Websites
made simple

CFDG

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Introduction

This guide is aimed at anyone who is wondering whether their organisation is making the most effective use of their website, or who has already decided they need to make some changes. By the end of it you should have a better understanding of the choices your organisation has in relation to its website, and how to make the necessary decisions.

It provides a framework for thinking and talking about your own organisation's website, from overall strategy, through planning and design, to the way you implement it in practice. The guide is structured around these three main elements, which are present in all the most successful websites:

Purpose Understanding who the website is communicating with, the objectives of that communication, and what success will look like

Design The way your website looks, what it contains, and the functions that visitors will be able to use (including features of Web 2.0)

Technology The practicalities of how you create, update and manage your website, and where it is physically located

These are followed by a short section about marketing your website, both on the web and in the real world. And finally, there is a substantial list of further reading, in case you want to find out more about any of the subjects touched upon in the guide.

Purpose

In thinking about your organisation's website, it is helpful to start with a clear understanding of *exactly* how it is going to help your organisation achieve its goals. We suggest that you ask yourself four questions:

- Why do you want a website?
- Who is your audience?
- What are you asking your audience to do?
- How will you know if you are successful?

Your answers to these questions should inform later decisions about website structure and content, and about the technology you need to deliver it.

Why do you want a website?

The answer to this question may seem obvious, but quite often there are a range of competing goals, and how you prioritise them can make a big difference to the ultimate look and feel of your website. For example, you might want to do one or more of:

- Raise your profile
- Raise money
- Change people's behaviour
- Provide services - for example information, advice or bookings
- Involve people in your work – for example campaigning or volunteering

Of course, you may have multiple goals for your website, but it will be easier to make effective design decisions if you can prioritise these goals, and even describe how they relate to each other.

Who is your audience?

The goals you set for your website should help to clarify its main audience. The site may have more than one audience, in which case you should decide which is the most important, and which less so. An understanding of your audiences will help you design your site appropriately, and inform the overall tone of your communications.

What are you asking your audience to do?

Your website is more likely to be effective if you make it clear what you are asking for, and why. These 'asks' should inform the messages that you give out across your entire website, not just the places where you actually make the ask. For example, if the priority for your website is to raise money, it needs to convey how you can be trusted to make good use of any donations you receive.

How will you know if you are successful?

It is fairly easy to measure how much money you raise through your website. However, if your goal is raising awareness or changing behaviour, you will need to find more creative ways of measuring success. There are a range of tools available for both quantitative and qualitative measurement of the overall success of your website, including:

- **Web analytics software** to measure traffic on your website
- **Entry and exit surveys** to compile qualitative and quantitative information about visitor experiences of your site
- **Collecting testimonies** from regular users of your website, to explain the impact the materials and services you provide have on individuals.

Design

Armed with a clear understanding of the purpose of your website and the characteristics of your intended audiences, you are ready to step into the world of web design.

The design of a website is critical to its success, and is concerned not only with aesthetics and visual appeal, but also with how useable the site is and how effectively it delivers its message. This section outlines the key elements of successful website design, which can act as pointers in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of your current website.

If you are planning to make major changes to the design of your website, we would recommend that you work with an experienced website designer. A good designer will have valuable technical and aesthetic expertise and understand how people interact with websites. However, you will save yourself time and money if you think about some of these issues for yourself, before talking through the relevant points with your designer.

Design for usability

Think about your audience

Ask yourself how people will use the site. What will they want to find? Where in your site's structure will that live? Is it where users expect? How quickly can they get to it? Imagine scenarios for different audiences looking for different things.

A younger audience may prefer 'state of the art' interactive features and modern designs which might be off-putting for other audiences. Remember to distinguish between designs that you personally like and find easy to use, and those that are appropriate to your target audiences!

Structure the information in your site into a hierarchy

Think about this from the point of view of your audiences. Your hierarchy should probably not reflect the way your organisation is structured – visitors are not usually interested in learning about your internal structures. Avoid having too many or too few alternatives at each level of your hierarchy. Many designers recommend between five and seven alternatives at each level.

Develop a navigation system

The ability to move easily between different pages and sites is part of the appeal of the web, but it can also be very confusing. You therefore need to do everything you can to structure the information on your site so that users can navigate – find their way – around the site easily.

Visitors using search engines may arrive anywhere on your website without going through the front page, so it needs to be immediately clear where each page fits into the overall structure of your site.

