably need to update their crisis plans for if they are Twitter-attacked by a world leader," she says.

That means asking staff members to develop a comprehensive list of programs, policy positions, and people the president could criticize or misrepresent and devise responses that address those vulnerabilities across multiple media — emails and blog posts as well as social media.

"You can't have it all ready to go and scheduled, but you can have drafts," Ms. Kanter says. "You can have a one-pager with facts and arguments that make your case."

Charities that feel ill-equipped to undertake this level of crisis-communication planning may be able to find public-relations professionals willing to lend their skills pro bono, she adds.

Preparation may also require developing an "early-warning system," Mr. Cohen says. That might be passive, like setting up Google news alerts, or active, like asking a staff member to monitor the internet during the early-morning hours when President Trump tends to send his tweets.

Mr. Cohen recommends nonprofits test their plans by running a "Sunday-morning drill" that mimics the conditions of a presidential twitter attack.

"It's 6 a.m., Trump just tweeted at us, what are we doing?" he says. "You gotta know, if that spotlight is turned on you, what are you going to do?"

Leaning on Supporters

If a charity finds itself in that spotlight, it shouldn't have to bear the exposure alone, experts say. Leaders should quickly seek assistance from their networks of donors, grant makers, national associations, and any other partners that can provide context and nuance relevant to the situation. Nonprofits that have built relationships with reporters might turn to them for fair coverage and fact-checking.

"Most grant makers and nonprofits are part of broad, deep coalitions that have been working together for a long time," Mr. Cohen says. In the event of a problematic presidential tweet, "access your peer group or donor network to turn the thing around." For example, in 2012, Charity Navigator responded to Mr. Trump's barbed tweets about the Red Cross and the U.S. Fund for Unicef with a link to its report on CEO salaries, which concluded that most nonprofit leaders are not overpaid.

Because it's likely that donors will want to help, nonprofits should make clear the actions they want supporters to take, Mr. Cohen says: "Give the people who love you ways to support you and have their back. If you want money, ask for money. If you want retweets, ask for retweets."

Pay special attention to major donors, Ms. Kanter says, perhaps by setting up a phone tree to communicate with them as soon as possible.

Drawing on the support of allies is ultimately more effective and important than trying win over members of the public inclined to heap scorn in the wake of a Trump tweet, Mr. Cohen says: "There are portions of the audience you are never going to convince."