TAKE CONTROL

Strategic Websites for Non-Profits

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Contents

Introduction

Businesses and organizations no longer need to be convinced of the value of a website. In fact, finding groups that do not have an online presence is becoming more and more difficult. Businesses and organizations know that their website is the principal means of communicating with critical groups of customers and clients.

Unfortunately, many small businesses and organizations have given away control over their website.

Building a website requires a certain level of technical knowledge that usually requires outside help. But, in finding that assistance, organizations often go too far and place too much trust in their web design company, essentially surrendering their website to someone outside the organization.

I know you want an effective website. Follow me and find out how!

As the owner of a small bookstore, my first foray into the internet world followed the pattern experienced by so many businesses and not-for-profits alike. I contracted a web design company to build a website, and loved the first impressions. The site looked fabulous, and we had high hopes for what it would bring to the business.

However, it wasn't long before I realized that the website was not really helping the business. It was a pretty face on the internet, but not much more than that. Fortunately, unlike most people in this situation, I had a background in business analysis and organizational modeling. I was able to apply those skills to the internet world. I realized that I had let a stranger make many business decisions on my behalf, and I was determined to fix the problems.

I took back control and created an effective website for my business.

A few years later, I volunteered to sit on the Board of a non-profit community theatre. Board members were unhappy with the theatre's static website that had been developed by a web developer some years before. Although the site was attractive, it did not really make much of a contribution to the overall theatre operation. For a small theatre that struggled financially, paying for even small changes was prohibitive.

So as happens on volunteer Boards, I volunteered to develop a new website that advanced the theatres goals. But this was my first time working in this capacity with a non-profit. I was fascinated by the challenges of the non-profit world, and the differences from the business world. Since, I have worked with other non-profits to do the same. I helped the theatre build a website that worked for them, in which they could be confident. Now I want to help empower other organizations.

Taking control and building an effective website should be a high priority for any business or non-profit.

In my day-to-day activities I see too many groups who have let others make their organizational decisions, and are disappointed by the results.

They lose confidence in their website, and are afraid of making the same mistake again.

This book aims to empower non-profits by challenging how you think about your website in the context of your organization and your goals. It gives concrete strategies for determining what works and doesn't work, so that the next time you want to improve your website you know exactly what has to be done.

Regain confidence in your website.

Empower your organization with a strategic website.

The first step to taking control of your website is to have a basic understanding of what a "strategic website" means. Keep reading and I promise it will begin to make perfect sense to you.

The Strategic Website

For most organizations today, a website is an essential means of communicating with their clients, supporters, donors, and the community. It is how relationships are built and maintained. For most organizations, a website is not an option. In today's inter-connected world, where organizations are expected to have a website, it is the first place people look for information.

A website that is designed and created to advance an organization's goals is a strategic website.

It is a business tool that goes beyond an electronic brochure. It's more than just a pretty face for the organization. It is an entity that has been de-signed and built with the sole purpose of advancing the goals of the organization. The contribution of the strategic website to the organization is measurable, and it is adaptable.

Putting the right pieces together builds a solid website.

Your website should

be viewed as a strategic asset, without which the future of the organization is threatened. A website does not exist alone, and it cannot be separated from the organization behind it.

A website is a strategic tool to be used by an organization to support their goals.

Any effective organization needs to be able to articulate why they exist. The same question has to be asked about a website. The website for any organization should exist for one simple reason, and that is to further the goals and objectives of the organization, whatever they may be. The functionality, appearance, layout, structure, and all other aspects of the website should relate back to what the organization wants the website to accomplish. All aspects of a website should make a contribution to its reason for existence.

Every non-profit has a different view in how they see the website contributing to their goals. All organizations are different, and have different ideas about how to go about their business. A strategic website reflects this variety.

The strategic website recognizes and directly addresses an identified target audience. It speaks in a language to which the audience can relate, and it encourages them to engage with the non-profit. It clearly identifies and presents the information and functionality needed by the visitor.

The strategic website does not try to be everything to everyone.

It recognizes the different ways people can engage with an organization, and reflects those that provide the most benefit to the organization. It realizes that there are limited resources to communicate with the world at large, so it prioritizes those that are most important.

The strategic website recognizes that the internet presence of any organization is not limited to their website. It recognizes social media, blogs, directories and listings, as well as the myriad of other industry-specific and topic-specific sites and blogs that inform and discuss others in areas of direct concern to your organization, and may sometimes discuss your organization itself. But it recognizes that it is the only web property that is fully controlled by the organization. It acknowledges the entirety of the internet, but positions itself as the hub for the organization.