Page content

Content published on the web needs to be structured and formatted differently than on paper. Users generally prefer to read only short documents on screen, so divide up and if necessary restructure longer documents.

Remember that the audience for your website might be different from the audience for other channels of communication, so you may want to rewrite some of your existing material specifically for the web.

Design for accessibility

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 requires that you make 'reasonable adjustments' to your website in order for it to be accessible to people of a range of abilities and disabilities. It is not specific about what this means in practice, but a British Standard for building and maintaining web content that is accessible to disabled people is due to be published in summer 2009.

In the meantime, the W3C Web Accessibility Initiative defines the essential components of an accessible website. You don't need to understand the technical details, you just need to know that you can test your website using tools that W3C and others provide (see references). Be aware that these automated tools have their limitations, and if accessibility is particularly important to your organisation, you may want to get specialist advice.

Functionality

Beyond simple text and graphics, the overall goals for your website and the needs of your audiences should determine the functions you provide on your site. For example, donation forms, discussion forums, mailing lists, bookings and sales, feedback and enquiry forms, site search, and multimedia content are all common functions of charity websites today. Some of these might be standard features of the software you use to create and manage your site, in which case it should be relatively straightforward to integrate them seamlessly into your design.

More technically challenging to achieve, yet of increasing interest to charities, are personalisation and integration between the website and internal business systems. Both of these concepts are described further below.

Personalisation

A personalised website creates a tailored experience for each individual visitor by promoting content that is specific to their interests. Personalisation may require a visitor to register with the website and set up a profile, or it may determine a particular visitor's interests by monitoring the types of pages they are looking at.

Personalisation can help you customise your web offerings to your different audiences, but needs to be thought through carefully when you design your site.

Integration

Good integration between your website and your internal business systems can significantly reduce the overheads involved in managing on-line transactions. It can also make a big difference to the quality of the relationship you have with your stakeholders both on-line and off-line. Whatever functionality you are planning to design into your website, think through the practicalities of how it will work behind the scenes.

The greatest impact can usually be gained by integration with your organisation's customer relationship management (CRM) system. Most CRMs nowadays claim a range of features that make for easy integration with your website. However, our advice would be to approach any integration work with a healthy degree of scepticism, plan the project thoroughly, and expect to encounter a few technical challenges along the way.

Don't forget the law

In designing a beautiful and useable web presence, don't forget the necessary legal requirements:

- If you are selling things, have you clearly communicated your terms and conditions?
- Have you protected the intellectual property of your organisation?
- Have you obtained all necessary licences and consents for using other people's materials?
- Have you obtained the consent of everyone featured in your own videos, photos and text?
- Have you included full information about your charity or company?
- Does your site aim to be standards-compliant and accessible to all users?
- If gathering or using personal information on your website, have you considered the data protection implications?

Web 2.0

What is Web 2.0?

Web 2.0 refers to the 'second generation' of web design based on technological developments that support a high level of user interaction. Web 2.0 websites create on-line communities by facilitating collaboration and sharing between users. Traditional websites talked at visitors. With Web 2.0, it's the visitors who do the talking.

Some Web 2.0 tools

Social networks form a principal part of Web2.0, allowing people to create and share within on-line communities without needing technical IT skills. These communities cater for different audiences. Popular examples are *Facebook* (general use), *LinkedIn* (business-orientated), *Flickr* (photographs), *YouTube* (videos) and *Twitter* (short updates).

Blogs are a key communication tool, similar to a shared on-line diary. They consist of regularly updated websites which allow people to share their opinions and link to other material on the internet. The *ICAEW* and *Financial Director*, have blogs as do many charities. *CharityBlog* provides links to a few of these.

Social bookmarking allows individuals and groups to save, organise and search their links to 'favourite' web pages. These links can be secure or shared, and annotations and keywords can be added to help find the links again. Increasingly, visitors are being encouraged to bookmark pages by adding links to bookmarking tools such as *Delicious* and *Digg*.

Wikis allow individuals to edit and share information in a managed way without needing specialist IT skills. They can be thought of as free collaborative encyclopaedias. *Wikipedia* is perhaps the most well-known public wiki. Organisations may also use Wikis internally for knowledge management.

