



How to...

get your organisation online



*GCVS: helping your voluntary
organisation grow*

Intro

Introduction

According to the voluntary sector think tank, nfp Synergy, the internet has changed the way the majority of voluntary organisations work. However, many organisations still do not strategically plan their online marketing and most work without direction from senior managers and trustees.

Since 2006, the internet has rediscovered its roots as the community spokesperson. Affordable, accessible websites, blogs, forums, picture galleries and so on have opened up a world of fundraising potential to the voluntary sector.

This guide sets out how to plan a website to ensure it is fit for purpose for as long as possible.

Questions, questions, questions...

Planning a website can feel like a minefield. This guide should answer some of your questions about websites, like:

What do I want the website to do?

Why is my existing website not very effective?

Where can I get ideas from?

What information should I include?

How can I make sure that everyone can access and read the website?

How will I market the website?

How much money will I have to spend to go online?

Questions, questions, questions



What do your audiences want?

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As with all marketing, a good starting point is to ask what your audience wants. All voluntary organisations have to communicate with a wide range of people, from funders to service users and from members to councillors.

Each audience will have a different attitude to the internet. Busy funders and management committee members will go online to access information about your organisation's credibility. Young people use the internet to talk about their hopes, dreams and complaints, listen to music and to find out information they might not otherwise ask in person. Some older people are confident "silver surfers". Others in the same age group prefer a good old chat with a cup of tea.

So before you start, ask yourself:

- who are we trying to communicate with?
- In what ways are they most comfortable communicating?
- How internet savvy can we expect them to be?

What do you want your website to do?

Once you have considered who your key audiences are, you then need to think about what you want to tell them and what you want your website to do.

Do you want your website to:

- Be a signpost, providing contact details to your organisation?
- Sell your goods?
- cut down administration and mailing costs?
- provide information about who you are and what you do?
- increase your credibility with funders?
- Be a forum for discussion with your members?
- Inform people about your news, events and job vacancies?
- Or all of the above?

What you want your website to do will dictate what sort of a site it is and how much ongoing work, and resources, it will require.

TOP TIP

Keep the layout of your site simple and consistent throughout. Make sure that features such as a company logo, navigation menu and contact details, can always be found in the same place.



Audit your existing website

If you already have a website, then take a hard look at why it isn't working for you. The best place to start is with a good bit of indulgent navel-gazing.

- Can you find your way around easily?
- Can you find the contact information easily?
- Is the text easy to read?
- Do the webpages load quickly?
- Do you have to scroll across to read information?
- Are the page titles appropriate and informative?
- Do the colours on the website work well together?
- Are there any accessibility accreditations visible on the homepage?
- Does your website work equally well in different browsers? Try opening them in both Internet Explorer and Mozilla Firefox.

Online review

Online review

Once you've had a look at your own site, then set your sights on other organisations' websites. Identify organisations which compete with you for attention with funders and influencers. Reach for the stars and take a look at organisations whose budgets are much larger than yours and pinch some of their ideas.

You might like to take a look at some of the websites rated top in the Hitwise 2006 list of humanitarian websites. What do they have that your site doesn't?

Rate your competitors' sites using the questions you asked yourself when auditing your own site.

Top 10 Humanitarian websites

- 1 www.oxfam.org.uk
- 2 www.raceforlifesporsome.org
- 3 www.nspcc.org.uk
- 4 england.shelter.org.uk
- 5 www.sportrelief.com
- 6 www.togscalendar.org
- 7 www.oxfamunwrapped.com
- 8 www.redcross.org.uk
- 9 www.christian-aid.org.uk
- 10 www.unicef.org.uk

Source: Hitwise



Content and navigation

One of the trickiest parts of planning a website is having a clear idea of what information you want to include. You also need to anticipate how your users will use the site.

- What will attract their attention?
- Where will they try to find information?
- How patiently will they wander round the site until they can find what they are looking for?

The key is to work through the planning systematically. You might want to do this in an MS Word table or on a big piece of paper.

- Make a list of all the information that your users will want to know about your organisation.
- Organise this list into categories. These might be things like “About us”, “Our Services”, “Our Members”, “Contact us”.
- Further organise your information into subcategories where necessary. So “Our Mission”, “Our staff”, “Introducing the Board” might all fall into the “About us” section.
- Is there any information that needs to be repeated or needs to be made available in more than one area? For example, you might want your contact details to be available on each page. Or you may want to link your pages so that people can click through to relevant information easily without going back to the home page.

You will probably repeat this planning exercise many times during the life of the website as your services change and you want to tell people about new initiatives. However, the first stage of planning is the most important so that both you and your designer have a clear idea of the direction you want to go in.

Accessible to all?

The basic role of the voluntary sector is to ensure that those who are marginalised from society, against their wishes, can be integrated. This right to access information and services extends into cyberspace.

That means that when designing a website you need to consider all your potential readers. At a basic level, are your colours easy on the eye, is your content straight forward and is your font size big enough?

The World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) has laid out some standards of accessibility which your organisation should aim to work towards. Some of these are easier, and cheaper, to implement than others. However, you need to make sure that your budget allows you to cater for all your users.

Don't be shy about your accessibility attempts. State clearly on the site that your ongoing aim is to make your website as accessible as possible.



Branding

Your website should have the same look and feel as the rest of your marketing material. In fact, given the long-term investment that you are about to make online, your website should almost be futuristic in its branding. If your website looks outdated within a year of going live, you'll be very disappointed.

