

# **Social Media Marketing for Community Foundations: Analyzing Engagement and Determining Best Practices**

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## **Abstract**

Social media use has exploded in the past decade, and now all types of businesses and organizations are using social media platforms to reach consumers and stakeholders. In the philanthropic sector, foundations are using social media to spread messages about the work they fund, and to interact with potential donors and the general public. Community foundations, which most rely on public trust and support, are the type of philanthropic foundations that can particularly benefit from using social media to interact with donors and members of the community. However, simply having a presence on social media is no longer enough, and in order to build their brand, foundations must make an effort to effectively engage with their followers. This research looks at 29 of the top community foundations in terms of giving and assets, and analyzes their presence on Facebook. Data were recorded during the three-month period from April to June 2013. High-performing posts were also qualitatively analyzed to determine what type of posts were the most popular.

## **Introduction**

The use of social media has been rapidly changing and evolving over the past decade. What was once solely a place for friends to interact has evolved into a digital marketplace where brands are competing for attention. In addition to

companies seeking to earn a profit from their social media presence, nonprofits and foundations are also seeking to raise awareness and donations for their causes by using social media. On Facebook, these organizations attempt to gain more support in the form of “likes” on their pages, as well as more likes, comments, and shares on the content they broadcast to their followers. How community foundations use social media is particularly of interest, because they seek public donations, which differs from other foundations in the philanthropic sector. Therefore, how community foundations use social media is important to examine and understand, in order for to learn form the top performing foundations and improve their engagement with the public via these new media tools.

Although there has been a modest amount of research examining how nonprofits use social media, there is very little research looking specifically at the philanthropic sector, especially community foundations. While some of the insights gained in previous studies on nonprofits could likely be applied to community foundations as well, these are organizations that have different characteristics and operations related to how they receive and distribute funds that make them unique. This paper will examine how the top community foundations use Facebook in order to learn more about what makes some foundations more successful than others and what types of posts are the most engaging. The types of posts that are the most engaging and what factors contribute to a community foundation’s overall success on Facebook became clearer by closely studying the individual posts of nearly thirty foundations. The success of a community foundation on Facebook isn’t attributed to the amount of people they serve, but rather the appeal of their individual posts on

Facebook. These posts become more engaging due to a variety of factors, including photos, consistent messaging, and calls to action. This paper uses examples from top-performing foundations to explain how these best practices contribute to a community foundation's social media success.

## **Literature Review**

My research question examines community foundations' use of social media, looking not only at the number of people connected to individual community foundations, but also the level of interaction foundations receive on individual social media posts. The advent of social media in recent years has led to many changes in how brands and nonprofits advertise, and a wealth of research on this topic exists, studying how social media marketing affects consumers. Research on social media marketing in general shows that social media has led to a change in the role of brands, and what consumers expect from brands has changed. Now brands must allow consumers to have an open dialogue, and encourage and facilitate conversations among consumers (Powers et al. 2012, 482). Furthermore, Laroche et. al (2012) concluded that brands on social media "can enhance brand trust and loyalty by improving customer relationship with the brand, other consumers, the company and the products" (p. 80). These two studies illustrate the importance of social media marketing for increasing brand loyalty, and the importance of having open communication on social media platforms. While these studies focus on profit-making brands, the same ideas could likely apply to community foundations, all of which have their own brand that they are attempting to market on social media.

Unfortunately, there is not much research that focuses on community foundations' use of social media, or even philanthropic foundations in general. A body of research does exist, however, that examines nonprofits and their use of social media. A study conducted by Nah and Saxton (2013) examining the 100 largest US nonprofits and their adoption of social media found that the size of an organization's assets did not play a major role in the use of social media, and also found that reliance on public donations for funding had a major effect on an organization's adoption of social media (p. 306-307). While this study looked at what led nonprofit organizations to use social media, Lovejoy and Saxton (2012) examined the content of social media posts made by nonprofits. They found that in general the predominant use of social media by nonprofits was to broadcast information, rather than have a dialogue with supporters. However, while dialogue was not the predominant form of communication, the majority of organizations still utilized dialogue to connect with supporters on social media. This research shows that nonprofits may be behind commercial brands in utilizing social media, and could potentially gain from following the best practices of brands that use social media to enhance communication and brand loyalty.

