

FIELD BRIEF No. 14

Leveraging New Media to Gain Program Donor Support

Lessons from WOCCU's MatchSavings.org in Mexico

This FIELD Brief is the fourteenth in a series produced by the Financial Integration, Economic Leveraging and Broad-Based Dissemination (FIELD)-Support Program. This Brief discusses how WOCCU employed social media marketing techniques to support its MatchSavings.org initiative.

*Managed by FHI 360, FIELD-Support represents a consortium of leading organizations committed to advancing the state-of-the-practice of microfinance and microenterprise development through innovation, learning and exploration. FIELD Briefs support this objective by sharing what we have learned and fostering dialogue on key issues. This brief was written by Jennifer Bernhardt and David McClure of **World Council of Credit Unions (WOCCU)**. For more, visit <http://kdid.org/projects/field-support>.*

Introduction

In recent years, the understanding of microfinance has moved beyond microcredit to include a broader array of financial services, including savings. And while research has shown that there is a greater demand for savings over credit, the poor are still more likely to be invited into the financial sector through loans. Recognizing that savings can serve as a powerful tool for the poor to improve their livelihoods, World Council of Credit Unions (WOCCU) has experimented with innovative products and services over the years to bring asset-building savings accounts to the rural poor. Considering the success of microlending online programs such as Kiva and MicroPlace, WOCCU saw an opportunity to

bring microsavings to the masses through a similar approach.

In October 2008, WOCCU created the MatchSavings.org program and corresponding website to tap into the success of online microlending with an opportunity to encourage microsavings among the poor. Through the MatchSavings.org website, individuals could match the deposits of poor people beginning to save for the first time in a regulated financial institution. The savers lived in marginalized rural areas of Veracruz state and previously did not have access to formal savings services. Through the program, they could choose to save for housing, microbusiness, education or health care goals. The savings matches they received after six months were funded entirely by private donations raised by WOCCU.

One year later, WOCCU received funding from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) FIELD-Support program for a focused 12-month promotional activity. The objective was to explore ways in which MatchSavings.org could communicate the effectiveness of savings as a vehicle to alleviate poverty and leverage the generosity of online communities to support the program. WOCCU's approach focused on four areas crucial to the sustainability of funding for the program: social media marketing, website development, leveraging key influencers through public relations



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and e-mail/online marketing.¹ In all four areas, WOCCU tested a variety of viral marketing techniques.

This FIELD Brief shares WOCCU's experience and lessons learned, which can be applied to other organizations exploring the use of social media and online fundraising to generate resources for similar programs.²

Social Media Marketing

Given the limited budget available for promotions and fundraising, MatchSavings.org operated as a grassroots campaign and was WOCCU's first foray into social media marketing. WOCCU initially marketed through staff, volunteers, friends and family within the credit union and microfinance industry by personally introducing groups of people to the program and asking them for support. After hiring a full-time person for MatchSavings.org in May 2010, WOCCU significantly increased MatchSavings.org promotions through social media.

Social media marketing refers to the use of social networks, online communities and electronic communication to raise the visibility and buy-in of a particular product, program or service.

Social media goals

1. Drive new visitors to MatchSavings.org and encourage past visitors to return regularly
2. Build the MatchSavings.org e-mail subscription list
3. Raise funds for the program by converting new visitors into matchers

Program staff followed a regular content production plan and posted new material on a daily basis during the work week.

In general, the plan called for:

- **Facebook:** 2-3 posts per week
- **Twitter:** 1-3 tweets per day
- **YouTube:** repository of videos documenting monitoring trips
- **Blog:** 1-2 posts per month
- **Flickr:** repository of photos from the field

Each of the social media outlets – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and the blog – served a different purpose and called for specific content:

- **Facebook:** MatchSavings.org debuted on Facebook at the beginning of 2009 as a “cause,” allowing users to donate funds, display their support and receive direct messages from MatchSavings.org. WOCCU created a more versatile MatchSavings.org “page” in 2010 to raise its visibility and make it easier for users to share updates with their networks. Most posts were

¹ This activity was closed in October 2010 when WOCCU's Mexico program, which served as the field office and operating environment for MatchSavings.org, came to a close. All social media sites are currently inactive.

