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Young philanthropists go high-tech to reach lofty giving goals

At 29, Michael J. Greene of Chicago is a young philanthropist in the making, though he hardly fits the stereotype. He doesn't drive a Porsche; in fact, he just sold his VW Passat with 90,000 miles and uses public transit to get around.

Nor does Greene have a huge bankroll to back his pet project, a new website called WorldPennyJar dedicated to disaster relief, health, education and the environment.

Yet Greene is light-years ahead of many in his age group to grasp how high-tech will change giving in the 21st Century. For starters, he's using the same strategy indie artists now exploit to raise start-up capital: a concept known as "crowdfunding," and popularized on sites such as Kickstarter and indiegogo.com. To explain WorldPennyJar, Greene produced a 4-minute video and posted it to attract donations.

Greene's blueprint is a programmer's dream: As he envisions it, WorldPennyJar would round up purchases made on retail websites — say, an office supply chain or pharmacy — to the nearest dollar. That change would then fill a virtual change bucket to fund a network of charities.

Greene sees WorldPennyJar as ideal for time-strapped givers. "There's no actual step you need to

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take," he says. "It's just a quick snap decision during the checkout process. And it's a relatively small amount to ask for, though it really can add up across the Internet."

With \$1,200 raised and another \$18,000-plus to go, Greene has his work cut out for him. In addition to the programming challenges, he has yet to convince any retailers to partner up. But sites such as



WorldPennyJar demonstrate how young idealists, with their understanding of digital navigation, now team giving hearts with entrepreneurial smarts.

"Philanthropy has been very slow to evolve and discover the web," says Jason Franklin, executive director of Bolder Giving, a website that shares stories of people pledging significant percentages of their assets to worthy causes. "But being younger, I'm online from the time I wake up to the time I go to bed. My phone is by my bed and the second I wake, I check my email and my

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Facebook page.”

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“We have a social media coordinator who comes in 10 hours a week, and in the last eight months, we’ve gone from under 100 Facebook fans to almost 800,” Franklin says. “You wouldn’t compare us to the Gates Foundation, which has 180,000 fans, but we have more followers than the Ford Foundation. They have 729 — and we have 795.” The bottom line: Bolder Giving’s website traffic increased six-fold in the last year.

Franklin cites Kiva and Crowdrise as innovative sites changing the fundraising game, the latter allowing users to collect for any cause they like. (Kiva pools donations and distributes them to the poor via microfinance loans.) Other pages such as Facebook Causes and Jumo (now in its beta version) allow for the promotion of worthy causes. Even as potential givers flock there for guidance, so will those seeking to promote their pet cause.

“Social media allows you to connect and be part of a community, or to make a donation much, much easier,” says Melissa Berman, President and CEO of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. “But the most effective campaigns not only

connect you to information, but allow you to get involved in making change. The first wave of tech opened us up to getting information beyond our backyard — and the second wave is about getting involved.”

Other times, young philanthropists use social media in less obvious but still innovative ways. Lauren McClusky, 21, used a summer’s worth of campaigning on Facebook and Twitter to promote “Nelarusky,” a charity concert for Special Olympics. Assisted by a team of interns — all her own age — McClusky also redesigned her event website to make it easier for visitors to buy tickets and donate online.

The cyber-push paid off big. On Aug. 3, Nelarusky raised more than \$30,000 and sold out Chicago’s Metro, a venue that holds more than 1,100 people. It was a triumph for McClusky, the daughter of a Chicago music promoter, who threw her first charity concert in 2007 when she was 17. (To date, all five of her concerts have raised close to \$100,000 for Special Olympics.)

But it’s also an extension of giving values passed down from her parents. McClusky first raised money for Special Olympics when she was 9, donating \$100 from a neighborhood lemonade stand. She’s also spent many hours volunteering with the organization as well.

McClusky stresses that age should never get in the way making money to make a difference, because teens and twentysomethings know so much about the fine points of social media. “We thought when we started that this would be the smallest event, and look at what it is

now,” she says. “Honestly, no idea is too big of an idea.”

Phil Cubeta, who holds the Sallie B. and William B. Wallace Endowed Chair in Philanthropy at The American College in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, supports that notion, and the youthful tech wave behind it.

“Philanthropy is usually used for a Bill Gates figure: someone with a lot of money and a lot of clout with the resources to cure malaria,” Cubeta says. “Then there’s this peer-to-peer giving, people chipping in to a common pot — doing what’s right with a little bit of your time and energy. And that in aggregate may be just as important.” ■