The next eight sections of this book explain the *eight critical strategies* for developing a strategic website for a non-profit.

Ready to learn more? Let's get started!

Non-Profits Are Not Businesses

1 *Understand that as the goal of a non-profit is not simply to make money, the way you think of your website must be unique to your organization's goals.*

In today's era of accountability and efficiency, there is incredible pressure on non-profits to treat their operations as a business would. While there are certain benefits to this in terms of ensuring resources are spent wisely and protected from fraud, most of these systems still have difficulty recognizing the fundamental difference between non-profits and businesses.

Simply put, the fundamental goal of a non-profit is very different from a business.

> All I want to do is make the world a better place.

Businesses exist to make money. Despite any secondary goals, other objectives, or extenuating circumstances, the fundamental basis for the existence of a business is to generate a profit and distribute that profit between the owners and/ or the shareholders of

the business. For non-profits and charities the answer is quite different.

Non-profits exist to change society.

The goals of these organizations are much more complex. Their fight is not for the contents of someone's bank account, but for the content of someone's mind. They want to change outlooks, attitudes, and behaviour.

Given that the important things to a business are so different from the important things to a non-profit, there has to be a difference in how they conduct their business, including what they want to get out of their website. Developing and measuring the impact of a website for a non-profit is not an easy task. Once the profit motive is taken out of the equation, it can become much more difficult to make the link between the goals of the organization and the contribution of the website.

So, given these challenges, how does a non-profit build a strategic website, and how can they tell if it is working? That's the challenge faced by non-profits, and it is not an easy task. The simple, and probably most common solution, is to take the easy way out and place this task in the hands of a web development company. More often than not, this results in a product that is very appealing visually. But without good planning, it is extra challenging to determine whether or not the website is actually

doing its intended job. Simply applying business metrics to a non-profit does not capture this essential difference.

A strategic website matches website activity to what the non-profit wants to achieve, and looks beyond the simple financial solution.

A well-designed website that includes a measurement regimen designed around organization goals is one of the basic aspects of a non-profit strategic website.

In the end, a strategic website builds confidence that the website is doing the job for which it was intended.

Make sure your website is actually your website …

Maintain Website Ownership

2 *Ensure you always have ownership of your URL, hosting information, user names and passwords.*

A common practice among website developers is to provide an easy one-stop shop for all the technical needs of an organization. There are a few technical items involved in setting up a website, and any web development company is more than happy to take care of these on behalf of their clients.

While there is nothing inherently wrong with this process, it is up to the non-profit organization to make sure that they retain ownership of their web property.

All registrations should be set up in the name of the organization, not in the name of the web developer. The organization should make sure that they have all user names and passwords to access their own accounts.

Protect yourself. Don't put your website in someone else's name.

While it is not common, there have been cases in the past where either the

relationship between a web development company and an organization has deteriorated, or where a web development company has gone out of business. In both these instances, an organization then has to spend time, effort, and sometimes money just to reclaim what should have been theirs from the beginning. In the worst cases, an organization can lose the rights to their own website, and it is very difficult to reclaim their own name.

Ensuring ownership of your own website starts from the domain registration process.

Registering the domain name reserves a web name (or URL) for the organization, such as www.analytic-or.com. If someone else sets this up on behalf of the non-profit, the registrant should be the non-profit, not the development company. It should also be set up in an account strictly for the non-profit and not grouped with other clients of the web development company. Finally, every time a domain name is registered, there has to be an associated administrative contact. Essentially, this is the person that has the authority to make any changes to the registration. This should be someone associated with the non-profit and not with the web development company.

Once the domain is registered, hosting has to be purchased for the website.

This is the physical place where the website will actually live. Often, web companies have their own hosting which will be sold to their clients, or sometimes they will resell space from another company. In either case, make sure that the hosting is in the name of the non-profit, and that all user names and passwords are given to the non-profit.

Depending on what has been purchased from the web company, there may be many other services that have been set up.

The non-profit has to ensure that their name was used for all registrations, and that they have all user names and passwords.

Ceding control over technical aspects may seem like a much easier route to take, particularly when first developing a website and many other decisions have to be made. However, nobody knows what will happen in the future.

For the long run, the non-profit has to protect their ownership.

The next strategy is to describe your audience...

Describe Your Audience

3 *Identify your target audience to ensure the website speaks to their needs.*

Describing the target audience is a basic and important component for not only website strategy, but for overall organizational functionality.