News feeds (also known as RSS feeds) allow people to have website updates delivered directly to them, rather than needing to repeatedly visit a website to see what is new. Many charities use news feeds to draw attention to news stories and new content. To access and read these personal 'news readers' can be set up which bring feeds together in one place. The *BBC* has a straightforward guide.

From being launched in 2004, Facebook had 175 million active users by February 2009

How can you use Web 2.0?

The voluntary sector is especially well placed to make use of these new developments. People who work with or support charities are often passionate about their cause, and will advocate for the charity in other situations. Web 2.0 presents a great opportunity to harness this passion. In addition, people interested in a particular charitable cause might naturally be drawn towards others who share the same interest, and communities and collaboration online are an ideal way of tapping into this.

In practice, your charity can harness the power of Web 2.0 in two ways. You can implement tools to create communications and encourage involvement on your own website. You can also establish a presence on the social networking sites that already exist (such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and MySpace). There are a growing number of charity case studies and exemplars available on the web (see Further information).

Opportunities provided by Web 2.0 that you might want to consider include:
- Raising awareness and recruiting supporters
- Campaigning and influencing
- Encouraging and responding to feedback
- Gathering information for use in your work
- Consolidating existing, unofficial social networks related to your organisation

Is Web 2.0 for you?

Not all organisations can benefit equally from Web 2.0. For example, you may be better off investing your time and effort elsewhere:
- You are still struggling with more basic technology, such as your CRM system or your Web 1.0 website
- If your target audiences aren't using social networking tools
- If you don't have time and expertise to research the technologies, and get them working
- If you can't afford to experiment and make a few mistakes along the way
- You want to maintain strict control over your brand and messages.

Implementation

Now that you're clear what your website should look like, and the functions that you want to provide for your visitors, you are ready to think about the technology you need to achieve your goals. This section considers the two main questions that face you:

- How will you create, update and manage your website?
- Where will your website be physically located?

Creating and updating your website

Using a content management system('CMS')

If your website has more than a few dozen pages and needs updating regularly you should definitely consider using a content management system. A CMS helps you develop, update, maintain and administer your own site through relatively simple administration tools.

With a CMS, website visitors view one version of the website (sometimes called the 'front-end'), while the website administrators and content editors have access to a different view (sometimes called the 'back-end') which allows them to set up the site, create and update pages, add new navigation, and much more, all through relatively simple administration tools.

Technically, CMSs work in a variety of ways. They may be installed on your own publicly accessible web space or on your internal computer network, or they may be available as hosted versions that are already on-line. All CMSs hold a database of content and settings for your website, which they use to create the web pages that visitors see, either by publishing a new version of your website on a regular basis (perhaps once a day), or by producing individual pages directly from the database in 'real time'.

What are the benefits of a CMS?

A CMS makes developing, upgrading and maintaining a website easier. It does this in part by separating out the different elements of content, design and navigation. So, for example, content authors can add and change text on your website, and the content management system will automatically create the correct design and navigation. Similarly, web designers can change the design or navigation of the whole site by making a single change within the CMS.

A web CMS takes some time to set up, but can save vastly more time and effort in the longer term. Using a CMS will allow you to take advantage of a lot of previous development work that has gone into simplifying website management and providing specific functions on

your website. Packaged content management systems include a set of core features that are needed for virtually every website. These can usually be extended by the addition of optional extras that enhance the CMS's functionality.

Choosing a CMS

CMSs come in many shapes and forms, both proprietary and open source. Although open source software is available free of charge, there may be significant costs involved in installing, hosting, adapting, developing and maintaining the website, or training staff in its use.

The starting point for choosing a CMS is producing a specification of what it is you want to achieve and the features you want the website to have. Some of the criteria to consider when choosing a CMS are:

- Can you understand how it works, and how to use it?
- Does it provide all the features you require?
- Is it widely used? In this country?
- Are other similar organisations using it?
- Does it require any specialised web hosting?
- Can it produce websites that meet current web and accessibility standards?
- What support, documentation and training are available?
- How will the CMS be developed in the future?
- How much will it cost to implement (including installation, development and training)?

Managing your website without a CMS

If your organisation only needs a very small, simple site which doesn't change very often, a full content management system designed to update sophisticated sites might not make sense. It would be time-consuming to set up, and you would be paying for functionality you'll never use. If this applies to you, there are a range of other options available.

