Yes, the Internet Sounds Great, But Is It Really for Us?

Should nonprofits with small staffs and budgets avoid the Internet?
Or is it really the brave new world everyone promises?

Q: We are a small (four-person) nonprofit organization. We have read with interest the articles *Nonprofit World* has published about the Internet. These articles suggest a brave new world in which nonprofit executives can run their organizations without leaving their computers. We are tempted. But is it really worthwhile for a small organization like ours to connect to the Internet? What are the *real* pros and cons for a small nonprofit organization? What benefits might we receive from the Internet, and what are the drawbacks?

A: To understand how you might use the Internet to your benefit, you must first have a clear understanding of what it is. We can define the Internet as a global network composed of individual computer networks. Using the World Wide Web (WWW) to access the Internet, 30 million users around the world can share information almost instantaneously.

THREE WAYS THE INTERNET CAN EXPAND YOUR WORLD

On-line communicating through the Internet can expand your world in three ways.

1. E-Mail. You can interact directly with other people via electronic mail (e-mail) messages. E-mail communication is the most widely used of all on-line capabilities. It's a fast and convenient way for you to be in touch with another person, perhaps thousands of miles away. E-mail is as quick as a phone call, but it lets you and the other person respond at will.

2. Discussion Groups. Belonging to an on-line discussion group and list-serve through the Internet lets you connect electronically with groups of people having similar interests and conduct real-time "conversations" with them.

3. Databases. Through the Internet's many databases, you can unearth up-to-date information from around the world without expensive and time-consuming delays.

THREE REASONS THE NET IS IDEAL FOR NONPROFITS

The Net is an excellent medium for nonprofit organizations for three reasons:

1. You Can Reach the Right People. Those who use the Internet most are the very people most apt to contribute money, time, and in-kind services to nonprofit groups. Most individual Internet users are in their 30s and 40s. Nearly half have annual household incomes greater than $50,000. Thus, the Internet is an excellent place to find new donors and supporters. It's also an excellent way to reach funding agencies, corporate leaders, and other potential benefactors, almost all of whom are linked to the Internet.

Being on line will open up a whole new world.

2. You Can Reach Many, Many People. Because of the exponential growth in its use, the Internet is a way for you to reach millions of people all over the globe with your message and needs.

3. The Price Is Right. Compared to other modes of communication, such as brochures and television spots, the Internet is inexpensive to use. Many servers (the computers that house the Internet) let nonprofit groups have free accounts—or at least lower rates.

SEVEN WAYS NONPROFITS CAN USE THE INTERNET

1. Raise Funds. You can raise funds on the Internet in several ways:

- You can make direct appeals for money to people who visit your home page. (For details on how to create your own home page, see "So You Want a Web Site, Now What?" in the September-October 1997 issue of *Nonprofit World*.) Besides describing your organization's services, you can provide instructions for making contributions through the Internet.

- You can even hold a fundraiser in cyberspace. For example, one California-based organization offered recipes of world-famous chefs via e-mail in exchange for a charitable contribution.

2. Recruit Volunteers. The Internet can also help you find volunteers:

- You can use community bulletin boards and Web sites to advertise volunteer openings. Community bulletin boards are local computer networks offering local information at little or no cost.

- You can allow people to become "virtual volunteers." Rather than coming to your office, virtual

volunteers contribute their services via computer hookup. For example, you may receive information from a volunteer lawyer using e-mail. Or, as more people become comfortable using computer technology, volunteer counselors may electronically "visit" harried parents or homebound elderly to provide support and information.

3. Chat with Nonprofit Leaders. The Internet is a great way to keep in touch with nonprofit professionals around the globe. Using e-mail, you can engage in one-to-one conversations with others in your field. Or, through listserves, you can exchange ideas with many at the same time. This mode of communication lets you stay in touch yet use your time efficiently because you can read and compose messages on your own schedule.

4. Keep Current on the Nonprofit Sector. The nonprofit sector is always changing. You can stay up to date by checking out on-line news services and logging onto Web sites about the nonprofit sector. In addition, on-line communication lets you benefit from the experience of your counterparts in other areas of the nonprofit sector.

5. Promote Your Services. There are several ways you can use the Internet to let people know about your services:

- Post announcements on community bulletin boards. An advantage is that you can update information rapidly, unlike brochures which may take months to change, print, and distribute.

> # You can update information rapidly, unlike brochures which may take months to change.

- Use e-mail to share information about new services with other nonprofit service providers, thus enhancing the referral process.

