

## **Companies turn to social media for grant-giving**

**Experts say the trend has a number of benefits for grant givers--but the best applicants might not always win**

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Companies are increasingly using social networking sites as a means of determining grant winners.

As celebrities, politicians, and students alike increasingly use social media to stay connected, education experts say they have noticed a growing number of companies turning to social media to determine grant award winners.

And education is not alone. Sherrie A. Madia, director of communications for the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, said the notion of using social media for social good is growing across all industries.

"In part, this trend is growing as companies see for themselves what 'doing well and doing good' can do for their brand, and social media is often the best means of promoting community outreach, based on its inherent ability to reach communities in new and more personal ways," said Madia, who is the author of *The Social Media Survival Guide: Everything You Need to Know to Grow Your Business Exponentially with Social Media*.

Steve Loflin, founder and executive director of the National Society of Collegiate Scholars (NSCS), said his organization uses social media to promote its scholarship opportunities to its members and to showcase scholarship recipients.

"Corporations are using Facebook because it's where their customers, clients, or members are. If you want people to be engaged with your brand and raise the awareness about your grants and organizations, you can't rely on traditional media alone to share that message," he said. "The bottom line is that social media has changed the way in which we acquire and

use information. This is true in general and certainly the case with grants and awards.” (See [“Schools reach out to prospective students via Facebook”](#)<sup>[1]</sup>.)

Both Madia and Loflin cited Pepsi’s [“Refresh Everything”](#)<sup>[2]</sup> campaign.

In its campaign, Pepsi invited consumers to become fans of its Facebook page and submit ideas across a variety of categories, from developing neighborhood projects to addressing hunger and homelessness. Fans vote on the entries, and Pepsi will award grants ranging from \$5,000 to \$250,000. The company estimates it will give away \$15.6 million, Madia said.

In the education world, [Kohl’s uses Facebook to connect with and determine potential grant award winners](#)<sup>[3]</sup>. In early July, the department store announced a contest that will award \$500,000 to 20 public and private K-12 schools.

To celebrate the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kohl’s Cares, its philanthropic program, Kohl’s will award \$10 million total—20 awards of \$500,000—to schools whose students, staff, faculty, or supporters share what their school would do with the prize. Examples include starting an art program, creating a new computer lab, or saving a music program. The program runs through Sept. 3.

“As kids and parents think about the new school year, we want everyone to dream big about how half a million dollars could impact their favorite school,” said Julie Gardner, Kohl’s executive vice president and chief marketing officer.

“We believe that when communities thrive, so does business. We feel so strongly about this program and the positive effect it could have that we have made it the cornerstone of the company’s back-to-school campaign,” she added.

Once a student, teacher, or parent submits ideas for what his or her school could do with \$500,000, Kohl’s Facebook fans can vote up to 20 times for their favorite elementary, middle, or high schools, with a maximum of five votes for any individual school.

The top 20 vote-getting schools that meet contest criteria will win \$500,000 each—as long as the school officials have provided information on how the school will use the money to support education programs or initiatives. Winning schools will be announced in late September.

As with all things, using social media to determine grant winners has both its pros and its cons.

“The upside of social media granting is the potential to engage more people, rally communities, and of course, generate positive feelings for the brand in the name of corporate social responsibility,” Madia said.

“The downside is that even as these promotions engage, they may isolate as more control is given over to the hands of consumers—the information ‘haves’—which may leave organizations who need funding the most even further behind.”

Loflin added that the best applicant might not win, because the general public might not be as attentive to all aspects of the application in the same way that a judging panel would.

"You can reduce the likelihood of that by ensuring that you use social media and the public to only vote on finalists. That way, it doesn't matter who wins—you'd feel satisfied that any of the applicants was worthy and met the grant's criteria or standards," he said.

As the use of social media in grant giving evolves, Loflin said there will be a greater need and request for transparency.

"The process of online voting can feel more like a popularity contest than a process for identifying the most qualified and worthy candidate," he said. "Verification and accountability are good measures of fairness and accuracy."

**Links:**

[Pepsi's "Refresh Everything" campaign](#)

[Kohl's Cares](#)

[National Society of Collegiate Scholars](#)

[The Wharton School](#)