



Cyberactivism: How a Web Site Can Make or Break Your Organization

Is it worth investing money in your Web site? Here are lessons to help you answer that question.

BY SCOTT PALEY

With the shrinking of the Internet economy, many nonprofits are reevaluating their Web sites and wondering whether the Internet can really offer a valuable return. The answer is consistent with old-economy business logic: When a project is done right, it yields value to an organization. When a project with the same objectives is done poorly, it yields high cost and little return.

How Has the Online World Evolved?

In the period from 1995 to 1997, when the Internet was seen mostly as a one-way informational tool, many nonprofits launched inexpensive, high-value Web sites. These sites offered general information about the organization's mission and values, educating people and explaining how they could participate. While not flashy or elegant, the value of these sites was obvious; nonprofits could now make basic information available to the entire wired world with modest expense. Before long, nonprofits began to get donations from people thousands of miles away, who had never come in contact with them before.

By 1998, most major nonprofits had added value to their Web sites by offering some simple ways for people to sign up for membership, make secure credit-card donations, or purchase organizational merchandise such as T-shirts. While development of these options was expensive to organizations on tight budgets, most of these new features provided value as online donations were processed and membership databases built.

The next phase of online evolution found many nonprofits making large expenditures on projects that often offered little or no return. Nonprofits that didn't make such investments considered themselves lucky and became skeptical about investing precious resources in Web development.

Today, these organizations are at a crossroads, trying to decide whether future investments in the Internet are warranted. The answer to this seemingly

simple question is—maybe. If the modus operandi will be the freewheeling approach of the past few years, these projects have a low likelihood of success. However, if executed with a coherent strategy and clear objectives, these investments can result in tremendous returns. The following is a set of suggestions generated from successful nonprofit Web projects that have had dramatic results.

Lesson 1: Remove Barriers to Participation

The relationship between any organization and its constituents is fragile. Consider TV viewers who see a public service announcement stating that a donation will change a child's life. If they're motivated to donate, they must find a pen to write down the phone number or address. Then they must make a call or fill out an envelope and write a check. All these tasks are barriers to participation.

Removing such barriers is an important task for nonprofits. As a two-way communication medium, the Internet provides exceptional opportunities to decrease barriers to participation.

The Million-Mom March, an organization advocating sensible gun-control

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laws, used the Internet to motivate and organize over 850,000 people to march on Washington. Its Web site was effective because it made it easy for all types of constituents to interact with the organization. When users came to the site, they were subtly required to identify what type of constituent they were: an interested bystander, marcher, local organizer, individual donor, corporate donor, and so on. Once the user self-identified, all the tools needed by that constituent type were made readily available. Marchers could book a hotel in Washington and sign up for transportation to the march, bystanders could join the organization's mailing list to be kept abreast of the latest developments in the movement, individual donors could make donations with their credit card and add their child's name to the Registry of Protected Children, local organizers could schedule a bus to bring marchers to Washington, regional organizers could download online instructions guiding grassroots organizing.

"The Web site had to capture moms the first time they visited, because they were unlikely to return otherwise," explains Donna Dees Thomases, founder of the Million-Mom March. "To accomplish this, each type of visitor was allowed a tool set that made their engagement with the organization simple, empowering, and compelling. In essence, the Web gave individuals an almost immediate impact and let the Million-Mom March organize in hyperspeed."

Lesson 2: Bring Your Brand to Life

One of the greatest misconceptions of the 1990s' "new-economy" bubble was that there was a new way of doing business. Nothing could be further from the truth. The old-world business rules that applied offline were equally true online, and they continue to be. These truths are

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especially apt when it comes to communicating your brand—the name, personality, logo, symbols, and values that identify your organization.

Branding is an underused marketing tool among nonprofit organizations. Yet the need to connect on an emotional level makes branding especially critical for nonprofits.

For a Web site to work, it must have an effective brand. Constituents can then have an ongoing two-way dialogue, connecting emotionally with the brand as it grows and evolves.

The American Legacy Foundation's Web site, www.thetruth.com, is an example of a well-branded organization that uses the Web to interact with constituents. The Truth Campaign is dedicated to exposing the truth about tobacco so that people can have all the information necessary before deciding whether to smoke. The mission of The Truth is to alert everyone to the lies and hidden practices of cigarette companies, while giving people the tools to have a voice in change.