- Create your own Web site, describing your organization, mission, and benefits. (See "So You Want a Web Site, Now What?" in the September-October 1997 issue of *Nonprofit World*).

6. Conduct Research. You can find a wealth of information through the Internet. Many free databases are available via the World Wide Web and other locator services. They offer up-to-the-minute information from around the world on nearly any subject you can imagine.

7. Educate the Community. What better way to keep in touch with community members than through community bulletin boards and your own home page? You can use the same avenues to educate the public about social problems. You can also help provide emotional support through the Internet. If your organization deals with cancer, for example, you can put cancer patients in touch with one another.

YES, BUT . . .

It's time to insert a note of reality. Although the Internet can help your organization thrive in a competitive, dynamic environment, it does have limitations:

1. Access. Many people, especially those in greatest need of nonprofits' services, can't access information electronically. They don't own the necessary equipment, and they may be too

A SURFING GUIDE FOR NONPROFITS

Below is a brief list of some Internet sources for nonprofit organizations. You will discover many more as you start searching the Net. Good luck, and have fun surfing!

Electronic Journals
http://www.fundraiser.com/index.html	Fund$Raiser Cyberzine
http://www.philanthropy-journal.org/	Philanthropy Journal Online
http://fdncenter.org/phil/philmain.html	Philanthropy News Digest
http://www.nptimes.com/	NonProfit Times
http://danenet.wicip.org/snpo	Nonprofit World

Mailing Lists
ARNOVA-L	Send e-mail to: rlohman@wvnvm.wvnet.edu	In body, type: subscribe arnova-l your name
NONPROFIT-NET	Send e-mail to: listproc@nonprofit.net	In body, type: subscribe nonprofit-net your name
USNONPROFIT-L	Send e-mail to :usnonprofit-l-request@rain.org	In subject line, type: subscribe (leave body blank)

Lists of Nonprofits
http://www.nonprofits.org/gallery.html	Internet Nonprofit Center Gallery of Organizations
http://www.charities.org/charity.html	America's Charities

Important Organizations
http://www.aspeninst.org/dir/polpro/NSRF/NSRF1.html	Aspen Institute: Nonprofit Sector Research Fund
http://danenet.wicip.org/snpo	Society for Nonprofit Organizations
http://www.nsfre.org/	National Society of Fund Raising Executives
http://ww.ncnb.org/home.html	National Center for Nonprofit Boards

General Information Sites
http://www.nonprofits.org/	Internet Nonprofit Center
http://www.nonprofit-info.org/npofaq/index.html	The Nonprofit FAQ
http://www.sils.umich.edu/~nesbeitt/nonprofits/nonprofits.html	Internet Resources for Nonprofit Public Service Organizations

On-Line Discussion Groups
http://www.library.ucsf.edu/kr/subs/grant/grant-lists.html#grants-l	Discussion Groups
http://www.bucknell.edu/boeke/work/info.html	PRSPCT-L

Fundraising Resources
http://alphaclp.clpgh.org/CLP/Foundation/fchome.html	Carnegie Library Foundation Center
http://www.charitynet.org	CharityNet
http://www.cof.org	Council on Foundations
http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_-docs/aces/aces140.html	Federal Register
http://nscp.fie.com/htdoc/fed/all/any/any/foa/any/info.htm	Fedix
http://fdncenter.org/grantmaker/contents.html	Foundation Center
http://www.foundations.org/page2.html	Foundations On-Line
http://www.fic.org	Funding Information Center of Texas
http://www.fund-raising.com	Fund-Raising.com
http://www.fundraisingonline.com	Fund Raising On Line
http://www.uic.edu	Galaxy's Professional Guide To Grant Sources
http://www.access.gpo.gov/su_docs/aces/aaces002.html	GPO Access
http://www.grantsandfunding.com	Government Information Services
http://www.tgi.com/sampmenu.htm	Grantsmanship Center
http://web.fie.com/cws/sra/resource.htm	Grants Web
http://www.lightworks.org	Lightworks Technology Foundation
http://weber.u.washington.edu/dlamb/apra/resource.htm	Prospecting Resources
http://www.infoed.org/products.htm	Sponsored Programs Information Network
http://www.cs.virginia.edu	University of Virginia Funding Page
http://www.os.dhhs.gov/progorg/grantsnet/whoswho/html	Who's Who in Federal Grant Management