² USAID FIELD-Support funding allowed WOCCU to 1) explore the sustainability of funding through a primarily online platform, 2) test the program's scalability and 3) determine its perceived impact among participants through independent research. This brief addresses the program's sustainability through web-based fundraising while FIELD Report 9 addresses the program's scalability and perceived impact.

short descriptions of an external resource accompanied by a link, for example, a featured saver story on the website or an interesting article elsewhere on the Internet. The Facebook page's photo gallery featured daily batches of new images during monitoring trips to Mexico. During the publicity push from June to August 2010, there were 43 Facebook posts, and the number of followers grew by 45%.



- **Twitter:** The strength of Twitter lies in the simplicity of 140-character “tweets.” The format rewards quick insight, casual chatter and entertaining links over corporate speak and is a great opportunity to build a more conversational image for an organization.

WOCCU started the MatchSavings.org Twitter account in January 2010 to share news that people would find interesting enough to re-tweet to their followers, thereby building the recognition of MatchSavings.org and shaping its “personality.” From June to August 2010, MatchSavings.org posted an average 1.5 tweets per day and followers grew by 300%. According to leading marketing consulting firms, organizations with professionally managed Twitter accounts can grow at a monthly rate of about 9%. In its short run, MatchSavings.org was able to outperform this by posting original tweets and re-tweeting interesting facts helped build the MatchSavings.org follower base. Growth steadied out after the initial push.

- **YouTube:** During monitoring trips to Mexico, WOCCU staff recorded short videos of program participants receiving their savings matches and/or sharing their stories. Videos were edited, close-captioned, embedded with a link to MatchSavings.org, then posted to YouTube. In this format, viewers could easily embed the videos into web pages and share them with others. The videos were uploaded to a MatchSavings.org channel on YouTube to help promote the program’s brand recognition and allow people to subscribe and receive notification when new videos were posted. As of Oct. 31, 2010, the eight videos housed on the MatchSavings.org channel had received a total of 1,629 views.

- **Blog:** In July 2010, WOCCU developed a blog for MatchSavings.org to catalog program and industry news, grow website traffic through an RSS feed (which automatically distributes new web content to subscribers) and encourage reader engagement through a commenting feature. The MatchSavings.org blog included in-depth information about the savers and their communities and served as a running travelogue on a monitoring trip shortly after its launch. There were 11 blog posts from June to August 2010, which consistently boosted daily traffic to the website by 40 to 50 visitors but did not engage readers to comment on posts.



- **Flickr:** Although Flickr’s “social” features allow users to search for and share photos with one another as well as post comments to individual images, most organizations use the service as a static photo gallery. WOCCU posted about 100 of the best pictures from a monitoring trip in July

2010, which could then be linked to other social media outlets. The Flickr photos did not generate comments online and attracted few visitors, perhaps due to its launch just months before the program ended.

- **Other tactics:** MatchSavings.org developed a branded search toolbar through FreeCause, which generated a small amount of money for the program each time someone did an Internet search using the Yahoo! toolbar. The tactic did not gain momentum, however, due to search engine preferences among users and lack of consistent marketing to promote its use.

Monitoring and commenting on relevant blogs occasionally engaged authors and their readers to inquire about MatchSavings.org and link to the website. WOCCU found that communicating a sense of vibrancy in MatchSavings.org was crucial when commenting on or pitching to blog authors, who are attuned to how much of a footprint (or lack thereof) organizations have on the Internet. Direct pitches resulted in a hit with a high profile personal finance blogger in Australia.

Lessons Learned

Even though the social media marketing did not generate significant matches, it was a useful way to demonstrate that MatchSavings.org had a “pulse.” It helped maintain a running timestamp of the program’s most recent activity, proof that the program was alive and tuned in to what was happening on the ground – especially important for a program with little name recognition among the general public.