Community foundations are a unique type of organization, as they differ from nonprofits in their operation as grantmaking organizations, but still rely on public donations from the community. In 2011, community foundations in the United States gave an estimated \$4.2 billion, and prior to the recession typically reported faster annual growth in giving than independent or corporate foundations (The Foundation Center, 2012). Community foundations are a valuable part of the

philanthropic sector, and are the type of foundations that are most likely to connect with donors in the community. This idea is further supported by an honors thesis by Rachel Heredia that found that the donation structure of a foundation influenced their adoption of social media, finding that foundations that accepted donations from the public were more likely to use social media to engage with potential supporters (p. 87-88). In the Council on Foundation's Centennial Plan for a Strong Community Foundation Field (2010), one of the four goals listed for community foundations is brand building, and one of the strategies to achieve this goal is "promote external recognition of community foundations' common value" (p. 6). Research on the effects of social media marketing on brand loyalty show that social media could be an important tool for community foundations to use to achieve this goal, but further research must be done to see if the same theories apply to community foundations.

While prior research has shown the importance of social media marketing for brand-building and has analyzed the adoption and content of nonprofits using social media, there is no significant research that looks specifically at community foundations and if they effectively use social media to engage with stakeholders. In my research, I analyze top community foundations' use of social media to determine which foundations are most effective in engaging with their followers, and look at specific content to determine which types of communications encourage the highest level of interaction with followers.

## **Methodology**

In my study, I analyzed the Facebook pages of top community foundations, focusing on the amount of interaction individual posts received. In order to choose which community foundations I would examine, I consulted the Foundation Center's list of largest foundations. The Foundation Center has two lists for community foundations – the 25 largest by total giving and the 25 largest by total assets. I chose to examine foundations that were on either or both of these lists, which unsurprisingly have a lot of overlap. Thirty unique community foundations appear on these lists, and of these, 29 have a Facebook presence. I chose to analyze a large number of community foundations because I was looking mainly at their Facebook pages and having a large number made it easier to compare foundations to one another and make a better assessment about community foundations on Facebook as a whole. After choosing the foundations for the study, I then looked at individual posts on their Facebook pages over a 3-month period. Analyzing a large number of posts from each foundation was beneficial as it made it clearer which types of posts were the most successful.

The posts that I analyzed on the community foundation Facebook pages were all posts that occurred during the 3-month period of April 1 – June 30, 2013. Measurements of the total number of likes each Facebook page had were taken on the day following the end of this period – July 1, 2013, all within the same hour so that numbers were not artificially inflated for foundations whose metrics were recorded at a later time. The three-month research period was chosen in order to get an in-depth, but precise, measurement of each foundation's Facebook activity. A

short time period could have resulted in bias if one foundation was having a slow news week versus another putting on a major event, for example. The period was not longer, either, in order to prevent past social media strategies that have since been updated to count negatively towards a foundation. During the months of July and August, I analyzed the individual posts made during the research period by creating a spreadsheet for each foundation and recording the number of likes, comments, and shares for each post. I also recorded what type of media each post was, which included text, link, note, photo, photo album, and video. After recording this data for each foundation, I sorted the posts to determine the most popular posts (by likes, comments, shares, or any combination of the three), and looked more closely at those posts to see what elements they had to make them stand out. I took screenshots of the most popular posts as determined by total likes to analyze later, and also wrote notes on my opinion on each page and their posts in general.

The quantitative aspects of my research were analyzed in Microsoft Excel and SPSS. For each foundation, I calculated the mean number of likes per post, comments per post, and shares per post, and also recorded the total number of posts made during the research period. I then used this information to rank the foundations on each metric, to determine which foundations had the highest levels of interaction and compared these rankings with rankings of total number of page likes in order to determine if foundations with a large number of likes also had a large number of interactions. Additionally, I looked deeper at the popular posts that I previously flagged in order to reexamine what elements they had that contributed to their popularity. Using both data (for example, similarities between top-

performing posts), as well as looking at top corporate brands and nonprofits on Facebook, I developed a list of best practices used by community foundations on Facebook.

