

Relevance of Social Media in CSR

On the final day of the Nasscom India Leadership Forum 2010, a separate track was conducted as part of the Nasscom Foundation -- the social development arm of Nasscom. The second session, which was about 'Reaching out to the bottom of the pyramid (BoP) through technology services and media', was chaired by Seemantinee Khot, CEO, Suzlon Foundation. The speakers for this session were Beth Kanter, technology consultant and a Social Media Expert, Gaurav Mishra, CEO, 20:20 Social, Vijay Talwar, CEO, William J Clinton Organization.

Seemantinee Khot started the session with the hope of raising some key issues with regarding to using technology and media to uplift those who are underserved and labeled as being at the 'bottom of the pyramid'. Khot asked the speakers and the audience to think about why everybody is talking about the BoP these days and what section of society comes under this category. Speaking from personal experience in the CSR field, she said more companies who have a CSR arm do not actually reach out to those who do not have the most basic amenities like electricity. The thought of providing computers and connectivity was a far cry in such situations. She questioned the motive for targeting this 'bottom of the pyramid', asking whether this was just a ruse to widen the market and increase prospective numbers. Even though these issues were subsequently not entirely addressed by the speakers, she did make a valid point tha technology services that is developed for the underserved, need to be made keeping the end-user in mind and understanding their requirements -- rather than presuming what will be beneficial to them.

Vijay Talwar drew examples of corporate social responsibility from his past experience with Nike, where the company went through a phase of negative publicity with regards to working conditions and child labor. He explained that creating a CSR report and creating awareness about the girl child, without trying to push its own brand. He cited ASSET (Achieving Sustainable Social Example) as an example where the NGO used Facebook as a platform to raise awareness for children of sex workers. People are increasingly donating via the Internet. Out of the one billion dollars that was donated to the tsunami fund, fifty percent was done over the Internet.

Beth Kanter, a blogger and social media expert, gave live examples where she has been able to use Twitter as a medium to obtain information and even mobilize people into donating and raising awareness amongst people. Pratham Books, a non-profit trust that publishes books for children at affordable prices, was able to track down a 'mobile library' in Kolkata that was being run by kids. They were able to do this through Twitter. Their request to track down the kids who run the mobile library was re-tweeted till it reached someone who got back to them with an address. Pratham Books was then able to donate more books to the mobile library, thereby reaching out to under privileged children who were interested in reading more.

Social media policy :

A more 'corporate' example that Kanter gave, was the American Red Cross. The organization's image had been tarnished after Hurricane Katrina. Over a period of five years, they strove to deal with each complain and criticism by connecting with people and bloggers too. Their interest in social media drove them to start a Twitter

account and tracking people's comments. They used the social media platform to build relationships, address customer service issues and resolve complaints from those who had significant influence in society. Their presence on Facebook was able to draw half of the 3 billion dollars in donation. In Haiti, volunteers, staff and affiliates used Twitter to sync and coordinate. All this, she said, has come through because the Red Cross has formulated a social media policy on how its volunteers, staff and affiliates must represent the organization.

Gaurav Mishra spoke about the untapped population that uses US \$25 phones that only support voice and SMS and raised the question about how social media can be made to move masses. He saw SMS-based social networking as a concept that was worth considering. He listed social media tools that are currently being used to benefit NGOs. Frontline SMS (to send multiple text messages to give updates from remote areas), BabaJob, SMSGupShup, Ushahidi (used to track election irregularities), and Video Volunteers were some of the social media platforms he mentioned.

The session did not really take into account the people who are yet to receive the basic amenities but through Seemantinee, it was highlighted that technology needs to be built around the needs of people and not on the basis of presumption. Mishra admitted that a vast majority still did not use SMS because they find the user interface confusing and language can be a barrier.

Need for more :

Social media platforms can be a cheaper way to reach out to more people and easier to scale, in order to raise awareness. But to mobilize awareness into a call to action, is something that also needs to be looked into. For example, Mishra showed how Ushahidi was used to track text messages sent by people who came across irregularities at voting booths. But nothing was mentioned as how this information was used to translate into some action. Mishra did state a working example of a hybrid approach carried out by Janaagraha for its Jaago Re project, where the group created local offline groups, along with the online networking model.

A key point made by Seemantinee was that more NGOs need to be made aware of the possibilities of social media. She also said that apart from reaching out to the underserved, it is necessary to make it possible to create a bridge between them and the top of the pyramid, so that they can also reach out to them.