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IS YOUR 24/7 AMBASSADOR AN EMBARRASSMENT?

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THE WAY IT OFTEN GOES

Your organization does awesome work. You want to do good and you want to empower others to do good too. But if your website is anything short of excellent, it won't be connecting with your audiences. And there's nothing more disheartening than an aspirational organization with a mediocre website.

Many non-profits have tight budgets, so a humdrum website comes as no surprise. Such sites are created under "bare bones" conditions, either internally, if there's someone on board who knows HTML, or externally, by an unseasoned web designer willing to create a portfolio piece for a low or no fee.

And once the site is launched, the "It'll do" mentality kicks in. Your organization's staff and volunteers are glad to have a site at all, even if it means referring to it in apologetic terms:

"...it's not particularly exciting..."

"...it wasn't exactly what we were hoping for..."

"...it's cluttered, but we didn't know how to fix that..."

"...but it'll do for now..."

And so the inadequate site becomes the public face of your organization. And your audiences—the donors, volunteers, clients, applicants, members of the media, elected representatives—they visit the inadequate site. And they find your mission statement, and your address, and they download a form they want, but they're getting just the basic facts. They can't see the passion in your work. No stories are told. No surprises are offered. Nothing moves them.



What a wasted opportunity. You and your organization are trying to cause fundamental change for the better, and your website does nothing to move your audiences. And this becomes more than a theoretical issue when you consider your volunteers and donors. If you want to persuade people to part with their time or money, they need to be moved to do so. Your organization's website should play a key role in that persuasion.

THE 24/7 AMBASSADOR

Look at it this way: your organization's website is not just a glorified extension of your phone book listing. It's your 24/7 ambassador. If you had a staff member who was "always on" and available to talk to anyone, anywhere, about your organization, wouldn't you want them to do more than repeat your mission statement in a flat monotone and hand out business cards and forms? You probably wouldn't risk letting such a staff member out the door, let alone be out in the world for years at a time.

Instead, you'd want that always-on staff member to be telling stories about your good work in the world. And not just the same story over and over, but different stories to each person who approaches. The staff member would tell them the latest news, with pictures, even video. The staff member would give out tips and resources, point out relationships between your organization and current events, and build a picture of the value of your organization and its successes. Visitors would still pick up that business card or form, but they'd come away with so much more. A sense of "Wow, that was awesome. I want to know more. I want to contribute. Participate. Join them on Facebook. Tell others." This is the kind of response an ambassador should elicit.

At this point you may be asking, "*What makes the difference between a mediocre site and an excellent site?*" The answer lies in a combination of factors:



1. INVESTMENT—understanding the true value of your web presence

Q: *“If our site looks fancy, donors will think we’ve wasted money that could have gone into helping the communities we serve. Remaining plain, even awkward and ‘homespun’ demonstrates that we’re economical.”*

A. There are two problems with this argument. Firstly, an excellent website doesn’t need bells and whistles to connect with your audiences. But it does need to be planned and designed well, and it needs to be adaptable as you and your circumstances change.

Secondly, keeping your website in the “It’ll do” mode is a false economy. An excellent website that truly expresses your vision and your stories is not merely a pretty bauble. It is an investment in the growth of your organization and its ability to serve your communities. According to a study reported April 2009 in BizReport, that looked at how website visitors were likely to part with their money or time, “highly satisfied” visitors to non-profit websites are 49% more likely to donate money and 38% are more likely to donate their time, when compared to dissatisfied visitors.

(http://www.bizreport.com/2009/04/foresee_results_good_online_experience_paramount_for_non-pro.html)

The real question is not, “what does an excellent website cost?” but rather, “what are the hidden costs and lost opportunities inherent in a mediocre site?”

2. PLANNING AND ORGANIZATION—the crucial first step

Q. *“But what is there to plan? Here’s our mission statement, our contact info, some news articles, and our bios. It just needs to be arranged neatly.”*

A. Planning your site should be strategic. It’s about stepping back and looking at your organization and your audiences: where you’ve come from, where you are now, and where you want to go. An audit of your current site, with its strengths and weaknesses, along with the goals learned from the planning process, will inform the information



architecture, messaging, and design of the new site. An excellent site is built with adaptability and growth in mind.

