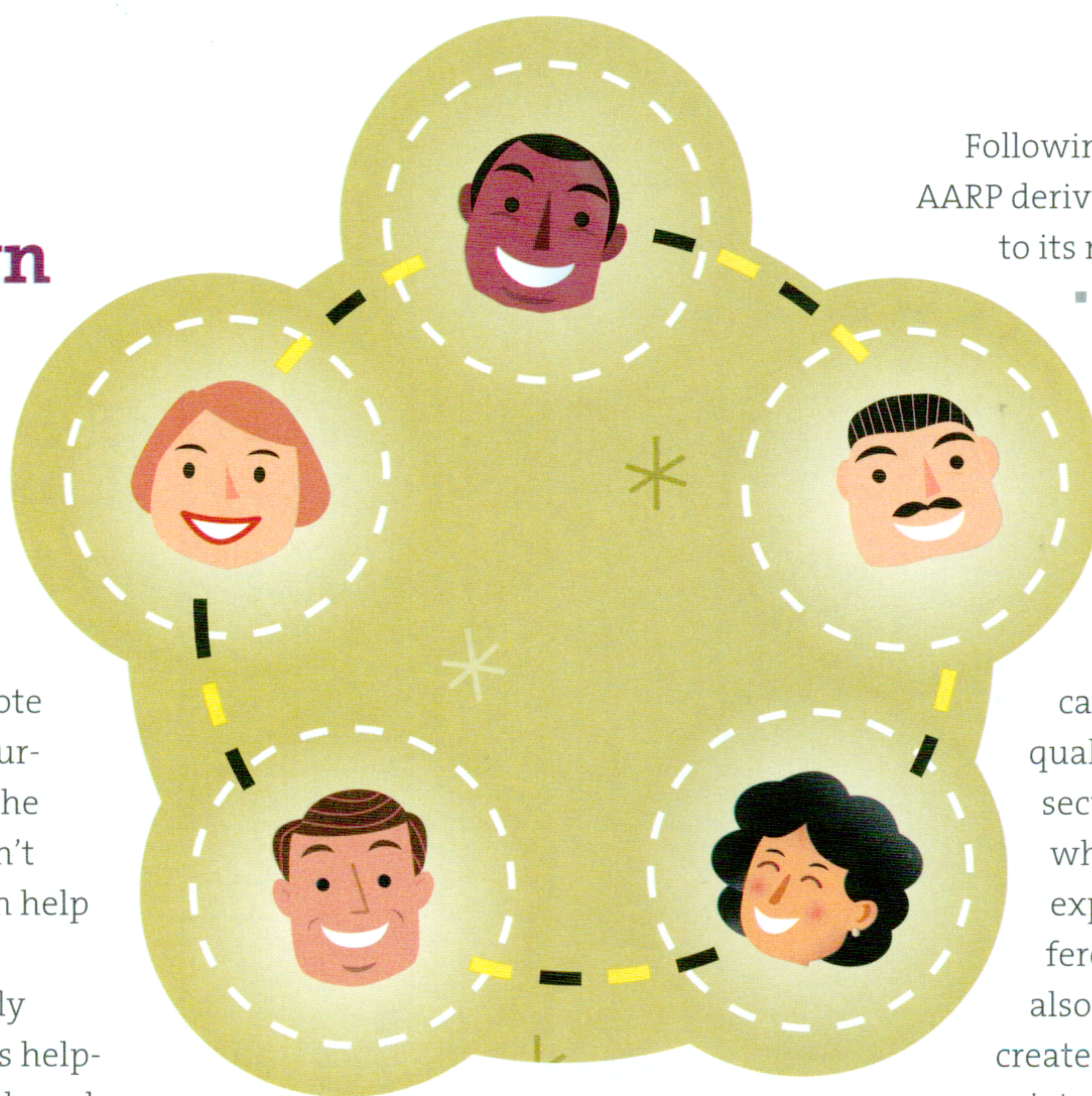SOCIAL MEDIA

The home-grown social media platform

By Harold Kerr

"I apologize if this isn't appropriate for this forum," a member of AARP's new online community wrote recently. "In two days I'm having surgery. They found a uterine fibroid the size of a grapefruit. I'm scared. I don't know what to expect. If anyone can help me, I would greatly appreciate it."

