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## Social Networks in Small Places

Submitted by Holly on Tue, 08/10/2010 - 8:35am

In just a few weeks, I'm heading to Colorado to chat with a group of nonprofits about using social media in their work -- but not in Denver.

I'm going to Western Colorado, where everything is smaller. In chatting with my hosts at the Colorado Nonprofit Association, they made it clear that the nonprofits I would be talking with work on a different scale, and I would need to address how nonprofits that work in small towns and rural spaces can use social media.



**Jen Newmeyer,**  
Food Bank of  
Central and  
Eastern North  
Carolina

I had a few assumptions I decided to test by talking to some organizations that work locally using social media.

Jen Newmeyer from the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, Jessica Haas from the Del Norte Family Resource Center, and Lana Nieves from the Independent Living Resource Center of San Francisco (ILRCSF) all answered my call on Facebook or Twitter and were gracious enough to share some time chatting about how they use social media.

Of course, each organization is unique in their approach and results, but there are a few interesting commonalities.

### Fish Where the Fish Are

If you've ever lived in a small town, you know the truism: everybody knows everybody's business. This can make the idea of using Facebook in a small town seem kind of silly -- but it's not!

The Del Norte Family Resource Center has been in operation for about two years now, and their Facebook page gets more traffic than their web site. A community center of sorts, the Center is available for the community to hold trainings and meetings at a low cost for low-income residents of the community. The Center's success depends on organizations using the Center, and on community residents attending and supporting the programs.

So why would people who are just as likely to bump into each other at the coffee shop as they are online find the center on Facebook? Jessica Haas, who runs their Facebook page, puts it this way: "It's at their leisure. It's where they're at."

### Service without Boundaries



**Lana Nieves,**  
ILRCSF

Lana Nieves from the Independent Living Resource Center of San Francisco echoes Jessica's sentiment, with a twist. Even when people are in the same geography, that doesn't mean they'll necessarily bump into you at the corner store. For the ILRCSF, their Facebook page and blog are cornerstones for a community that can't always come to them. "We serve people with disabilities," Lana told me, "and that means that some of the people we work with can't get to our office. These tools help us stay connected to them."

Jessica says the same is true for the Del Norte Family Center, where the community members are spread out across a wide geography. Transportation is an issue and social media helps overcome that.

### Discovering Your Local Connections

Even in the smallest of communities, you can't know everyone's business -- but social media can make it all a lot more explicit.

Jen Newmeyer from the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina has seen that time and again through her use of Twitter. She's made some deep connections with the Raleigh community through Twitter, which have led to a number of outreach opportunities.

In partnership with one local "Tweetup" group, the Food Bank held a social available only to their social media followers. They gave tours of their warehouse, played music, and held raffles. The best part to Jen was that there were people tweeting as they took the tours. The next day, several area bloggers wrote about the event.

Lana from ILRCSF has also had this experience, finding collaboration and partnerships with organizations that work in her city only because she saw a listing on Twitter or Facebook.

### Reinforcements!

Since social media has no boundaries, it makes sense that even local organizations can make beneficial connections from all around the world.

This is something that Lana from ILRCSF has experienced first hand. Her organization provides a lot of information about assistive technologies to the community they work with. Often, they want to translate these resource sheets into Spanish, but translation services are expensive, and this kind of work is difficult because of the specialized terminology. Through Facebook, the ILRCSF connected with a like organization in Spain, and now the two organizations share resource sheets, expanding the reach of their program work.

There are clearly a lot of benefits for local organizations in using social media. What have you found?

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Karen Dwyer  
Thank you so much for sharing these stories about local communities and their use of social media. This proves that social media can be used to create deeper bonds and connections and provide an extension of a gathering place of existing communities. In reality, what these small communities have is what many are trying to recreate using social network.

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**Holly Ross**

You're welcome Karen! I'm just very grateful for the folks who took the time to share with me  
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