This impression of timeliness was even more important for MatchSavings.org because of the inherent rhythm of the matched savings model. From a communications perspective, MatchSavings.org could feel “quiet” during the middle of a savings period when there was little to report on a daily basis. During these less active times, Facebook, Twitter and other social media outlets provided a much needed sense of vitality in the organization's online presence. It was a consistent way to make the program more attractive to prospective matchers or influencers who shape the opinions of a target market.

While MatchSavings.org social media efforts resulted in greater visibility and some spikes in website traffic, WOCCU identified a number of potential reasons those efforts did not significantly bring in matches or produce active engagement with followers.

- **Content generation:** The steady process of small deposit-making month after month was difficult to translate into the social media format. There was a lot of activity at the forefront (selecting new communities and savers) and end of a six-month savings period (distributing the matches), but not much to communicate in between. It required some creativity and time to find newsworthy content related to the program that people would find thought-provoking and engaging enough to make a match or to share the posts with their networks. During slow news periods, less time-sensitive content typically attracted the attention of people who were more interested in learning about the program or microsavings than in making a match.
- **Follower base:** Although the number of readers following the MatchSavings.org social media accounts increased substantially, a majority of subscribers were already involved with the program in some way — past matchers, credit union professionals, WOCCU employees, family or friends. While some proved to be great champions of the program, their support stemmed

largely from professional interest or personal affiliation and did not generally extend to other social networks.

Unlike the large-scale and immediate attention a successful pitch can draw, social media is like compound interest — long, slow and only worthwhile if you can commit steady resources over a long period of time. Several months was enough time to start gaining momentum but not enough time to develop a well-defined reputation among followers or expand beyond WOCCU's immediate network.

- **Messaging and the messenger:** Borrowing a statement from social media news site Mashable.com, it is important to note that “social networking platforms are not fundraising machines; people are.” Getting the right message out is crucial. If fundraising is the goal, programs using social media are more successful if they have clear champions (other than the managing organization) who feel they are part of a grassroots effort. If the right person with the right network supports the cause, people are more likely to pay attention. Quips, news bites and calls to action have higher pick-up than blatant promotional or corporate speak.

Website Development

The MatchSavings.org website was well developed when the program launched, but further improvement was necessary to give users the ability to easily share information over their social networks. Seeing the potential that individual stories and testimonies could have in bringing the program to a personal level, WOCCU redeveloped the visual components of MatchSavings.org so that a particular saver's story or matcher's tribute could be shared through social networking sites. The new functionality also gave WOCCU the opportunity to highlight and link to the individual testimonies through its monthly e-newsletter and Twitter and Facebook pages.



Lessons Learned

Website development can consume enormous amounts of time and if people don't know what to look for when they visit the website, new features will remain hidden in the abyss of the online world. For that reason, every tweak and addition should be driven by the program's goals and included in the overall marketing strategy. While WOCCU did not evaluate the MatchSavings.org website by testing its navigability and content on users, it would have been helpful to have had this data when prioritizing changes to the site.

Reaching Key Influencers through Public Relations

The endorsement of major opinion leaders and respected news outlets can help overcome the name recognition and donor trust challenges faced by relatively unknown programs. In the case of MatchSavings.org, the most influential voices were nationally syndicated journalists or columnists who wrote frequently about international aid, development economics or foreign affairs and had the intellectual credibility to throw their weight behind little-known programs.

Public relations goals

1. Establish relationships with influential leaders to drive program endorsements
2. Increase the visibility of the program
3. Recruit new matchers

WOCCU worked with a media consultant to identify key influencers and send them targeted pitches to introduce them to MatchSavings.org. The first round of pitches focused on the growing scale and pace of the program. They announced that December was shaping up to be one of the most successful months yet in terms of fundraising for MatchSavings.org, highlighted the program's one-year anniversary and personally invited a few key people to an upcoming monitoring trip to Mexico in January 2010.

