

Best Practices for Non-Profits

By Mike Van Winkle | August 13, 2008

Non-profit organizations are in particular need of solid new media advice. Scarce resources, ironically, can lead both to chronic underspending and chronic overspending on new media.

Some non-profits rely on volunteer or intern labor to build their web presence. To no surprise, these NPs usually end up looking unprofessional. Other NPs, keen on looking professional and afraid of appearing cheap, make the exact opposite mistake. They assume more expensive means more effective. Nothing could be further from the truth. There are plenty of expensive web firms charging an arm and a leg for products that are nearly outdated.

More than any other type of organization, a non-profit needs to maximize the bang it gets for the new media buck. But there are few resources out there to tell them how to do so.

What follows is a list of question to ask yourself about your web site. It isn't comprehensive and one could certainly write an entire article about each. However, I hope this list will start you on a path to making solid decisions about your web projects. I have categorized the considerations according to key values that should govern your thinking.

Key Value: Adaptability

How adaptable is your Content Management System (CMS)? Choosing a CMS for your web site is like choosing the operating system for your computer; it affects every subsequent decision you make. In the new media world, things can literally change overnight. You may go to bed having installed the most cutting edge CMS around, only to wake up obsolete. In fact, if you stick around long enough, you WILL become obsolete.

As important as satisfying your existing needs is planning for the future. Choose a CMS that will be easy to upgrade, or at least easy to abandon once the something better hits the market.

Can you export your content into XML format? XML is a web standard that allows your content to be imported into another CMS or read by RSS Aggregators? XML is the language of interactivity.

Is your site designed using Cascading Style Sheets (CSS)? CSS separates the design of a site from

the programming. This means a clever young designer can come along and update the look of your web site without having to reprogram the CMS. This will save you time and money.

Does your CMS make it easy to add and remove modules? Without paying exorbitant programming fees? Twitter becomes all the rage and you'd like to add a Twitter feed to your site. Does the CMS allow you easy access to site modules? Or do you have to call a programmer?

Key Value: Usability

Is your site designed with tables or Cascading Style Sheets (CSS)? (I know, I already asked this) Visually impaired individuals use screen readers to access your site. These screen readers actually read the code aloud. Tables are cluttered and disorganized. Many think search engines discriminate against "ugly" code. All things being equal, use a tableless design if at all possible.

Do you have a "call to action" on the home page? People like to do things online. They like to click on things, sign up for things, and join things. As a general rule you should try to have something for them to do on your home page.

Does your homepage engage the user? It's tempting for think tanks and other content-producing non-profits to want all their content featured on the home page. But in doing this, they undermine the chief goal of the home page, which is to engage the user. Think about Google's home page. There's really on one thing to do: search. Yet, it is incredibly effective. Decide how you want to engage your users and then focus on doing it on the home page.

Any "call to action," whether it be an email subscription or a petition, should be prominently placed. If you feature content, limit features to just one of two and use menus to guide the user deeper into the site.

Key Value: Search Friendly

Does your site link to other web sites in your "industry"? Links are how you "exist" to search engines and other web sites. A web site with no external links might as well not exist.

Do your articles link keywords to external sites? If writing an article on Agriculture, you should link key terms in the article to external resources on the issue. Search engines will pick up on linked keywords and in some case give you search priority. Of course, you don't want to over-link either, because that will overwhelm the reader.

Are your URLs pretty? It may seem like a silly question but it's an important one. The URL for this article is

<http://www.mikevanwinkle.com/2008/08/new-media-best-practices-for-non-profits/>

However, it could just as easily have been something like

http://www.mikevanwinkle.com/art_asp/article?id=12353&true.asp

If you came across both links in a Google search, which would you click on? You should strive for a system that allows you to create URL strings that include the keywords you want to associate with the article.

Are you using keywords in the right places? Search engines prioritizes some parts of you site over others. Page titles, headings, image captions and titles, these are all key places to use your keywords. (more on SEO priorities)

Does you CMS allow the tagging of content? Tags are a way to inter-relate content within your site and help search engines determine the relevance of your site. Most new CMS have built in tagging, but most older than a couple of years do not.

Key Value: User-Community

Is your CMS open or closed? This is a critical question. There are advantages to closed proprietary systems and advantages to open-source systems. Proprietary systems tend to be more stable and have a more reliable base of trained programmers. Open-source systems, though, tend to be more innovative and more adaptable than proprietary systems.

Who else is using your CMS? If you are the only one using your Content Management System, you have a problem. You alone will bear the cost of upgrading and improving that system for future generations of your site. Good CMS have a community of users, all making small innovations that eventually get incorporated into a new version. Sometimes your CMS community is simply the other clients working with your web firm. In the case of open-source, that community can be millions of people. This one of the factors that has made open-source so popular.

Committing to a CMS is committing to a community of developers. Each community has distinct and idiosyncratic characteristics. Pay attention to the community you are joining, is it vibrant and full of life, or is it depressed and dying? Sometimes it is hard to tell the difference, but the important thing is that you are paying attention.

Key Value: Sociability

Where is your blog? Regardless of what CMS you use, if you are going to blog, you should consider putting it on a separate site using Wordpress. There are a number of reasons for this. First, blogging is an extremely fast-changing and interactive endeavor; you want to make sure you are using the best possible blogging platform.

Second, if you're blogging you are probably hoping it will bring traffic to your site. If so, why bury it within your existing site? Instead, think of it as a separate web space to link back to your regular "institutional" articles. This has the added benefit of increasing the number of inbound links to your web site.

Finally, a blog without comments is a waste of time and energy. But most organizations are afraid to allow comments on their web sites for fear of being associated with the off-color remarks they may contain. By separating the blog off into a separate product, you attain a level of separation between the brand of your organization and the brand of your blog.

Are you serious about being social? There are a million ways to be involved in social media: Twitter, Facebook, blogging, Digg. The list goes on and on. And just like in the real world, you can't fake the interaction you have in these social media. You can't go to a party, stand in the corner all night and then expect people to listen to you when you have something to say. You have to actively engage the community. It is very labor intensive, but the pay off can be enormous. Social media isn't right for every organization, but if you are going to make it work you have to truly commit to it. Consider making it someone's full time job.

Do you understand community? You can't fake community. Community requires sharing, and to build a real community, you have to be willing to share your organization with the participants. There's nothing wrong with being unwilling to do this, but be honest with yourself about it. If you aren't willing to share, then don't waste your time pretending.

Key Value: Vision and Substance

Do you have vision and substance? All the fancy media in the world won't make up for a lack of vision and failure to produce a valuable product. If you don't have these things in place, don't waste your time worrying about new media.