Web design tools

Web design tools can be used to create and manage your entire website. Examples of these tools include Microsoft FrontPage (now Microsoft Expression or Microsoft SharePoint Designer), Adobe Dreamweaver, or any number of open source options. For someone with the necessary technical skills, it could be cheaper and quicker to set up and maintain a small, static site using one of these tools than using a CMS.

If you choose this route to create your website, or you already have a website created in this way, you may want to look at the packaged software tool Adobe Contribute. This allows non-technical users to

easily update an existing website (unlike other CMSs, which can only work with websites that are held within their own database).

Website-in-a-box

Website-in-a-box tools allow you to go to an on-line site builder, pick out a design and layout from hundreds of templates, upload a logo, define your navigation, and create your text and images — all with easy-to-use tools that are intended for anyone accustomed to using software like Word or Outlook. These are inexpensive tools, but the design and functionality available will be limited. Many web hosting companies offer simple website-in-a-box tools for free, although they vary widely in quality.

A small number of tools are available that extend the concept of the website-in-a-box with additional functionality specifically for not-for-profit organisations, including donations, event registration and email newsletters. Some even provide basic CRM functionality, so you can manage all your contacts on-line as well as your website. While the feature set is considerably broader than that provided by a website-in-a-box, you are still limited to what the tools offer. Two examples are WildApricot and Nonprofit Soapbox (see Further information).

Social networking sites

MySpace and Facebook offer easy-to-use tools that will help you set up a web presence. If you just need to put up some simple materials, and your key audiences are the type of people likely to be on social networking sites, creating your initial web presence using these tools could be a viable option.

Where's your site going to go?

It may sound obvious, but your website needs to be stored (or 'hosted') on a computer that is permanently connected to the internet so that other people can see it. In this section we look at the features that you should consider when choosing the right host for your website, and explain the advantages and disadvantages of a range of different approaches.

Getting your requirements clear

Here are some of the things you should consider when choosing your host:

Cost

This ranges from free upwards. Make sure find all the hidden extras involved in meeting your requirements.

Disk space

As well as your web pages, don't forget to take account of the space you'll need for any databases you use, and user-generated content.

Data transfer

There will generally be a monthly limit on the total amount of data that can be downloaded from your site, which will vary depending on how much you pay. Some hosting companies will 'switch off' access to your site without notice or impose hefty charges if you exceed this.

Bandwidth

Even a site that does not require a great deal of data transfer a month could run slowly if the bandwidth available is limited, or shared with too many other sites.

Support for advanced functions

If your site uses a database or customised scripts (as it will do if you provide any type of interaction) your host will need to support these features.

Multimedia support

Good quality video hosting is still very expensive. Consider using external sites like YouTube instead.

Content management

Some hosts provide pre-installed open-source CMSs free of charge.

Security

You will need a secure server if you will be holding financial or personal information on your website.

Backup

Not all web hosts will keep a back-up of your website. Even if a web host says that they will do regular back-ups, you should also regularly back up your site.

Analysis

What analysis of website traffic will you get? If you are hosting your own website, don't forget to factor in the cost of any analysis software and hardware you need.

Technical support

Hosts will offer different response times, and some cheaper hosts may only offer e-mail support.

Service level agreement ('SLA')

If you need the peace of mind that SLAs can offer, make sure you get a written agreement.

Choosing the right option

The main options available to you, and their advantages and disadvantages, are outlined in the table on the following page. In choosing a hosting option, and in choosing a hosting company from

amongst the hundreds out there, we recommend that you:

- Are clear about your requirements and certain that your chosen host can fulfil them
- Get recommendations from organisations with similar websites
- Make sure you read the hosting company's terms and conditions carefully