Planning a website is a good time to evaluate your organisation's branding.

- Do we use consistent colours, imagery and content across our materials?
- Will the existing colours work well both online and offline?
- Do we have a clear mission statement so that people can read quickly who we are and what we do?

TOP TIP

Make your text easy to read. Break it into small sections, using subheadings and appropriate spacing to separate each of the sections. Use active verbs and short sentences.

Legal Issues

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You have a responsibility to look after your website users. That means that you need to reassure them that any personal data they give you, or any information about the computer they use, does not fall into the wrong hands.

Also, if you are planning to include a discussion element to your website, think hard about what to do if some of the discussion gets out of hand. You may need to assign a moderator to keep an eye on the content.

The best way to make sure you're covered is to speak to your lawyer. Ask them to draw up a statement outlining the terms and conditions which visitors must comply to when using your website.

Budget

Budget

A website can be as cheap or expensive as you want it to be. There are lots of great free options such as blogs that you can then customise with your own website address. However, while they can be a great add-on for discussion groups and forums, they are not for the totally uninitiated and overstretched!

Aim high. Be ambitious with your wish-list and ask your designer to break down his or her quotation so that you know what elements you can afford at first. Don't forget to enquire about any annual maintenance fees or web hosting costs.



How much do you want to be involved?

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Not so long ago, websites, once developed, became the developer's domain for all but the very wealthy organisations. You had to pay every time you wanted to make even the smallest change to your site.

Nowadays, you – the purchaser – can be much more involved in the set up and maintenance.

Three factors will influence how much you get involved.

- the sort of site
Is your site going to be fairly static or will the content change regularly?
- the available staff
A bit of on-the-job learning will be required to get to grips with new technology. Do you or your team have the time to skill up and to update the content as often as necessary?
- the budget
Your designer will charge you, probably on an hourly basis, for each change you need. Work out what his or her hourly rate is and work out whether it is more cost-effective for you to do the updates on a content management system.

A content management system built into the design and cost of the website will give you the most options. It is generally fairly intuitive and through it you will discover the delights of bringing a website to life!

Prepare a designer's brief

During the course of your online review, you will come across sites which you particularly like. Give them a call and ask them who designed their site and how the process went.

Then, the best way to identify the designer who is most likely to design the website you want, is to let them know your wish-list right from the start.

A tender-style document is a good template to use to set out your wish-list clearly. Some of the things you might include in this brief are:

- who your organisation is and what it does
- what you want the website to do
- any specific requirements with regards to accessibility, design, search functions
- other websites which you like and which the designer could use as a style guide
- your budget
- your ideal timeline
- any requirements relating to the designer – company background, financial viability, previous similar experience, project plan, referees.

Prepare a designer's brief



So your website is live and kicking. How do you let people know about it?

- Include your web address on all publications
- Put your web address at the bottom of all emails
- Set up reciprocal links with other relevant websites so that their users can find out about your organisation
- Identify some keywords that describe your organisation and use them regularly when writing your content so that search engines can find your site
- Create reasons for people to visit your site. Run an email newsletter, advertise jobs, make publications available for people to download.

TOP TIP

Use keywords that your target audience would search for. Sprinkle them throughout your text, but not to the extent that it hurts the quality of your content. Check your spelling and grammar. Remember that quality is in the details.

Monitoring and Evaluation

A website is an organic marketing tool. Today's relevant information may not be relevant next week, next month or next year. And on the internet, more than anywhere else, your readers expect you to be bang up to date.

So make sure that your website designer provides you with a good website evaluation tool. This will generally be an online tool which lists things like how many people have visited your site, what information they read and how long they spent. Using this information, you will be able to identify trends and start planning for the future – both online and in the running of your organisation itself.

TOP TIP

Test your website before you go public. Make sure that all links work and that images appear as you want them to on all screens and browsers. Let your target audience test how clear and easy it is to use and then implement their feedback.



Useful Resources

Here are some resources which we found useful in designing the GCVS website.

Worldwide Web Consortium

The leaders in website accessibility standards

<http://www.w3.org>

Scottish Accessible Information Forum

SAIF works to improve accessible information for disabled people by producing and promoting standards and guidelines.

<http://www.saifscotland.org.uk>

Disability Rights Commission

The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) is an independent body established in April 2000 by Act of Parliament to stop discrimination and promote equality of opportunity for disabled people.

<http://www.drc.org.uk>

Plain English Campaign

A great guide to writing online

<http://www.plainenglish.co.uk>

Nfp Synergy

nfpSynergy is a think-tank and research consultancy for the not-for-profit sector. Our goal is to provide research information and knowledge to help non profits thrive. We do tracking research, focus groups and individual projects. We measure anything from effectiveness to advertising.

<http://www.nfpsynergy.net/>

Third Sector

Third Sector is the UK's leading publication for everyone who needs to know what's going on in the voluntary and not-for-profit sector.

<http://www.thirdsector.co.uk/>

Survey Monkey

An online survey tool which allows you to get feedback from your web visitors on your website and what changes they would like to see.

<http://www.surveymonkey.com>



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GCVS Good Practice Guides

GCVS has produced a range of good practice guides to support voluntary organisations in their growth.

If you would like to talk to a member of staff about any of the issues raised in these publications, call 0141 332 2444.

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