



Reap More Online Donations: Five Steps to a Better Website

Don't miss this easy way to gain supporters.

By Andrew Buck

Imagine two nonprofits that are nearly identical. Similar missions, same size, equal marketing budgets. They both have websites that do an admirable job of showcasing their impact.

In most ways, these two organizations seem like twins. But one raises *much more* money online than the other. Why? One of those nonprofits has created a more donor-friendly website.

There are five things you can do to ensure that your website makes donations a given:

1. Make the Homepage a Hero

When visitors land on your webpage, they're often there to do one of two things:

- Make a donation.
- Decide whether to make a donation.

The first audience – the people who know they're going to give – need little more than a big shiny “Donate Now” button. More on that in a minute.

But the second group? *You have to give them a reason to care.*

Before your donors are willing to dig into their pockets to help you, you have to move them. Simply asking will get you only so far.

There's no action without emotion. So your website should trigger emotions. The quickest way to inspire emotion is to lead with your mission. And the quickest way to do that is to be sure you have a snappy “hero message” on your homepage.

A stellar example is this hero message from the Boy Scouts of America:

Some kids avoid obstacles. Scouts overcome them.

Why is this hero message great? A couple of reasons:

- It's rhythmic, almost musical.
- The message plays on a common ambition: being exceptional, standing out, vanquishing the ordinary.

“Ensure that your website makes donations a given.”



And the photos that accompany it – big, bright, full of smiles and nature and friends – bolster the message. These are Scouts, not ordinary kids. The message is clear to anyone who lands on the homepage.

2. Simplify

Next, it's time to audit your donation process. Is the process simple and easy? It should be. Simplicity is key. Research proves, time and again, that a confusing donation process will cost you money. Users who decide to give but then encounter a hiccup are more likely to get frustrated and leave.

We often think of donors as making donations the way they pay their bills: It's an errand, a chore they dutifully complete. But for many donors, the donation process is a moment of spontaneous generosity. They're in a momentary "state of charity."

So when these would-be donors see a long, field-heavy donation form, they may grow fatigued and slip out of their generous mindset. And voilà, they're gone.

So we recommend the following ways to keep donors from leaving:

Be as short as feasible. Don't ask donors for more info than you need. If you don't need to know their salutation (Mr. or Mrs. or Ms.) don't ask for it. If you never plan to call them, don't ask for their phone number. The more questions you ask, the more likely your users will suffer from "cognitive overload" and decide it isn't worth the trouble.

Use a multi-step form. Create multiple pages: one for donors' basic contact info, another for their payment info, another for donation amount, and so on. This approach offers a few advantages:

It mitigates the risk of user fatigue. Instead of seeing one long, exhausting form, the user is asked only a small handful of questions at each phase.

It allows you to use Google Analytics to see exactly where in the donation process your users drop off. If only 50% of users who complete Step 1 also complete Step 2, you know where to make a fix.

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3. Give Each Page a Goal

Beyond the homepage and donation page, each page on your website also needs a purpose. Far too often, organizations add a page to their website without having a clear, compact *reason* for the page.

“Because we want one” isn't an adequate reason to add a page. Instead, for each page you propose adding, write down the following about it:

- page title
- content owner
- section of site
- purpose
- audience
- desired user action.

If you can identify all these elements – and you still want all of them – then you're ready to create and publish your page.

The purpose of a webpage should be singular. Each page does one thing – no more, no less. Once you begin overloading a page with different topics or targeting different audiences, you risk confusing and misleading your users.

Meanwhile, on every page, you should know what you want your user to *do* – click on this link, navigate to a sub-page, download a document, fill out a form, or the like. Identifying the desired action may help you understand the purpose of the page. Then you can craft your content to drive the user toward the desired action.

Note: You want your users *doing things* online. Therefore, vague or passive user activities won't suffice. For example, your page's purpose shouldn't be “learn about our programs” or “understand our mission.” You want them clicking, downloading, and so on.

4. Test, Test, Test

Don't assume your website is working perfectly. Instead, test it. Then test it some more. And whenever you change something on your site, test it again.

Remember, *you* think about your organization *infinitely* more often than your users do. This is called the “curse of knowledge”: Once you know something, it's impossible not to know it. The curse of knowledge describes the big challenge facing fundraisers and marketers: getting people who *don't* know what you know to know it.

And the curse of knowledge explains why so few organizations bother testing their digital content. It makes sense to them; surely it will make sense to users. But this is rarely the case. Most website users don't have the context, experience, or knowledge you do.

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So how do you test your website's usability? For starters, ask for the free website evaluation kit at mightycitizen.com. It allows you, on both a website and individual webpage scale, to evaluate the effectiveness of your content. Is your content accurate, on brand, and accessible to all users?

Then you can conduct some usability testing on your own. Gather a few people who have never used your website. Sit down with them and ask them to conduct simple tasks on your site (for instance, "Find our event calendar" or "Make a donation").

Then watch them do it. Record your notes:

- Do they mis-click?
- Do they get lost?
- How quickly do they complete the task?
- Do they get sidetracked or distracted along the way?

You can learn more about your website's shortcomings in 10 minutes of watching someone use it than you could in hours of internal brainstorming meetings.

5. Be Accessible

In web design, "accessibility" refers to whether online content can be used by everyone regardless of their ability or disability.

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“There's no action without emotion.”

With more than 60 million Americans who have some form of disability – many of whom use assistive technologies like screen readers and screen magnifiers to browse the web – making sure your website is fully accessible isn't just the right thing to do, it's smart business. After all, if people with disabilities can't perceive, understand, and interact with your website easily, they won't become donors and supporters.

So how accessible is your website?

Fortunately, there are website accessibility testing tools online that will show you how accessible your site is – along with where, exactly, you're coming up short. One such tool is the WebAIM Website Accessibility Check (wave.webaim.org), but there are plenty of others.

Focus on What Works

There's a ton that goes into streamlining your website's effectiveness. But the low-hanging fruits – a clear hero message and a simplified donation process – are still woefully under addressed by many nonprofits. Make sure yours isn't missing these easy opportunities to boost your donations. 

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More Resources (NonprofitWorld.org)

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