Unfortunately, it is also one which is often glossed over, or simplified too much to have an impact on the strategy.

In particular for non-profit organizations, when asked to describe their target market, often the answer includes phrases like "everyone" or "the general public". A non-profit wants to improve the world, and they may have difficulty envisioning anyone that would be unreceptive to their message.

I know who I'm speaking to. Do you?

But a more objective assessment recognizes two things. First, not everyone is going to be receptive to your message, no matter how compelling you may believe it to be. And second, even if they are receptive to your message, they may never move

beyond their initial interaction with your organization.

The target audience for any organization depends on a number of factors, including the goals of the organization and how they intend to meet those goals. Again, the target audience should follow logically from the strategic plans for the organization.

Describing your target can include a number of factors. Some things to include in describing your target are:

- Demographics (such as age, sex, marital status, geographic location, or home owners);
- Behaviours (such as group memberships, heavy internet user, or sports fan);
- Attributes (such as occupation, travel history, or having elderly family members);
- Outlooks (such as political views, religious beliefs or attitudes towards gun control).

There does not have to be a single target for an organization.

In fact, most times there will be multiple target groups. But each target group should be well defined, have an outreach and interaction strategy defined, and have an ideal interaction outlined.

It also has to be remembered that each target group has its own distinct opportunities and challenges, and requires your attention and resources.

Since most non-profits have limited resources to work with, trade-offs often have to made between groups.

For your website, another major constraint is the area available on the most important pages of the site. Consider who the target audience will be and what pages they will potentially start with on the site, keeping in mind that not all visitors to the site start with the home page. The initial message and appearance is incredibly important, but if there are a variety of target groups, they cannot all be addressed at once and on every page of the site. Again, decisions and compromises have to be made.

The next strategy is defining your interactions...

Define Visitor Engagement

4 *Recognize how you relate to your audiences and build the website to nurture those relationships.*

Non-profits are, by definition, not pursing a financial return as the bottom line. Non-profits are pursing the hearts and minds of their target to effect societal change. Even in the cases where a non-profit is raising funds and accepting donations, this step is still just a means to an end—it is to raise resources to pursue their ultimate goal.

The most important resource for non-profits is people that are committed to and passionate about your mission.

I know what my visitors need, so I'm going to deliver it.

Those who voluntarily give of their time, their effort, and possibly their dollars are your most valuable asset. But a cause does not usually come with a built-in constituency of true believers. And even if it does have

such a core, networking and expanding that core group is an important process. It is through these people that a non-profit will exercise influence to make change.

In the business world, the only interaction with true value is one where a financial transaction is involved. Every other level of interaction only has value insofar as it contributes to that final step. But for non-profits, it is not so black and white.

For a non-profit, even raising awareness of an issue has a real value. Every increased level of engagement increases that value, but it is the relationship that is important.

Every time a relationship of any kind is established or expanded, the non-profit has contributed to their goals.

Even when raising money towards a cause, the fund-raising is not the final goal – it is the means to an end. If someone does not make a donation, but relates to the end goals enough to build some sort of relationship with the organization, then the goals have been advanced.

Non-profits need a vision of the world that recognizes the increasing value of people increasing their level of engagement with the organization. Such a vision could look like a 5-step pyramid. Although this pyramid is a good place to start, it can be modified to suit exactly the needs of each individual organization:

- **Awareness:** *People that are aware of your organization and your issue*
- **Support:** *People that agree with your position and/or approach*
- **Subscribers:** *People that have indicated a desire to receive information from your organization*
- **Cooperators:** *People that interact regularly with your organization*
- **Activists:** *People who promote your organization to external audiences, or provide the resources that enable you promote your organization*

For the non-profit, although there is a greater benefit to having people move up higher in the pyramid, it does not have the same imperative as with a business. Since success is not defined in financial terms, it is not only those at the last stage that make a contribution. Therefore, the objective of the non-profit is not to maximize the size of the last step, but instead to grow all steps. Growing these steps is not simply a means to an end, but are direct successes contributing to the final mission.

The strategic website recognizes and encourages the various levels of engagement. Visitors to the site have different relationships with the organization, and have different requirements. The website has to recognize the needs of the various visitors, and make sure they are addressed.

You're half way there. On to designing to support your goals...

Design To Support Goals

5 *Design all elements of your website to speak to your audience, nurture relationships, and advance your goals.*

All aspects of the strategic website have to work together to help an organization reach their goals. To be successful, the structure has to work with the site's content, graphic design and layout. These are the aspects that visitors actually see when they reach the site, and are the only means of connecting with visitors through the website.