Resources on Volunteering
http://www.contact.org	Contact Center Network
http://www.cns.gov	Corporation for National Service
http://www.energizeinc.com	Energize
http://www.impactonline.org	Impact Online
http://www.project.org	Project America
http://www.servenet.org	Servenet
http://www.halcyon.com/penguin/svm.htm	Sound Volunteer Management
http://www.non-profits.org/.	Volunteer Center of Dallas County
http://www.childrennow.org/volunteer.html	Volunteer Centers Online
http://www.accesspt.com/civicsys/main.html	Volunteer.Point
http://www.bmi.net/mba	Volunteer Today

Products, Services, & Training for Nonprofits
http://danenet.wicip.org/snpo	Society for Nonprofit Organizations
http://www.clark.net:80/pub/pwalker/home.html	Nonprofit Resources Catalogue
http://www.uwex.edu/li	Learning Institute for Nonprofit Organizations

intimidated to ask for access at public institutions.

2. Quantity of Information.

Another problem is the amount of data on the Net. There is so much information that you could spend a lifetime sifting through it. The size of the Internet, particularly the World Wide Web, continues to grow, and the ease of finding information has decreased proportionately. The popularity of the Web is partly to blame. With tens of millions of users, and more entering cyberspace every day, computer networks can't efficiently handle the traffic, resulting in a sluggish network.

The content of the Web hinders finding useful information as well. The greatest growth of the Web has been in the commercial sector, translating into a profusion of sites devoted to advertising. Another growth area is in personal home pages, set up by individuals to discuss their interests. With the surge in these two types of Web pages, surfers find themselves wading through descriptions of hobbies and pictures of puppies while searching for that elusive fact or site.

There are services on the Web designed to help you find worthwhile information. These services, called Web search engines, explore part of the Web for a specific term or phrase. They then give you lists of sites that match the search words. Although these search engines can help locate some types of information, they aren't currently powerful or sophisticated enough to conduct efficient research. Often a simple search will retrieve far too many results, many of which aren't relevant. Another drawback is that each Web search engine looks and responds differently, requiring initiative to locate instructions for each one.

3. Quality of Information.

When you locate information on the Internet, you must evaluate it far more vigorously than information gathered from other media, such as books and journals. Since no single entity controls the Internet's content quality, it is full of erroneous and misleading information. You must take care to determine the source and validity of any information you gather from the Net.

4. Cost.

Connecting to the Internet isn't cheap. It requires substantial money up front, plus money to upgrade and maintain equipment and skills.

Before you can use the Internet, you need a high-grade computer and modem. To fully access the World Wide Web's capabilities, you need a color monitor and a speaker system. There are many free software programs, but most of the bug-free, state-of-the-art programs require some payment. One estimate places the cost of being connected to the Internet at about $3,000.

An often overlooked cost of connecting to the Internet is staff training. While navigating the Web is becoming more intuitive, effective use of staff time and resources demands skilled instruction. These expenditures are beyond the budgets of many small nonprofits.

THREE TO GET READY . . . .

Does this list of drawbacks mean that you should stay away from the Internet? Not at all. But it does mean that you must think carefully before plunging in:

1. Assess Your Needs.

Pinpoint your main reason for wanting Internet access. If you intend to solicit volunteers, funds, and in-kind resources, the Internet is excellent. If your purpose is to seek advice and information from colleagues, you will also find the Internet worthwhile. But if your primary aim is to reach potential clients, there may be better ways to do so.

2. Evaluate Your Resources.

If you can't afford Internet access, consider getting on-line at a library. Or negotiate with a business or organization to use their Internet access in exchange for your organization's unique resources. Meanwhile, build technology into your budget and strategic plan. If you make it a priority, it will happen.

3. Hone Your Expectations.

So, when you do link up to the Internet, will you be able to manage your organization without leaving your computer? No, sorry. But the Internet is so versatile that you're bound to find it useful, whatever your mission or budget. As accessing the Net becomes easier and cheaper, the discrepancy between those who use and those who don't will shrink. Being on line will open up a whole new world for your organization. Just be sure you take the time to analyze your organization's needs, create a technology budget, and map out your route before rushing onto the information superhighway.

Karen N. King
Assistant Professor of Pol. Science
Bowling Green State University
108 Williams Hall
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403
and
Julia K. Nims
Coordinator of Library User Education
Jerome Library
Bowling Green State University
Bowling Green, Ohio 43403

Note: Also see Where the Information Is: A Guide to Electronic Research for Nonprofit Organizations. *(To order, see page 25 of this issue; for a review, see the November-December 1997 issue of* Nonprofit World.*)*