### *Research Setting*

While my research does not focus on a specific geographical area, it does focus on a specific type of organization. Community foundations differ from private philanthropic foundations in a few key ways. First, community foundations must focus mainly on a specific geographic area (often a city or region) and must make a certain percentage of grants to organizations in that area. Additionally, members of that geographic area help to govern community foundations as members of their board. Finally, community foundations seek donations and partnerships from public donors, as opposed to being fully funded by a corporation or the estate of a single person. These elements of community foundations help make them generally the foundations that are most transparent and have a strong communications arm in order to gain public trust and support. Therefore, community foundations are the most likely to benefit from effective social media use, more so than other foundations in the philanthropic sector, as they can use these tools to engage with the public in the community that they serve.

### **Results**

After a full analysis of all of the community foundations Facebook pages in the study, there were clearly some Facebook pages that had higher levels of



interactions than others. After reviewing descriptive statistics about all of the foundations as a whole, this paper will look closely at three top-performing foundations that fell in the top 5 in terms of average likes, but had distinctly different elements that contributed to their success. The average number of likes per post ranged from 62.1 likes per post for The Seattle Foundation all the way down to 0.53 likes per post for The New York Community Trust. The average number of comments community foundations received was a much smaller number, ranging from a high of 3.79 comments per post for The Seattle Foundation to 0.08 comments per post for The New York Community Trust. The average number of shares per post community foundations received was slightly higher than comments, in general. The foundation with the highest average number of shares per post was the Tulsa Community Foundation with 11.62 shares per post, although these data are skewed due to two posts with a very large number of shares related to disaster relief immediately following a devastating tornado in the region. The Seattle Foundation again performed strongly in this category, falling just behind Tulsa with an average of 7.9 shares per post. Other top performing foundations included The Columbus Foundation, the Omaha Community Foundation, The Oregon Community Foundation, and The Cleveland Foundation. Most of these foundations fell in the top 5 for each category measured.

TOP 5 COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS ON FACEBOOK – AVERAGE LIKES PER POST  
(April-June 2013)

Foundation	Likes per Post	Total # of Posts
1. The Seattle Foundation	62.1	73
2. The Columbus Foundation	30.05	93
3. Omaha Community Foundation	26.57	155
4. The Oregon Community Foundation	12.72	43
5. The Cleveland Foundation	12.05	95

TOP 5 COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS ON FACEBOOK – AVERAGE COMMENTS PER POST  
(April-June 2013)

Foundation	Comments per Post	Total # of Posts
1. The Seattle Foundation	3.79	73
2. The Columbus Foundation	1.62	93
3. Omaha Community Foundation	1.57	155
4. The Cleveland Foundation	1.08	95
5. The Oregon Community Foundation	0.79	43

TOP 5 COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS ON FACEBOOK – AVERAGE SHARES PER POST  
(April-June 2013)

Foundation	Shares per Post	Total # of Posts
1. Tulsa Community Foundation*	11.62	13
2. The Seattle Foundation	7.9	73
3. Omaha Community Foundation	6.09	155
4. The Cleveland Foundation	3.42	95
5. The Chicago Community Trust	2.65	20

\*Tulsa had a few posts with a very large number of shares related to tornado disaster relief

## **Analysis of Three Top-Performing Foundations**

### *The Seattle Foundation*

The Seattle Foundation was the highest performing Facebook page of all foundations measured, with the highest average number of likes and comments per post, and the second-highest number of shares per post. The success of The Seattle Foundation's Facebook page is largely attributed to an event they held, called "GiveBIG." GiveBIG was a 24-hour online fundraising event led by the foundation, in which they challenged the community to donate to a large number of participating nonprofits in the region through the GiveBIG platform. The event was highly publicized on The Seattle Foundation's Facebook page. On May 15, the day of GiveBIG, 29 Facebook updates were posted in just one day, which comprised 40% of the analyzed posts during the study period. Most of these posts were very popular, with many receiving hundreds of likes. The top 5 most popular posts on The Seattle Foundation's Facebook page during the study period were all related to GiveBIG. While fewer updates were posted at other times, most still received a large number of interactions. Another top-performing foundation held a similar campaign – The Omaha Community Foundation posted 54 Facebook updates on the day of "Omaha Gives!" their 24-hour online fundraising challenge, and their top 5 posts were also all related to the Omaha Gives! campaign.