That posting was, in fact, entirely appropriate—it shows how AARP is helping its members better connect with each other. In 2007, AARP realized that such sharing of information enhances its members' ability to communicate with both other members and the association, and it began an initiative to revamp its website. Launched in spring of 2008, the updated aarp.org delivers information, news, and entertainment. And, recognizing the increasing role that online communities play in fostering communication and collaboration between constituents and an association, AARP replaced existing online user forums (which were standard bulletin boards with no multimedia) with a full-blown online community to fill the social networking void for individuals aged 50 and older.

Today, the community has more than 400,000 registered users, approximately 80 percent of whom are AARP members. Users can upload pictures and videos, post journals, and create groups. Many of AARP's original user-forum participants are active in the new community and created many of the early groups—which now number more than 2,000, covering topics from AARP bread-and-butter issues like healthcare and social security to "Singles Perspectives," "Car Problems," and "Dogs." (That last one is the community's second-largest group.)

Because some members are very vocal, management initially had concerns about how users would engage with the community and how it would monitor user comments, but the pre-existing message boards had hosted unfettered conversations. Beyond using software to filter offensive words and allowing users to report terms-of-service violations (which are addressed by a team of site moderators), AARP doesn't do much site policing.

Following are a few of the benefits that AARP derived from its new site, according to its managers:

- **More effective communication about programs.** The majority of the online groups are created by users. However, AARP creates groups to deliver information about programs such as Divided We Fail, which advocates for access to affordable, quality healthcare and financial security, and Create the Good, where volunteers share ideas and experiences around making a difference in people's lives. AARP can also contact moderators of user-created groups to ask permission to associate an AARP program or benefit to the group.

- **Real-time feedback.** In addition to allowing users to comment on AARP-written articles posted on the website, AARP receives real-time feedback related to specific issues posted within the groups. This allows AARP a pulse check of its constituents.

NOT READY TO GO IT ALONE?

If your staff budget for building an online community is closer to one FTE than 70, outsourcing the project may be a more sensible way to go. In 2007 the American College of Healthcare Executives was looking to update its website designed to support members who were preparing to take its Board of Governors Exam. Part of the impetus was to move beyond an older, bulletin-board system, but ACHE also wanted to install a system that would do a better job of improving community connections. "They were looking for something that was more ongoing," says Kimberly Mosley, ACHE's vice president of management information systems and chief information officer. "They wanted to continue the camaraderie, even after the online tutorial class had ended."

The new site, launched in late 2007, was created by ThePort, and included the ability to let members to add biographical information, so those with like interests could find each other; a regularly updated blog; a repository of information and documents related to the exam; and a platform for real-time study sessions. Since implementing the system, which is monitored by one staffer, positive evaluations of ACHE's online tutorial system have increased from 4.0 to 4.5 on a five-point scale. And the members are sticking around after the exam is done. "They love the opportunities to interact with each other," says Pat Griffith, ACHE's assistant director of membership. "It doesn't stop when the online tutorials stop."

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- **Potential membership growth.** While AARP doesn't yet have hard numbers connecting the online community to increased membership, AARP has found that members renew membership when they receive value and access to information—something they get in abundance within the website and the online community. Further, AARP's membership department can perform prospecting within the online community. And because many within the online community are passionate about it, they encourage others to register, which in turn increases the number of prospects.
- **A method of updating records.** AARP's membership department is exploring linking individuals' online community profiles to their membership records to allow users to make changes. This functionality would lead to a reduced workload for the customer service department.

The website and member community was built from scratch by AARP's web strategy operations (WSO) group, which has approximately 70 staff. Due to the ongoing maintenance effort associated with supporting and enhancing the online community portion of the site, AARP is considering possibly migrating the home-grown community to a prebuilt online-community software and hosting solution. According to Nataki Clarke, a WSO director, "buying a solution solves the resources and capacity issue and allows AARP to focus on core capabilities instead of social network support functions such as photo uploading/management, video player issues, etc."

Additionally, buying an online community package could be an attractive option for other associations considering similar offerings for their members. Multiple prebuilt online-community software and hosting solutions are currently available at prices well below custom-built solutions and affordable for associations that do not have access to a large number of information technology resources.

Launching the site is just the beginning. AARP's WSO group realizes that the evolution of an online community is iterative and thus, to ensure that it continues to thrive, the community needs to be nurtured. "AARP has learned that users will definitely give input, and as a result, the organization needs to be able to course correct," Clarke says.

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