Determining a target audience and engagement model are organization-level activities. They describe how the non-profit sees their interaction with the general public. This is key information in the website design process. This enables the strategic website to be built and measured using what is important for the non-profit. If it is not advancing the non-profit's goals, question why it is included in the design.

I build when I have a smart plan so I don't have to guess.

The website for any organization has to be directed towards the target audience. Although this may seem to be a very basic and obvious statement, it is not hard to find websites that seem to have missed this first principle. Remember the purpose of the website – to either reinforce or increase the level of engagement with the target audience.

The website visitor has taken an action to find the site, and chances are there is only a very short period of time to engage them.

The website interaction has to both satisfy the visitor and advance the goals of the organization. If the website only meets one of the two requirements, it is not a strategic website.

The home page of a strategic website in particular is a product of compromise, but of informed compromise. The area available on this page is quite limited. Even more restrictive is the area "above the fold" (the area that a visitor sees when they first reach the home page without scrolling up or down). The home page cannot speak directly to everyone, and the strategic website makes decisions about the home page based on the organization's target audience and levels of engagement.

For the strategic website, the home page of the website should not be thought of as bait to lure people deeper, but instead as a filter. Not everyone who visits the site wants to engage. Why

waste resources and valuable screen real estate on visitors that have a very low probability of providing value to your organization? But at the same time, it has to provide an easy path to areas of the website that provide value both for the engaging visitor and the organization itself.

The home page is the part of the website where creativity, quality copywriting and professional graphic design are most essential.

The combination of logic, analysis, and creativity at this stage is the hallmark of the strategic website.

Optimizing for search engines is next...

Optimize For Search Engines

6 *Use search engine optimization to reach your audience.*

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is a sexy term. Every web development company advertises SEO services, or at least makes the claim that their websites are search engine friendly. The problem is that SEO is a specialty area that is little understood, even among many website development companies. Many website owners are hoping for a magic bullet that will propel their websites to the top of the rankings, bring in thousands of visitors, and suddenly make their organization super successful.

Unfortunately, that's not the way SEO works. You can't flip a switch and jump to the top of Google's listings.

I'm being found by the exact people I want to have find me.

Search Engine Optimization takes work. It involves aspects both on the website, and things that happen on the rest of the internet. It involves an understanding of how search engines work, how the site interacts with the search engines, and how the rest of the internet

interacts with the website. It is a combination of factors on the site that are under the control of an organization, as well as multiple factors outside the site which an organization at best can try influence, but are not within their control.

And to make it more interesting, Google changes the way they do their searches 400 to 500 times per year. Exactly how the search engines determine rankings is confidential. However, they have provided guidelines around best practices, which when combined with experience give an approach to help search engine rankings.

Most web developers are not SEO specialists.

Although the basic concepts of SEO can be stated fairly easily, actually implementing them in practice is very tricky.

The strategic website has an advantage when it comes to SEO.

Knowing your target audience and how they engage with your organization helps make SEO more effective.

This leads to the development of clear and precise keywords— the actual phrases that potential targets will type into search engines. Incorporating these keyword phrases directly into the website text will help boost your search engine performance. Another key element of SEO is building a presence on the internet outside the website – normally through links to a site from

other websites and social media. Again, the strategic website has an advantage. By identifying their target audience and explicitly creating ways to interact with them, they encourage others to build the links used by search engines.

Almost done. Strategy #7 is measuring what's important...

Measuring What's Important

7 *Include measures on your website beyond basic Google Analytics to learn from your visitors.*

Measurement is what takes the guesswork out of a website.

It provides the basis for determining the amount of success the website is achieving, as well a providing a baseline for updating the website to improve performance.

Measurement, often through Google Analytics or other similar tools, is the link between the organization's perceptions of their website and the perceptions of their target audience.

If I have a target, then I'll know how successful I am.

In other words, it is the way in which the organization can tell if their message is reaching their audience as intended. The planning process is about developing a vision for how the website is going to work. Implementation is about putting all the pieces in place. Measurement is getting feedback on whether or not the plan is working.

For a non-profit organization, measuring the success of a website is often a difficult task. Without the measuring stick of profit, measuring success often requires some assumptions and generalizations. The properly constructed strategic website takes this difference into account.

These measures demonstrate whether or not the target audiences are making use of the organization's website as envisioned, or whether parts of your website needs to be improved.