### *The Columbus Foundation*

The Columbus Foundation had the second-largest number of likes per post (30.05), as well the second-largest number of comments per post (1.62). Unlike The

Seattle Foundation and The Omaha Community Foundation, their success is not attributed to an online giving challenge, but instead a strong and consistent social media messaging plan. The Columbus Foundation embraced the slogan “The Spirit of Columbus” for their social media efforts, which is an allusion to the Spirit of Columbus plane – the name of the plane in which the first woman to fly around the world flew. The foundation used the slogan on photos that captured people and events in Columbus, highlighting the work of many events and nonprofits in the city. The majority of the posts on The Columbus Foundation Facebook page were these photos, along with a short description of the person or event that captured the spirit of the city, with the Spirit of Columbus logo in the corner. The top 5 most popular Facebook posts were all photos that fell under the Spirit of Columbus branding. The success of The Columbus Foundation on Facebook illustrates the value of building a strong brand, as well as the importance of regularly posting interesting photos that show events that the foundation is participating in or which are taking place in the area served by the foundation.

### *The Cleveland Foundation*

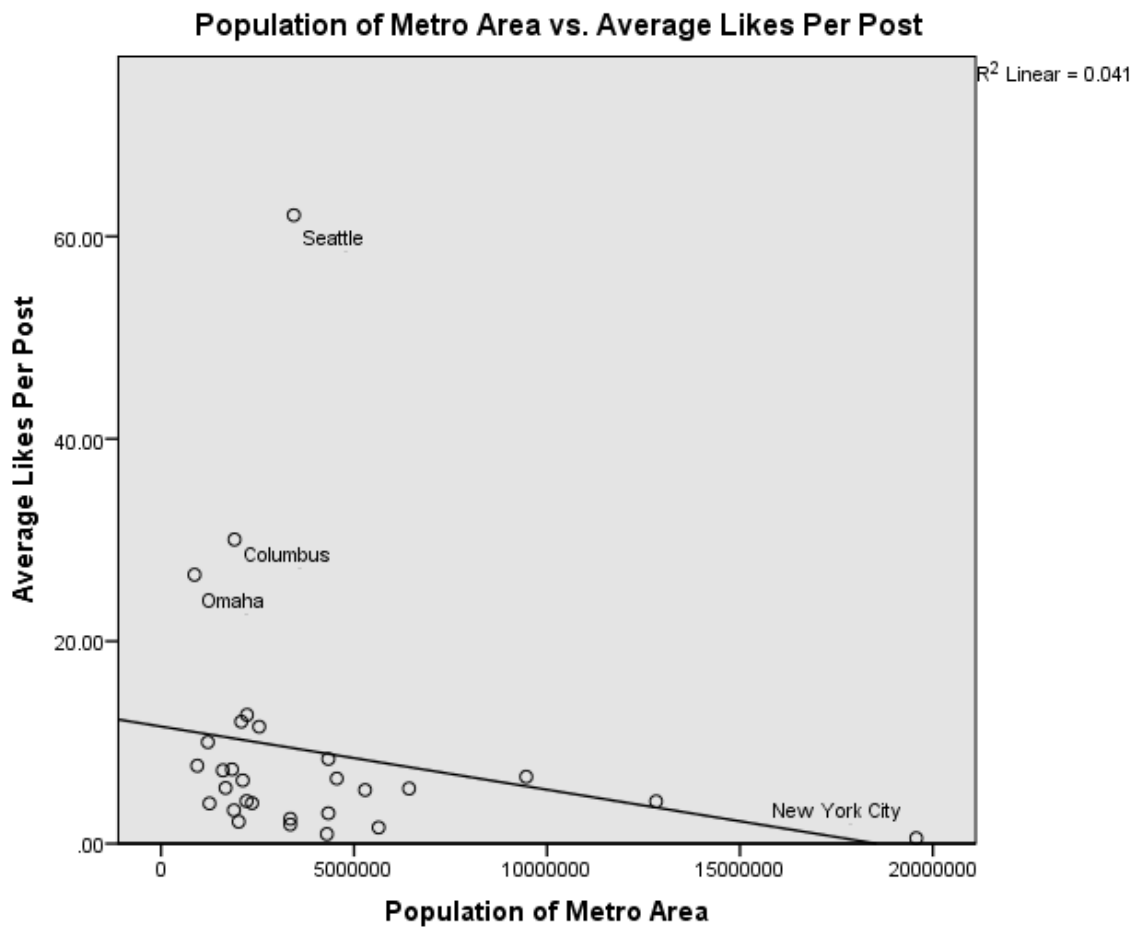
The Cleveland Foundation was another foundation that performed strongly on Facebook, with an average of 12.05 likes per post and 2.65 shares per post. The Cleveland Foundation updated their page regularly and consistently, and even cross-promoted their other social media properties on Facebook, including their foundation blog and chats hosted on Twitter. The most popular posts during the study period were related to the Cleveland Courage Fund, which the foundation