3. COPYWRITING/COPYEDITING—tailoring your message to your audiences, while keeping your authentic voice

Q. *“Why do we need a copywriter? We’d rather do the writing in-house. After all, we know our organization better than anyone.”*

A. It is true that your staff knows more about your organization than an external writer. However, organizations’ websites are at risk of being verbose, wonky, dull, repetitive, and inconsistent. A good compromise is a copy editor: someone who will work with you to unify your message, remove stylistic stumbling blocks, and refine your writing in alignment with your voice, your goals, and the needs of your audiences.

Keep in mind that Web visitors:

- don’t read, they skim
- absorb information in a non-linear way, not necessarily in the order you intend
- will leave much of your website unread
- need information categorized under familiar terms and according to a mental schematic they understand
- don’t need to be told that this is your website and in it they will find information about you
- should be asked, outright, to sign up for your newsletter, RSS feed, or to donate
- like to look at pictures and be told stories

Above all, your audiences should get the information they need as quickly and easily as possible. Especially audiences who might give you something, such as money, time, or exposure. NEVER think, “If they really want to know ‘X’, they can call.”



4. DESIGN—not just choices about colors, fonts, symbols, imagery, and layout, but the overall information architecture and experience too

Q. *“So called ‘good’ design doesn’t make much difference, right? It’s icing on the cake, something most visitors won’t notice—as long as they can access our information, we’re good.”*

A. A well-designed website is not only visually pleasing, it anticipates your audience’s needs and questions, and gives them information in a digestible form. An intuitive interface makes fewer demands on the visitor’s brain as they navigate, while a confusing, cluttered website causes frustration and fatigue. The effect may be slight, but cumulatively leads to a less positive experience for the visitor. Thus, they are less likely to make the investment of signing up for your newsletter, volunteering their time, or clicking the *Donate* button. Design isn’t just about looks, it’s about functionality.

5. TECHNOLOGY—the software underpinning the site and the admin system

Q. *“How do we update the website ourselves? Should we go with a web company that will set us up with their own proprietary content management system?”*

A. The content management system (CMS), through which your staff edits the website, should be easy for non-techies to use. It should also be browser-based, meaning it’s accessible (with a secure login, of course) from anywhere with an Internet connection.

Ideally, your CMS should be based on a widely available system so that you’re not locked into a contract with one provider. If your website is built on one of the widely available systems, and you want to switch providers, you can do so easily because many technical experts know how to work with those systems. Whereas, if you’re locked into a proprietary system, only people from that one company can understand the inner workings of your website. And if you want to move away from that company, your website will probably have to be rebuilt.



6. INTERACTIVITY AND ANALYTICS—engaging visitors and gathering data

Q. *“It’s all very well to describe our website as an ambassador, but besides being our “always on” public face, what else can this ambassador do? After all, we’re short staffed here and everybody has to wear multiple hats to get the work done.”*

A. An excellent website is more than just a passive brochure. It can interact with your audiences, let them interact with each other, and gather data. Visitors can “talk back” on pages that allow commenting. They can talk to each other if you have a forum. You can poll visitors, and use the data in your work. You can showcase your clients, and grow your and their community. An excellent website also facilitates adding visitors to your database and social media outreach.

Behind the scenes your “ambassador” does analytics, noting which sites and search words bring in visitors, which pages they looked at, how long they stayed, and even the age of their browser. You can learn what’s driving traffic to your site, and watch for clues such as pages that visitors consistently leave early: a sure sign that something is confusing them. Analytics helps you refine your messaging and adapt to changing conditions in the client, donor, political, and social landscapes.

SUMMARY

A well-planned, well-designed, powerful web presence will nourish your organization in multiple ways. Your “ambassador” should get you donors, build your database, frame your issues, tell your stories, and spread the word. In short, your website should be connecting you with your audiences, authentically and powerfully.

As the BizReport article says, “...nonprofit websites have long been underestimated and misunderstood, and actually have tremendous power and influence over donor and volunteer behavior.”

Your organization is extraordinary. Your website should be, too.