Those who use the site have many ways to interact with the foundation, including online polls, Truth-branded e-mail addresses for those who join, the latest Truth news, and galleries that showcase past and present Truth media campaigns. The site features a section called "Info Vault," an easy-to-use reference archive for those researching key points in the fight against the tobacco industry. Another area of the site is the event section, listing Truth events held in major

U.S. cities. Visitors to the site can access Truth Tour dates and obtain photos taken of them at Truth Tour events.

The Truth Campaign connects to its constituents by creating an emotive brand and giving them information and tools to take action. All these elements help define the brand and bring it to life.

Lesson 3: Build a Relationship that Engages Constituents

Nonprofits can learn a lesson from corporations, which, while slashing their investments in other marketing channels, keep funneling dollars into Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tools and one-to-one marketing programs via the Web. They understand that the Internet is the ultimate communication vehicle for developing one-to-one connections with constituents and that they can build durable relationships by engaging people over time.

Offering repeated points of interaction with constituents can be as simple as providing online polls, discussion boards, and personalized content. Over time, these interactions facilitate long-lasting relationships.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals' site (www.peta.org) is rich with information and content-related interactive options. The site engages visitors in a myriad of ways, offering such lifestyle tools as free vegetarian starter kits, recipes, guides to vegetarian restaurants, and information on cruelty-free fashion. Visitors to the site can participate in Action Alerts or use PETA's letter-writing guide to send letters to business leaders and members of Congress.

The PETA site has potential to develop a lifetime relationship with concerned citizens. PETA Kids features an interactive calendar with daily activities and a clever guide to help kids decline to participate in school animal-dissection projects. The site features celebrity spokespeople (including Paul McCartney and pop superstar Pink) who appeal to a variety of



age groups. The depth and intelligence of the PETA site are proof that a new era of long-lasting, one-to-one connectivity has emerged in the nonprofit world.

Lesson 4: Develop Online Processes to Cut Costs

For most nonprofits, the greatest value of the Internet will continue to be as a tool to communicate with constituents, reducing the need for more costly offline methods. The Internet lets nonprofits develop functional programs and processes at a fraction of the cost. Consider which of the following options, for example, would be more expensive and time-consuming for your organization:

- Soliciting petition signatures door-to-door? Or canvassing for signatures by e-mail?
- Hiring telemarketers to call people? Or hearing from people via online discussion boards, FAQs, and e-mail response technology?
- Sending information through the mail? Or distributing the same content online?
- Hiring workers to do endless data entry? Or having constituents feed the information directly to your database through the Web?

These are just a few of many ways to save money with online processes. Each nonprofit has unique programs that can be streamlined using the Internet.

The Gift of New York wanted to give cultural-events passes to World Trade Center victims' families. When Michael Garrett, executive director, learned that he couldn't access the list of victims' family members (because of privacy issues), he had two options: He could combine publicity and a call center to reach constituents, or he could use the Web to interact with the organization's constituents directly. Because he chose the Web, hundreds of families were able to

The Web Black Book

The best thing about developing your Web strategy is that help, in the form of a multitude of nonprofit and Web design resources, is just a click away. Contact these sites for the information and guidance every Web project needs:

Abstractedge.com
Interactive agency which applies the fundamentals of online activism, grassroots organizing, and cause-based marketing to communication initiatives.

PassionMarketing.com
Cause-based offline marketing communications firm.

Cnet.com
Compendium of hardware and software listings, reviews, and advice.

Mvps.org/access
Advice and free downloads for Access, the most widely used database program.

Not-for-profit.org
Multi-purpose resource guide for nonprofits.

receive tickets and enjoy the city's cultural offerings, demonstrating that the Internet can replace costly traditional processes with inexpensive online approaches.

The Web Is Here to Stay

While the Internet has had its fits and starts, the formula for nonprofit Web site success hasn't changed. The key to any nonprofit's success is to engage core constituencies, motivate them to embrace the organization's values, and develop long and meaningful relationships with those people.

Online failures result when strong business planning and discipline aren't at the core of a project. When leveraged intelligently, the Internet can be the most cost-effective way to build relationships with your constituents. An investment in the Internet can yield exceptional returns if you make decisions carefully

with the right partners and an effective strategy. ■

Resources

Bosc, Joyce, "Brands: They Need to Work Just as Hard as You Do," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 1.

Elges, Mary, "Driving Traffic to Your Web Site," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 6.

Roufa, Mike, "Marketing Your Web Site with Search Engines," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 2.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, www.snpo.org.

Scott Paley is chief technology officer for Abstract Edge (4 West 22nd Street, New York, N.Y. 10010, abstractedge.com), a multidisciplinary, interactive marketing firm that provides Web solutions to nonprofit organizations, transforming their constituents into brand or cause advocates.