established to collect donations for three kidnapping victims from Cleveland. This case received a large amount of coverage in the national press, and there were many people interested in donating to the fund. After the foundation initially shared information about the fund, they wrote many follow-up posts that answered the questions that people wrote in comments, which was a good example of how to effectively communicate with an audience on Facebook. In other posts not related to the Cleveland Courage Fund, the foundation regularly included questions for their followers in their posts. Excluding posts related to the Cleveland Courage Fund, the top 3 most commented on posts included questions in the text. Including questions in posts proved to be an effective tactic for increasing interaction with Facebook fans for The Cleveland Foundation, as well as a number of other community foundations.

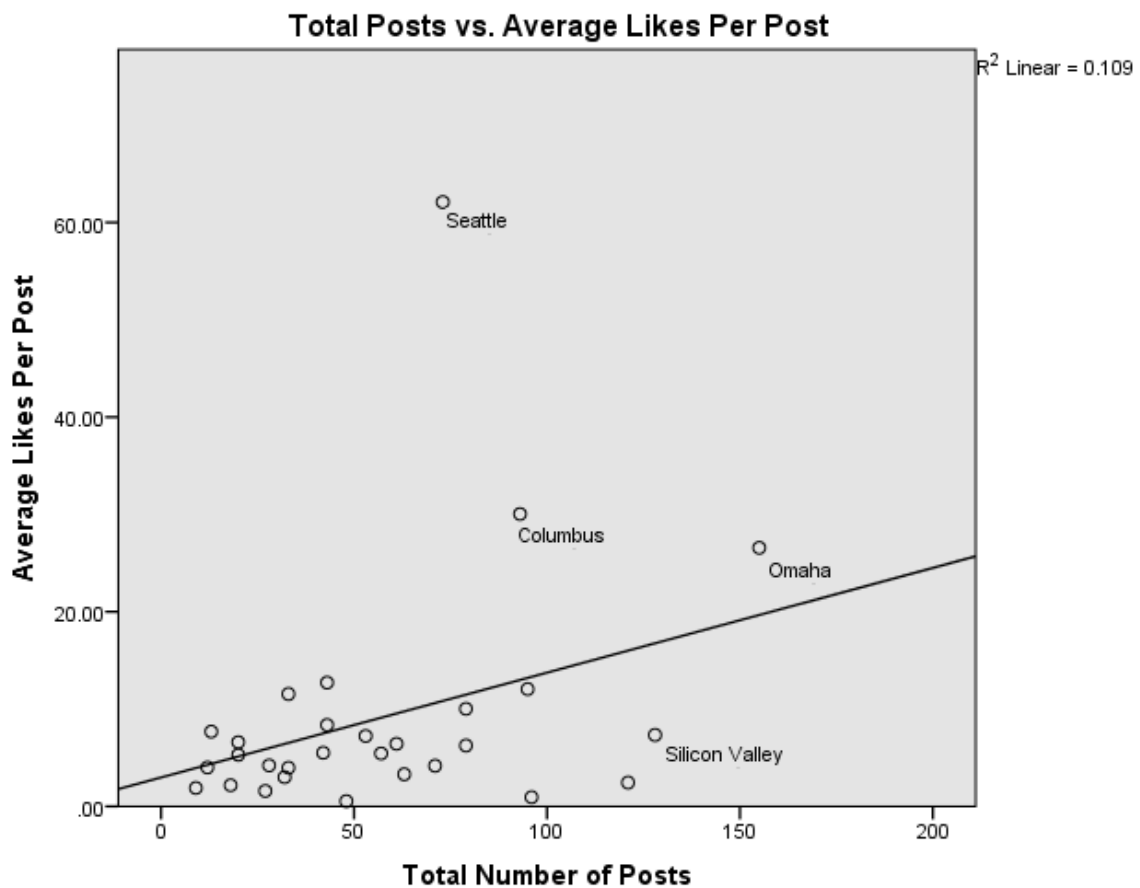
### **Further Analysis**

Beyond posting engaging content, there are other factors that could have contributed to a community foundation's success on Facebook; however, most of these factors did not have a strong effect. One could argue that foundations that serve larger geographic areas would receive a larger number of likes, comments, and shares on their post, but the data collected does not support this claim. When bivariate analyses were run on average likes, comments, and shares versus the population for the metropolitan area of the foundation's location, a weak negative correlation was shown. The correlation between population and average likes per post was -0.204, the correlation between population and average comments per

