

Why Didn't Facebook Waive 'Sponsored Post' Fees for Hurricane Sandy Relief?

BY LEA ZELTSERMAN | Wednesday, November 7 2012

Even a week after Hurricane Sandy struck, even on Election Day, the urgency and desperate need is still palpable. On the phone, relief coordinators talk quickly and then excuse themselves to rush back to their duties. On social media timelines, posts tick by rapidly with requests for volunteers to help seniors stuck in their apartments, to feed evacuees, to collect blankets, to shelter pets.



South Ferry subway station under water, the day after Hurricane Sandy (credit: MTAPhotos)

For a while, it seemed that we were moving seamlessly from social media elections to social media revolutions to social media disaster relief. But Facebook doesn't want to play that game any longer. Volunteers in New York and New Jersey dropped everything to help the thousands evacuated from homes that were flooded, freezing and without electricity; the New York Times and Wall Street Journal dropped their paywalls to give people full access to information during this time of crisis; but Facebook did not suspend its fees for promoting posts — even when they were urgent calls for emergency volunteers and supplies.

This past summer, tech watchers started to notice that posts on their Facebook pages weren't reaching as many fans as they had in the past. Suddenly, just 10-15 percent of the people who'd signed up to "like" a page were seeing its content.

And then Facebook rolled out a conveniently timed solution — promoted posts, which offered page owners the option to reach varying numbers of their fans and friends of their fans. For a price.

Was Facebook “[broken on purpose](#)”? Headlines from the New York Observer and even the Wall Street Journal seemed to think so, screaming “[Broken on Purpose: Why Getting It Wrong Pays More than Getting It Right](#)” and “[It's Not Cool to Pay for Facebook Posts](#).”

It's an accusation the company has denied, claiming that page posts still reach the same number of people on average.

“We did not introduce these changes to news feed to incentivize users or businesses to use promoted posts; rather we recently saw the need to reduce instances of negative feedback occurring in news feed, such as people hiding posts or reporting posts as spam,” wrote PR spokesperson Gwendolyn Belomy in a statement sent by email. “Engaging posts will still get good organic reach.”

But that's not the feeling among smaller non-profits and NGOs, who have invested time and energy into building their base — lured in by the promise of an open and accessible (aka, free) platform — and are now feeling backed into a corner where they must either pay up or lose everything.

It's a reality that has become particularly ugly over the past week, as charities and aid organizations added weighing out promoted versus un-promoted posts to the to-do list.

Daniel Sieradski, an activist who manages the Occupy Judaism Facebook page (with 2,733 likes), spent \$150 out-of-pocket on Facebook posts to promote fundraising and volunteer calls for hurricane victims this week. His non-promoted posts are seen by less than 150 people; by contrast, a \$20 post was seen by 7,890 people (that number includes not just his page fans, but their friends too). Incidentally, it was a post raging against Facebook's promoted posts.

Promoted or not, viral content tends to travel.

“It's infuriating. I respect that Facebook is a large company, that puts money into its tech assets,” says Sieradski. “But are you going to exploit your user base in a way that privileges the upper half? Facebook is saying everybody's got to pay to play now. This isn't a level playing field.”

Facebook is toying with our most cherished assumptions about social media and the Internet, “Shifting the idea from the Internet as something that puts the tools of media into the hands of the public, as the bottom-up media ... Facebook is changing this back to top-down media.”

In its more utopian renderings, social media represents the promise that, in exchange for losing some privacy, maybe, just maybe, this time the little guy stands a chance. And during disasters, it's a lifeline. No one I spoke to suggested that the company doesn't have a right to make a profit. But the feeling is that Facebook has somehow cheated, breaking the unspoken contract around those notions of public good that drive social media. Tahrir Square, in all its hopeful optimism, seemed to hover over every conversation.

Alexander Rapaport, who runs the Brooklyn kosher soup kitchen [Masbia](#), puts it far more simply: “Bait-and-switch comes to mind. You get everything set up ... they encourage you to get likes. Why did we invest so much time and energy in this?”

Given the crisis — they've gone from 500 to 3,000 meals a day — Masbia opted to pay for promoted posts to its 925 Facebook fans, spending nearly \$100 already. That's \$100 that could have fed up to 20 people.

The posts they paid for were specific calls for volunteers, and the results speak for themselves. They've had 100 volunteers a day showing up and have turned people away. But in the long run, Rapaport questions the value of paying for 'likes,' arguing that Facebook is good for building brand awareness but not for direct fundraising asks, which means it's not an expense they can justify.

Not everyone is put off by the changes. Like Rapaport, Margarita Korol, the marketing and PR coordinator for COJECO, is focused on immediate needs and is [reaching out in whatever way possible](#). Facebook is just one of many strategies, though she notes that this is the first time she felt justified promoting posts.

“I hadn't felt it appropriate to employ the promoted post feature until we began coordinating Hurricane Sandy relief efforts,” she wrote in an email.

“Presenting a promoted post at the top of a member's timeline comes with the assumption that the organization has something to gain. In the case of Sandy relief, it was transparent that we are on the same side and that our incentives are aligned.”

But for many charities, the return on views and clicks isn't enough to justify the expense (a more damning problem for Facebook in the long run as it struggles with its IPO). [Jersey Cares](#), which coordinates volunteers across the state, has relied on Twitter — their single promoted post only took them from 175 likes to 250. And [Project 195](#), a national organization that does disaster relief, argues that the cost per click doesn't justify the expense when they have access to Twitter, email lists and even local media coverage.

Co-founder Dave Skoblar suggested that Facebook should treat charities in a separate category, an idea that's been floated by many in the non-profit sector, spurred on by similar moves from Google

and LinkedIn. Even the New York Times dropped its paywall for Hurricane coverage.

Unfortunately, that won't help smaller, grassroots initiatives and "pop-up groups" like [Staten Island Recovers](#) or [Rockaway Emergency Plan](#).

Facebook refused to comment on the suggestion that they make a special exemption for non-profits or specific emergencies like Hurricane Sandy.

What it does have to offer is its own [Global Disaster Relief page](#). Leaving aside the absurdity that a single Facebook page can stand in for the entirety of our very troubled planet, Facebook's efforts have been abysmal. On October 30, the page had nine posts, dropping down to a mere two on October 31, another two on November 1 and then just a single post on November 4. A few posts point to Red Cross, FEMA and even wedding website The Knot, but mostly, Facebook's disaster relief translates into pats on the back about the value of social media, with factoids like the Jersey Shore Hurricane News page [receiving 111 likes on a post](#) or the [top terms shared by Facebook users](#) the morning after the disaster. Umm, thanks for the intel?

So far, hurricane relief remains front-and-center, and last night's election results won't divert that attention. Related posts will continue to qualify as, in Facebook-speak, "engaging" content that gets views. Viral enough for now, but for how long?

This post has been updated; its headline was changed.

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