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LOOSE WIRE By JEREMY WAGSTAFF



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Virtuous Reality

How Online Networks Can Boost Good Causes

March 30, 2007

JAKARTA, Indonesia -- When Beth Kanter added a few lines of computer code to a Web site in December she proved a simple truth: All the fancy social-networking, Web 2.0 stuff we keep hearing about can have a useful purpose.

The computer code was what is called a Web widget. Think of it as a mini Web page within a larger Web page, a panel where the data come from a different source from the rest of the stuff on that page. Widgets are increasingly popular as a way of delivering little slices of information or content to Web logs (blogs) or other Web pages. Usually, it's geeky stuff like a clock or a piece of music or video. But in Ms. Kanter's case it's about raising money for charity.

Ms. Kanter, a 50-year-old Massachusetts-based consultant to nonprofit organizations, wasn't new to computers. So when in November Honolulu-based ChipIn launched its fund-raising widget, which allows users to contribute money and also displays how much money has been raised and how much still needs to be raised, she took the plunge; she placed the code on her Web page

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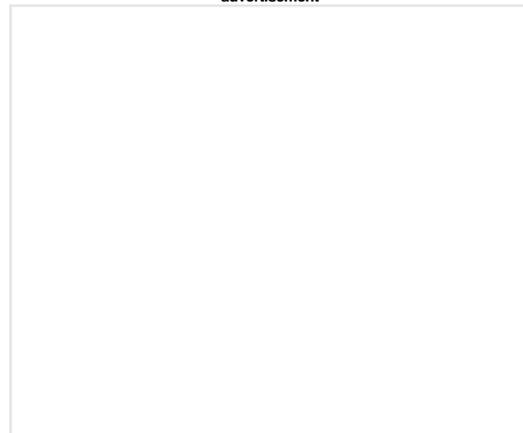
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(sharingfoundation.chipin.com/sharing-foundation) and set a goal -- raising a modest \$750 to fund Cambodian orphan Leng Sopharath to go to college -- and a deadline of a month.

She then raided address books, instant-messaging buddy lists and networking sites for people who might be interested. ChipIn handled the donations. She raised \$882 in 26 days. (You can find details of her campaign at [widgetfundraising.wikispaces.com](http://widgetfundraising.wikispaces.com).)

Raising money online isn't new. But what's interesting about Ms. Kanter's case is that the panel she used taps into something else: the growing trend of social networking online. Web sites, Web services and blogs all thrive on the ability to reach others and build informal, ad hoc networks of people with similar interests and goals. What Ms. Kanter proved is that it's possible to use these networks to raise money, quickly, without a lot of back-office stuff. As Michael Stein, California-based nonprofit strategist and author of a book on online fund raising, puts it: "Everyone talks about Web 2.0, viral marketing...Beth sat down one afternoon and wanted to make it work for her."

Ms. Kanter, says ChipIn founder and Chief Executive Carnet Williams, is not alone. Since November, ChipIn widgets have been used for 3,000 events, raising more than \$500,000 for them.

Expect to see this kind of thing grow. Peer-to-peer fund raising, or personal fund raising, or distributed fund raising may appear more authentic and appealing to people fatigued by overexposure to TV, newspaper and magazine appeals. "People want to know where their \$10 is going and how it is helping," Mr. Williams says.

The system isn't perfect. One area ChipIn and other similar services have yet to master is money: While it's easy to donate via their widgets if you're a user of online payment service PayPal, this doesn't work in all currencies and in all countries.

And it remains to be seen whether this is just a fad. After all, donor fatigue is just as likely to kick in online as offline. If every Web site and blog we visit is festooned with tip jars, donate badges and fund-raising bars, we may just switch off. But on the other hand we read the people we trust and we trust the people we know, so it's more likely that we'll give to a charity they believe in. That we're able to monitor what's happened to our cash just may end up making us more discerning, generous givers.

Widgets may not herald the end of the big, mainstream charities, says Ms. Kanter, but they are here to stay. "Organizations that think it is a fad," she says, "will be left out."

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