

# Report on the Annual Grantee Convening

## Of the Northern California Environmental Grassroots Fund And California Wildlands Grassroots Fund

November 14, 2008  
Oakland, California

On a warm sunny day in Oakland, 75 activists from 52 California environmental groups attended the third annual convening of grantees of the Northern California Environmental Grassroots Fund and the California Wildlands Grassroots Fund. People came from as far north as Weaverville in Trinity County and as far south as Anaheim and all points in between. A total of 90 people attended the event, which was focused on "Activism 2.0: Tools for Grassroots Environmental Activists." The historic Preservation Park Conference Center in downtown Oakland served as the site for the convening. To offset the carbon footprint of the event, energy credits were purchased from NativeEnergy.

### Online Engagement Essentials

John Kenyon led the first session of the day. A veteran nonprofit technology strategist, he has years of experience working with nonprofit groups to help them reach their organizational goals using technology.

Mr. Kenyon covered the basic requirements for groups to engage in an online presence, including creating a web presence, communicating with a variety of audiences through websites and email newsletters, driving traffic to websites and tracking results. He also talked about organizational capacity requirements for effective online engagement.

One of the highlights of his talk was that action is important for positive online engagement. People need to be able to do something when they go to a website: make a donation, sign a petition, volunteer at an event or find out other ways to get involved. This activity will bring people back to the website and also make them feel part of the work of the organization.

A website is not the only tool for organizational effectiveness, but should be complementary with other communication methods. If direct mail is utilized, it should be coordinated with the website so that there is a consistent message across platforms.

The audience had a variety of questions and comments during the session. Of the 54 evaluations we received, 80% said the presentation of "great," and 20 % said it was "good." The comments included:

- *Ran out of time for all content.*
- *Excellent information, very useful.*
- *Maybe too much info, but better too much than not enough.*
- *John's talk generated a significant "to do" list. Can't wait to get back to the office.*
- *Post notes online, provide full size slides – notebook too small.*
- *A little too much redundancy.*
- *Great presentation – covered a lot of ground and provided useful, relevant specifics too. Thanks for the handouts!*
- *Inspired to move forward on our web design. Was timely.*
- *John is great! He covered a lot of information from basic to complex and offered great simple tips to implement quickly.*
- *Would have liked to have him provide 2x the time so he could have finished his presentation – I feel like we missed some great info at the end.*

## Question and Answer Session

After his presentation, John Kenyon opened up the floor for questions from the audience. Questions ranged from how to set up a website or email list to what are the staff needs to have a more effective online presence. Many questions asked were specific to the subjects of the afternoon workshop topics and were addressed in that setting.

## Afternoon Workshops

After lunch, grantees could choose from one of three workshops on databases, building effective nonprofit websites and e-communication basics.

The **database workshop** was led by Joey Gray, a consultant with ONE/Northwest in Seattle. The focus of the session was capturing and managing information to help empower constituents. This workshop received evaluations with 67% saying it was "good" or "great". Additional comments from the evaluations include the following:

- *Lots of web searching/logging in time spent to getting down to topic. I asked in the beginning if my questions would be answered in this workshop, was told yes, and it was not talked on at all. Other workshops were more applicable it turned out.*
- *Too much Salesforce, not just overall database management.*
- *It was useful and relevant. It ended up more as a discussion than a regular presentation.*
- *Joey has a lot to offer. She lost track of her presentation early on.*
- *Hard to access level in room and speak to that level.*
- *Way too scattered.*
- *I only stayed for half because it was way over my head. Could have used better organization.*
- *Small size of workshop allowed for questions directly related to our groups.*

The **website workshop** was led by two staff member from TechSoup, Chris Peters and Becky Wiegand. Chris is a technology writer, analyst and trainer and Becky is a staff writer, writing and editing articles for the TechSoup Learning Center. The focus of the session was how to build and maintain effective websites without a technical staff. This session received a 74% good or great rating on the evaluations.

- *Attended first portion and left because it was too detailed – didn't seem to be topic that I need to understand. Someone told me the second part had great helpful information and a walk-through on [wordpress.com](http://wordpress.com)*
- *A little too much elaboration on off-subject topics. Just one speaker would have been better. (Also, small room, constant "translation" was a bit distracting. They tried to keep volume low, but...)*
- *Disorganized workshop.*

John Kenyon presented the **e-communications workshop**. The focus was on effective email communications, including building email lists, e-newsletters, spam guidelines, email message vendors, and online/offline fundraising campaigns. This was the most attended session and received a 97% great or good rating.

- *This was so helpful. However I feel overwhelmed and as though I will never find the money to make our site work.*
- *He is great. A great speaker as well as informational, not to mention entertaining.*
- *Another great workshop! John did get a bit short with poor/uninformed questions.*
- *Some people kept asking unrelated/unrealistic questions.*

A common theme of the comments on all of the workshops was that there were so many different starting points of technology experience in the rooms that the workshop leaders were easily led off track with so many questions. Another theme was the regret

that individuals could only attend one workshop. These comments speak to the fact that this is an important topic for those in attendance. One suggestion was to not have the expert panel, but to offer each workshop twice so that more people could access the information.