Efforts resulted in a full-page color spread in the business section of the local newspaper³, which ran the same time as a mention in The New York Times. An unsolicited e-mail to Nicholas Kristof, a columnist at The New York Times, resulted in a one-sentence mention of MatchSavings.org and link to the website at the end of a Dec. 30 column about the power of microsavings.⁴ The local newspaper ran his column the day following the business page article. Website traffic spiked over 12,000% relative to the daily average over the course of the last month and remained at an all-time high for the next five days, resulting in \$12,451 in matches.

Following this success, WOCCU contacted a group of high profile journalists at Mother Jones, NPR, PBS, Newsweek, Oprah and other major news sources. This second phase focused on a monitoring trip to Mexico and emphasized the positive side of U.S./Mexico relations through MatchSavings.org. The program conveyed an alternative look at Mexico's people during increasing gang and border violence that had been depicted in the media.

Interestingly, while national press hits resulted in significant increases in revenue, WOCCU found that local media coverage was less effective from a fundraising perspective. The coverage that the program received in the local newspaper and a public radio talk show⁵ resulted in measurable increases in awareness and interest. Examples were modest spikes in website traffic, on-air support from call-in radio participants and contact from interested academics. But once the hype settled, these local media hits produced few matchers for the program. A local television news feature on MatchSavings.org may have produced different results, but it was pulled before it ran due to the program closing.

Beyond the media, interaction with the local university, community action groups, the development finance industry and credit union system resulted in several more industry-specific interviews and articles.

Lessons Learned

Personal, one-on-one appeals to opinion leaders produced the greatest returns for MatchSavings.org in terms of getting the word out and bringing new visitors to the website, but it

³ [Offering a Hand to the Needy, http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/article_c7763508-f81a-11de-b549-001cc4c002e0.html](http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/article_c7763508-f81a-11de-b549-001cc4c002e0.html)

⁴ [Sparkling a Savings Revolution, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/31/opinion/31kristof.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/31/opinion/31kristof.html)

⁵ [Interview: Kathleen Dunn Show, http://www.matchesavings.org/videos/matchesavings_interview.mp3](http://www.matchesavings.org/videos/matchesavings_interview.mp3)

was also the most time-consuming. The success of each appeal depended heavily on reaching the right people at the right time with the right message. This involved identifying individuals who could influence the target audience, searching for a particular angle that would interest them, then making a concise but persuasive pitch and following up. The challenge after getting a story was compelling the audience to make a match and keeping those people engaged to continue their support.

E-Mail & Online Marketing

WOCCU experimented with direct e-mail marketing through in-house and rented lists and targeted online ads in an attempt to reach audiences outside the credit union, microfinance and WOCCU-affiliated circles.

E-mail & online marketing goals

1. Grow the in-house list of subscribers by capturing opt-in e-mail addresses
2. Test various designs and messaging to identify the most effective outreach approaches
3. Recruit new matchers

- **E-mail Marketing:** The steady process of small deposit-making month after month was difficult to translate into the social media format. There was a lot of activity at the forefront (selecting new communities and savers) and end of a six-month savings period (distributing the matches), but not much to communicate in between. It required some creativity and time to find newsworthy content related to the program that people would find thought-provoking and engaging enough to make a match or to share the posts with their networks. During slow news periods, less time-sensitive content typically attracted the attention of people who were more interested in learning about the program or microsavings than in making a match.

In an effort to attract new subscribers and matchers beyond WOCCU's circle of influence, MatchSavings.org rented a list of 15,000 e-mail addresses from a mail house. The addresses were provided by people who indicated that they were interested in charitable giving and humanitarian causes.

WOCCU produced three stand-alone HTML e-mail messages and sent them to 15,000 recipients on May 21, June 25 and July 1. For the second and third e-mails, two versions of the message were produced — a graphical version and a text-based version. Through an A/B split on the rented list, two separate groups received one of the two versions. WOCCU tracked website traffic from the messages to gauge which one elicited the most response. Similar messages were sent to WOCCU's in-house list of supporters and subscribers as well as past MatchSavings.org matchers.

In general, open and "click-through rates"⁶ outperformed industry standards for nonprofit fundraising e-mails. For messages sent to the

Online marketing ties together the creative and technical aspects of the Internet, including design, development, advertising and sales.