post was -0.206, and the correlation between population and average shares per post was -0.218. The population of the metro area seemed to have very little impact on the average number of interactions a foundation received on their Facebook page – in fact, the foundation located in the area with the largest metropolitan population (The New York Community Trust) had the lowest number of likes per post of all the community foundations studied. While there is a slight negative correlation between metro area population and average likes, a scatterplot of all the foundations studied shows the majority clustered in one area.



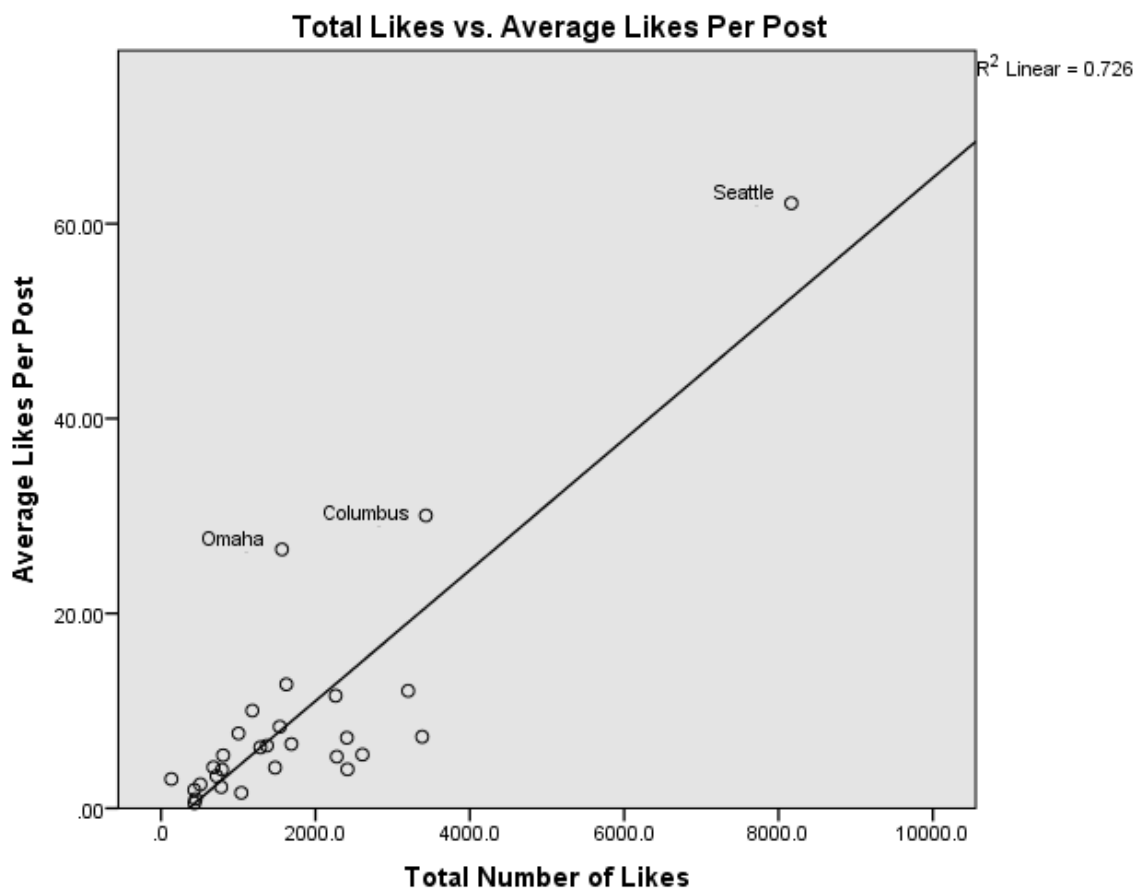
Posting a large number of times also did little to influence the average number of interactions per Facebook post. A bivariate analysis of total number of posts during the three-month study period versus the average number of likes per post found a moderately-sized positive correlation of 0.330. The top five foundations in terms of average likes per post had a total number of posts ranging from 43 to 155.