### **Ask the Experts Panel – Afternoon Plenary**

In the afternoon, attendees were given the opportunity to ask technology and communications questions to the workshop presenters and other technology experts. The panel included John Kenyon, Chris Peters, Joey Gray, Becky Wiegand and Fennel Doyle of Tides Foundation. The questions were far-ranging and varied from how and why to set up a Facebook account to how to find consultants for help with upgrading websites.

As the energy level in the room lagged due to so much information being absorbed, Tim Little of the Rose Foundation re-energized the crowd by having everyone in the room answer one of the following questions: What is one thing you've learned today that is valuable? What is one thing you are curious about? Based on today's conversations, what is one thing you will do differently?

Highlights of those answers include:

- *The importance of tracking metrics.*
- *How important it is to plan and schedule before diving in.*
- *The need to group updates and additions with what the organization is trying to achieve.*
- *The importance of tracking links and the importance of the design of the newsletters – simple, pretty, clickable.*
- *Keep it simple.*
- *I no longer fear technology. It is more accessible.*
- *Importance of humor!*
- *Learned about bulk email and am inspired to re-do website.*
- *Another great workshop! John did get a bit short with poor/uninformed questions.*
- *The black background on the handout makes them hard to read.*
- *Some people kept asking unrelated/unrealistic questions.*

Of those who filled out the survey 97% thought the session was great or good. Additional comments included the following:

- *I got my question answered!*
- *Could not hear speakers who did not speak directly into mike. Write down and post URLs, resource names/organizations.*
- *Really tied things together. Essential!*
- *Too much info too little time, very complex topic.*
- *Something we all need to understand.*
- *Audience went wacko asking for specific "rulings," more suitable for after presentation.*

### **Summary**

When asked *what people like most* about the conference, people responded that they liked the presenters, the information presented and the subjects covered. John Kenyon's presentations received very positive feedback. Participants felt that he did a great job of explaining the elements of email campaigns and websites in a very understandable way. They also found his presentations engaging and fun.

Other items that participants liked included hearing about specific tools and participants feedback at the end of the day, understanding how email and websites can work together, the food, that the day was on schedule, the lunch topic discussions, and the

beautiful weather. Participants also liked the conference location at Preservation Park. They enjoyed networking with people from other groups, and with staff from Tides and Rose Foundation.

When asked *what they didn't like*, they said the repetition of questions from the audience, too much information to comprehend, lack of handouts on the resource discussions, a few people dominated the conversation, and they wanted to see demonstrations of the web tools. There were some issues with the slide printouts for John Kenyon's presentations. They were difficult for many people to read. Many people had a hard time choosing between the afternoon workshops. Several people suggested that we divide people into smaller groups based on technology level and also offer the workshop topics during more than one time slot. Many asked that the presentations be made available for the workshops they could not attend. The plenary and e-communications presentations were included in the registration packets and are available electronically by request. The other two presentations were made available to convening attendees through a followup email with the following hyperlinks:

Database Workshop - <http://www.onenw.org/toolkit/introduction-to-data/>  
Website Workshop - <http://www.box.net/shared/85z3h2oe5p>

Topic *suggestions for next year's convening* include several requests for a repeat of the topics at this convening and for a variety of fundraising topics, including donor/board member cultivation and fundraising, grant writing and donor tracking. Other suggestions were for creative writing for websites/newsletters, litigation, lobbying, organizational building, attracting new members/constituencies, litigation, policy analysis basics, and accounting tools. The remaining suggestions were issue or group specific such as communities in rural areas, environmental impact reports, understanding codes/zoning, water concentration, toxic waste and packing houses and Pistachio Naranja.

Additional suggestions for the next convening were: offering afternoon snack and coffee, hands on opportunities to learn about the topics, and several people suggested breakout groups based on tech knowledge and experience.

Of those who received *travel stipends*, 83% said the stipend covered the cost of their travel. We believe that this is due to the increase in travel stipends that were available this year as well as offering hotel stipends for those traveling over 200 miles one way. On the questionnaire, 7 said they would like *childcare* to be provided at future convening. For the majority of respondents, the question did not apply.

The majority of *suggestions for the location of next year's convening* were for the same location (58%). Other suggested locations include Sacramento, the Bay Area, Sonoma County, Redding, and Vacaville/Fairfield.

Of the *conference overall*, 84% said that it was great, and 16% said it was good. The comments included lots of "thank you," "great presentations," and "relevant and timely information." The following comment was received after the convening:

*You truly were able to perceive just what tools were necessary to allow us to move ... forward with our web site re-design, newsletter and emailing in an accessible way that allows us to realistically utilize the information we assimilated.*