

Building Successful Websites for Nonprofits

Websites are critical marketing tools for today's nonprofit. They provide a contemporary platform for two-way communication and can be extremely effective in establishing credibility with each audience group that visits your site. While many of the same principles used to develop corporate websites apply to nonprofits as well, there are also some important differences as well.

Take time to tell your story . . . but not too much time.

As a nonprofit, visitors to your website aren't looking to buy a product – they're looking to *make a difference*. Since individuals visiting your website come with this unique motivation, they are already more inclined to invest time in learning about you, your mission, your accomplishments, and the needs they might help you address. While there is a temptation to try and tell the *whole* story – don't do it! Instead, use selective restraint on the content you provide and leverage rich story-telling devices such as video, audio, photography, flash and well-written content to present your message and build a bridge between the site visitor and your organization. Your goal is to motivate the visitor to respond.

Establish a “credible” difference.

A poorly developed website can create some genuine credibility issues. Nonprofit websites must quickly convey a sense of “trustworthiness” which should be reflected throughout the entire site. Your site visitors will assess your organization not by just the copy and photography, but the organization and functionality of the website. A lot of broken links, pages that don't load properly, or the promotion of events long since passed can quickly cast doubt on the importance and integrity of your mission.

Speak to everyone in a language they can understand.

A website is the easiest way for someone to learn about your organization; you'll find however, that nearly every web audience is also highly fragmented. The hundreds or thousands of visitors that come to your site each month represent a wide range of demographic factors (income, gender, age, occupation, location, etc.) as well as a large number of reasons for being there. Based on your understanding of the audience, viewers should be grouped into categories and appropriate content, language and resources should be provided for each. Also, don't neglect other important groups such as reporters and potential strategic partners that are reviewing your site. Given the variety of audiences you'll be addressing, make sure you provide them the content they seek – and make it easy to find.

What you build, you must manage.

Before launching or re-launching your website, make sure it's not only well-designed for each of your distinct target audiences but that it can also be managed and updated by your organization. Active nonprofits can easily generate large volumes of content but if your website still promotes outdated events, you've just taken a hit to the credibility of your organization. Develop a proactive content management system -- and work it.