⁶ Click-through rates are the "number of users who clicked on a link" divided by the "number of times the link was delivered."

rented list, open rates averaged 14.44%, significantly higher than the nonprofit industry standard of 12.82%. Click-through rates ran from 0.87% to 1.03%, also better than the industry benchmark of 0.78%. Each of the three e-mail messages was sent to the same group, and the resulting website traffic increased with each message. As expected, messages sent to the list of past MatchSavings.org matchers performed the best, with 42% and 30% open rates for the graphical and text-based emails respectively. While the performance of the actual messages was above average, increased traffic to the site did not result in any new matches on the three days the messages were sent.

- **Monthly e-Newsletter:** In addition to direct e-mail marketing, MatchSavings.org launched a monthly e-newsletter in July 2010. The e-newsletter included recent program activities, a featured saver story, media coverage, social networking links and highlights from the MatchSavings.org Facebook and Twitter newsfeeds. As with other e-mails sent to the MatchSavings.org in-house list, open rates for the e-newsletters were uniformly impressive, generally over 50%.

Many who followed the MatchSavings.org Facebook and Twitter accounts were not signed up to receive e-mail alerts, and many registered e-mail subscribers did not follow the social media postings. Utilizing both vehicles allowed for cross-promoting and provided an opportunity for further engagement.

- **Paid Ads:** In an effort to test list-growth strategies, WOCCU identified two online publications that targeted the matcher demographic and purchased advertisement space on their websites. Identical interactive ads that linked to MatchSavings.org appeared on MotherJones.com for two weeks and NYTimes.com for one week. Ad cost was based on the number of impressions or times they appeared to site visitors.

Ads on MotherJones.com resulted in 226 clicks out of 200,000 impressions (0.08% click-through rate), while 7,500 impressions on NYTimes.com produced an insignificant amount of traffic to MatchSavings.org (less than 0.01% click-through rate). Compared to an industry standard of 0.1%, the campaigns underperformed and did not result in any new matches.

Lessons Learned

While they may have been effective in raising name recognition for MatchSavings.org, e-mail marketing and paid ads were expensive endeavors that did not produce any measurable impact for the program.

The poor conversion rate on the e-mail marketing was likely a function of the inherent limitations of a rented e-mail list. Though the list consisted of opt-in subscribers to a particular area of interest, e-mail marketing is generally more effective with a list of recipients who have explicitly given permission to receive communication from a specific organization.

Since the ads on MotherJones.com and NYTimes.com were identical, the difference in click-through rates may have been due to the ad markets. MotherJones.com was a more targeted demographic for MatchSavings.org, while the NYTimes.com readership was likely more diverse.

The campaigns pushed out the MatchSavings.org brand to more than 200,000 people outside of WOCCU's network. However, more time and money to test a variety of ads and run additional campaigns may have produced more tangible results.

Sustainability of Funding through Online Giving

MatchSavings.org halted fundraising in October 2010 and completed the final round of savings matches in June 2011. The program ended because WOCCU's Mexico program, which served as the field office and trusted operating environment for MatchSavings.org, came to a close. At the same time, funds were not coming in at the rate necessary for continuation and expansion based on the costs involved with implementing the program.

Online marketing efforts for MatchSavings.org, while useful for increasing WOCCU publicity, did not draw a substantial or consistent stream of funding. Many people supported the concept but seemed more curious in the methodology or seeing it gain traction before contributing. Since the program ended just after two years with limited staff resources, it is difficult to conjecture how the funding stream may have changed given more time, personnel and funds to develop the program.

Despite its short run, WOCCU learned many lessons along the way.

Be different

The endorsements of major opinion leaders like Nicholas Kristof were a great way to make inroads on the issues of credibility and name recognition, and it may be that media hits like these are necessary to build the critical mass of awareness to create a sustainable online giving platform. Program naming may also have had an impact, since Kristof's online column mentioned the program alongside similar charities as the URL "www.matchesavings.org." Each charity was linked to its corresponding website, but MatchSavings.org may have had an advantage since it was clearly displayed as a hyperlink. Though simply conjecture, the appearance of the program name as a hyperlink made it easy for readers to see it as a launch point into the MatchSavings.org website since it was just a click away.