When looking at these numbers as well as the total number of posts for all 29 community foundations studied, there are many outliers. Yet, it is important to note the importance of posting somewhat frequently. The foundation in the top five for average likes per post with the lowest number of posts still posted nearly once every two days during the study period, and an additional three posted at least once

per day, on average. Posting regularly helps foundations to continue to appear in the newsfeeds of their followers, making it easier for them to receive interactions from followers scrolling through their Facebook homepage.

While the previous measures showed weak correlations, there is one measure that showed a very strong correlation. When comparing total number of likes a community foundation has on their Facebook page versus the average number of likes they received per post, the correlation was 0.852. This number suggests that pages with a larger number of likes are more likely to receive a higher number of likes on each post.

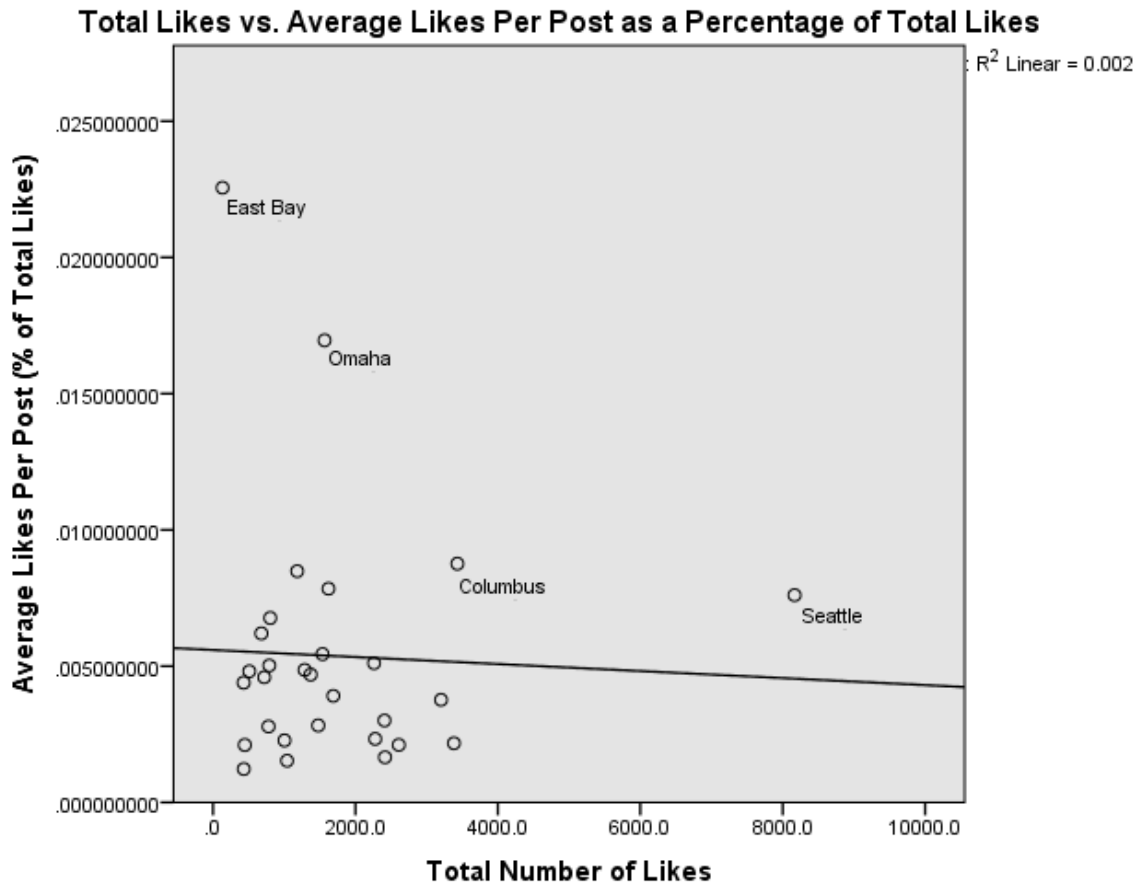


While this makes sense, it also doesn't mean that pages with more automatically receive a large number of likes on their individual posts. Silicon Valley Community