Website hosting options

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages	Choose this option if...
Free hosting There are lots of companies that just offer free web space	It's free. You may even get free web space with your existing internet service provider (ISP)	There may be significant limitations to the service you get, and obviously there won't be much comeback if the service is slow or unreliable	You are not dependent on your website to communicate information or deliver services
Shared or virtual servers Your website is allocated a limited amount of space on a server that's shared with other sites at a remote location	The cheapest practical option for most charities	The features and technologies available to you will be limited. Problems with other sites hosted on the same server could cause problems for yours	You have a low traffic site with reasonably static pages
Dedicated servers Your host provides a dedicated server for your website at a remote location	Improved performance, particularly if your site uses databases or other more advanced web technologies. Fewer limitations to available features	Can be a lot of work. Some hosts will do the hard work for you, but this will be reflected in the price	You expect your site to get busy or complicated.
Co-location servers This is similar to having a dedicated server, but you buy the hardware and set the server up yourself, and then rent space in a data centre and connections to the internet	Gives you maximum freedom in terms of which software you install, and consequently what features you can provide on your website, but it's also the most involved	Often more expensive than simply renting a dedicated server from your host, and it can also be more time consuming. The onus is on you to set the server up, so this option really isn't for beginners	You need total freedom to install whatever software you want and you have a strong technical team to support you
Hosting the site yourself Your web server would be located in your own offices, alongside your other central computer systems, and would share the internet connection you use for browsing the internet	Gives you the most freedom and control over your website, and can be particularly useful if you are intending to integrate your website very closely with your internal systems	Creates a range of technical challenges that are not present in the other options. It is difficult and potentially costly to provide the same level of reliability and bandwidth as a dedicated host at similar prices	It is dictated by specific requirements (for example in order to integrate your website with internal systems), and you have a strong technical team to support you

Marketing

Finally, it's no use putting all that time into strategising, designing and developing your website if no-one visits it. Here are some tips for getting visitors to your website.

Get listed on search engines. You can submit the website to the search engines, or wait for them to find you. Good web design is important if you want to appear early in the list of results – plenty of advice is available on-line (see Further information).

Get links from other websites. Most search engines rate your website highly if other websites link to yours, especially where those websites are on a similar topic to yours and are highly ranked themselves. Put aside some time to build links with other organisations' websites in your field of work.

Tell everyone. If your organisation has a marketing strategy, make sure the website is part of it. At the very least put your website address on all your organisation's business cards, newsletters, reports, stationery and staff email signatures.

Get some free advertising by signing up to Google Grants. You may have noticed adverts appearing in a column beside Google's standard search results; these are now available free to registered charities (see further reading).

Use Web 2.0. Get a presence on social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook. If you have a promotional video, put it online at YouTube. Always include links back to your own website.

Further information

General resources
LASA Knowledgebase: a range of articles on the web specifically for charities
www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/youronlinepresence

Purpose
Virtual Promise: annual reports on charities use of the internet from 2004 onwards
www.nfpsynergy.net/our_free_research/our_reports_by_topic/internet_new_media.aspx

Hitting the Heart: A benchmark study of website donation marketing
www.dotmailer.com/hitting_the_heart/default.aspx

Passion, persistence and partnership: the secrets of earning more online
www.nfpsynergy.net/includes/documents/cm_docs/2008/p/passion_persistence_and_partnership.pdf

Accessibility
How to commission and design accessible websites: by AbilityNet
www.ictknowledgebase.org.uk/fileadmin/ICT/pdf/ICT_Hub_Publications/ict_hub_webguide.pdf

Accessibility validation tools
WAI tools: validator.w3.org/ and jigsaw.w3.org/css-validator

Cynthia
www.contentquality.com/

Web 2.0 examples
Christian Aid Week Facebook page for 2008
www.facebook.com/pages/Christian-Aid-Week-2008/10610276709

ActionAid UK's Bollocks to Poverty campaign
www.actionaid.org.uk/101564/bollocks_to_poverty.html

Content management systems
CMS Watch: authoritative news and reports, particularly for larger organisations
www.cmswatch.com/

CMS Matrix: feature comparison of different CMSs
www.cmsmatrix.org/

opensourceCMS: online trials of many open source CMSs
www.opensourcecms.com/

Managing your website without a CMS

Adobe Contribute

www.adobe.com/products/contribute/

Non-profit Soapbox

www.nonprofitsoapbox.com/

Wild Apricot

www.wildapricot.com/default2.aspx

Hosting

A comprehensive guide to hosting

www.sitepoint.com/article/complete-guide-hosting-1/

Marketing

Google Grants

www.google.co.uk/grants/

Getting a higher profile on search engines

www.google.co.uk/webmasters

made simple guides

Made Simple guides are aimed at finance professionals and other managers working in charities. They cover technical areas such as tax and VAT treatments as well as information management areas and aim to provide practical guidance to busy managers and trustees in charities.

The content of guides is correct at the time of going to print, but inevitably legal changes, case law and new financial reporting standards will change. You are therefore advised to check any particular actions you plan to take with the appropriate authority before committing yourself. No responsibility is accepted by the authors for reliance placed on the content of this guide.

Other guides in the series

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