Develop a brand personality

Compared with successful microfinance charities such as Kiva, MatchSavings.org lacked a grassroots heritage to promote the program. Kiva was founded by individuals with personal interest to share. While MatchSavings.org was established by an organization with decades of experience, it did not have one passionate founder with a compelling personal story about the program's inception. People connect with other people over a faceless organization.

Make a personal connection

Many fundraising organizations succeed by simulating a direct donor-beneficiary connection. Being able to choose a specific person or group to benefit from a donation is a powerful way to personalize the process and attach an explicit sense of urgency to any individual donation.

WOCCU opted not to do this with MatchSavings.org because of the high costs of tracking real one-to-one connections and the lack of transparency in presenting a direct connection to someone who had already received help. Charities have typically already assisted those they promote as "people in need of your help." It makes programmatic sense to operate this way – donors respond to the

sense of urgency and personal connection, but beneficiaries do not have to wait to get assistance until someone finds their case compelling.

Many microcredit fundraising efforts allow “lenders” to recoup their donation or use it to lend to another person after the loan is repaid, giving an additional opportunity to direct where their money goes. This approach also effectively presents the donation as something other than a handout, even though most people opt to relend their money. The “pay it forward” model is an attractive way to continuously engage people in a program — if they don’t take out their money, they automatically become repeat givers.

Reach economies of scale

MatchSavings.org did not develop into a sustainable source of funding because it never achieved the necessary economies of scale. For most Internet-based nonprofit organizations that conduct their fundraising efforts exclusively online, the vast majority of revenue comes from direct fundraising appeals sent to an organically grown, in-house list of e-mail addresses. Using industry standard figures for donation conversion rates (0.13%) and average gift size (\$80), and assuming a messaging rate of one e-mail per month, a subscriber list of about 16,000 addresses would be necessary to meet a very modest \$20,000 annual fundraising goal. That is a very difficult goal to attain with limited operational funding and staff time.

Over the two-year lifespan of the program, 247 people gave money out of 16,999 total unique website visits, which translates to a fairly impressive 1.4% conversion rate. These numbers are somewhat skewed, however, by the anomaly of the December 2009 New York Times hit, which drove large numbers of new matchers to the site. In general, WOCCU found that its online marketing strategies to drive traffic to the website failed to produce a sustainable stream of donations and was subject to the natural ebbs and flows in nonprofit fundraising, which typically peak at year-end and dip in the summer months.

External funding is necessary to get a new program off the ground. Determine from the beginning what role fundraising will play. Will agencies or individuals be the primary funding source? How much can be raised compared to the cost of the program? What percentage of a donation will go toward operational expenses? Donors want to see as much of their money as possible go to individuals, but operational costs are necessary to create a sustainable program.

Conclusion

In just over two years, MatchSavings.org succeeded in promoting the concept of savings before credit through a program with tangible stories and results. But in the end, the excitement MatchSavings.org elicited did not stimulate sufficient monetary support to sustain the program. Employing online tactics to generate matching funds helped keep the hard costs of the program down but required significant amounts of staff time to keep communications fresh, compelling and effective.

Building brand awareness and reputation takes time. Whether or not a program will succeed depends not only on what it is about and who it reaches but how much time and resources an organization can dedicate to it. Through funding from the USAID FIELD-Support program, WOCCU was able to test new approaches and extend the program much further than it could alone. To WOCCU's knowledge, MatchSavings.org was the first matched savings program to solicit matching funds from the general public.

MatchSavings.org launched in the midst of an economic recession, when even great ideas can suffer the chopping block before they have time to fully mature. Given the opportunity, it may have been interesting to test a community savings model for larger goals or a value chain finance approach for savers who completed the program. The sustainability of privately funded matched savings programs will likely continue to be an ongoing challenge, but through the lessons learned from MatchSavings.org and with the enthusiasm it generated, future matched savings programs will have a good foundation to build upon.