Foundation (SVCF) is an example of a foundation that has a high number of total likes on their Facebook page, but receives a lower level of interaction on individual posts. With 3,382 total likes, SVCF has the third-largest number of total likes among the community foundations studied. Yet, their levels of interactions rank much lower. In terms of average likes per post, SVCF ranks 10<sup>th</sup> among the community foundations studied, and their rankings in the other categories are even lower. The number of comments SVCF receives per post places them at a rank of 18 of the 29 community foundations studied, and the average number of shares ranks at number 15. These numbers are in stark contrast to the other top foundations in terms of number of total likes. The Seattle Foundation, which has the highest number of total likes, also has the most number of likes and comments per post, as well as the second-highest number of shares per post. Similarly, The Columbus Foundation, which ranks second in terms of total number of likes, also ranks second in number of likes and comments per post. The number of total likes a community foundation has on Facebook is, for the most part, related to the quality of their content. There are many reasons why SVCF could have a large number of total likes but have lower levels of interactions. Because of SVCF's geographical location in the heart of the technology industry, it could be likely that the people in the region it serves are more likely to "like" their page on Facebook as a method of showing support, but with no intention of interacting with the content. The content that SVCF is posting may also not be interesting or shared in a way that encourages interactions from followers. While determining the cause of SVCF's low levels of interaction is outside the scope of this study, this foundation serves as an example that a large number of

total likes is not necessarily a predictor of success on individual posts.



In fact, when replacing “average likes” with “average likes, as a percentage of total likes,” the correlation is much weaker at 0.311 and there is little patterns seen on the scatterplot of all the foundations. This suggests that foundations must make an effort to make individual posts interesting and engaging, which will result in higher levels of interactions per post as well as a higher number of total likes.

When looking at all of the community foundations studied as a whole, there are clearly certain elements of posts that contribute to a higher level of interaction. These include sharing interesting photos, asking questions, and having clear calls to action in the post such as “click like.” These elements were often used by the top-performing community foundations, showing the importance of including them

regularly in individual posts. However, social media is not an exact science, and employing these elements did not ensure success of any one individual post. Being consistent is important, and The Columbus Foundation effectively illustrated this by their use of the “Spirit of Columbus” branding. Another interesting element that resulted in high levels of interactions of individual posts were responses to major disasters. Three events that occurred during the study period illustrated this phenomenon: a major tornado resulted in a high number of shares for related posts by the Tulsa Community Foundation, responses to found kidnapping victims resulted in high levels of interactions for The Cleveland Foundation, and a donation fund for victims of the Boston Marathon bombing resulted in a large number of interactions for The Boston Foundation. These events illustrate the importance of social media in responding to disasters and events with extensive national media attention, and are a subject for further research.

## **Conclusion**

Social media is not an exact science, and including certain elements such as a photo in a post will not guarantee a community foundation will be successful on Facebook. My research has shown that there are a variety of factors that interact with each other and can contribute to a community foundation’s social media success, or lack thereof. Yet, it is also clear that there are certain best practices that can help a community foundation to better engage with their audience on Facebook. As foundations that rely a great deal on public support, it is important for community foundations to have a deep engagement with their supporters, and

Facebook is an important tool that can help foster those relationships. While it is hard to guess how social media will continue to evolve, it seems fairly clear that it will stay an important part of the lives of both organizations and the general public for a long period of time, so community foundations should make an effort now to strongly position themselves on social media so that they are able to better grow and adapt.

This research study examined community foundations over a fairly short time period of just three months, but it would be interesting to see how the foundations' pages change and grow over a longer period of time. There are also many other statistics and metrics that would have been interesting to measure, but that were outside the scope of this research study. Studying the demographics of those that interact with community foundation Facebook pages would help determine which posts are more engaging, and seeing how individual posts performed over time would also be an element for future research. Additionally, it would be interesting to see how the levels of interaction change for a foundation if they update their social media posting style to incorporate more of the best practices used by leading foundations. It would be hard for any foundation to change their social media plan and become successful overnight, but employing some of the best practices found in this study would likely translate into better interactions with followers.

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