Non-profits that depend on external funding usually have to generate reports demonstrating the extent to which they are meeting their goals. Properly customized and implemented web analytics are an important part of this reporting mechanism. When an organization moves beyond simply reporting the number of hits on their website to measures that link to their organizational goals and objectives, it demonstrates a maturity in thinking and operations that is well regarded by funders.

Many organizations rely on donations from their sponsors, and use the website as a key element in generating these donations.

Well planned website measurements not only measure the success of donation campaigns, but also provide important information on how donors (or potential donors) interact with the website before and after making a donation.

The measures that link website performance to organizational goals are called Key Effectiveness Indicators (KEIs). They inform an organization whether or not their target audience is interacting with their website as had been envisioned, and provide clues as to how to make improvements.

Google Analytics is by far the most popular web analytics software package in use today. It is powerful, flexible, easy to use, and is free. But it does have its limitations.

The wide variety of data that Google Analytics collects requires careful interpretation, or misleading conclusions can be reached.

Last but not least, test, evaluate and improve is next...

Test, Evaluate And Improve

8 *Use the information you gather from measuring to make smart changes to your website.*

The strategic website is never a finished product.

Whether changes are made hourly, daily, monthly, yearly, or otherwise, the key feature of a strategic website is that it makes a significant contribution to the goals of the organization, and that the contribution is measurable. The purpose of measuring is to provide the data and evidence to make improvements. After all, if there is never any intention to change the website, there is no reason to determine how well it is working.

If an organization has clearly stated their goals, determined how the website can help meet these goals, built the design around these decisions, determined KEIs, and incorporated analytics measurement, then congratulations are in order. This is a strategic website, one that works for the organization.

Things just keep getting better and better.

But the strategic website is not a static advertisement.

The whole purpose of adding truly meaningful measurement to the website is to learn.

The strategic website uses that newfound knowledge to make improvements.

While the measurements reveal the effectiveness of the site, and probably provide some indications of trouble spots or ideas for potential improvement, the best way to make a website even more effective is to try new ideas, and see what kind of impact they have. This is where website testing comes on the scene.

Often called conversion testing, usability testing, or some other name, the philosophy is the same. The idea is to compare two (or more) versions of the website to see which version produces the better results. The differences between the two versions are sometimes quite extensive, but more often, they are small differences. Sometimes the comparisons are between two entirely different versions of a home page to see which prompts more people to continue exploring the rest of the website. Sometimes the comparison is as simple as trying different colours of a "Donate Now" button to see which prompts more activity.

Evaluating the results of website testing is another instance where the power of the strategic website shines through.

After putting in all the hard work to determine what's important on the website, it's much easier to evaluate the results of an experiment.

So what can be concluded from all this new information?

Conclusion

A strategic website is an effective website.

A website is the main portal to the outside world for any organization these days. It is one of the first places people look, whether they are looking specifically for your non-profit, whether they are a long-time client or a new visitor, or whether they are simply researching your area.

But along with the website being the destination for your target, you only have a short period to make an impression. Your website has to meet the needs of both your visitor and your organization. The best way to do that is to make sure your website is

Our strategic website is a great success!

designed to meet those needs, and that Google Analytics (or a similar tool) is in place and set up to tell you what is happening.

Creating a strategic website that works for both your visitors and for your

non-profit is not a trivial undertaking, but neither is it impossible. But what it does need is an understanding of your organization, its goals, its target audience, and its relationships with clients.

While the task of physically building the site can be entrusted to others, the background knowledge of your non-profit cannot be outsourced.

The strategic website gives you the confidence that your website is working as it should, and producing results for your non-profit.

About The Author

Dr Jay Adamsson is a specialist in Search Engine Optimization and Web Analytics. He obtained his Doctorate in Science (Mathematics) from Carleton University in 2000. He is the owner and operator of Analytic-OR, a web development company with the mandate of not only building effective websites, but also educating clients on how to get the largest benefit from their website.

Dr Adamsson regularly conducts seminars and workshops on building a strategic website. He also provides columns for business publications, and on his website www.analytic-or.com he maintains an active blog.

Dr Adamsson spent over ten years working for the Operational Research Division of the Department of National Defence. Operational Research is the science dealing with the development and

application of scientific methods to decision-making. His expertise at computer-based modeling and simulation are well recognized. Dr Adamsson spent periods as a cryptographer and as an assistant professor at the University of Prince Edward Island. He currently shares his time between St Peter's Bay, Prince Edward Island and Kingston, Ontario.