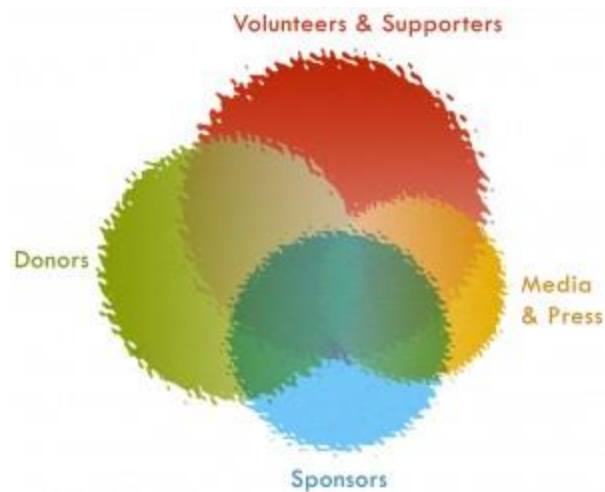


# 15 Guidelines for Non-Profit Websites

While non-profit websites follow many of the same principles as any other good website (relevant content, user-friendly design and navigation, etc.), there are a number of other considerations and best practices for organizations planning out a new website.

We organized our list of 15 guidelines (or best practices) into 4 different groups. We'll cover one per week in this 4-part series. The four groups are:

1. Plan for the needs of your target audiences
2. Organize your website's content and design
3. Foster a community
4. Ensure a reliable behind-the-scenes setup



*Although there is significant overlap between the different audiences, each group still has specific needs a non-profit website should address*

## Plan for the needs of your target audiences

Most non-profit websites are visited by users who represent different types of audiences – from potential donors to members of the press or media. Unfortunately, one of the most frequently overlooked factors when planning a new website is identifying the specific needs and goals of each audience group.

### *(a) Make it extremely simple for donors to give you money*

Donors play an important role for all non-profits, so you want to make your website makes it as easy as possible for them to donate. There are a few things to keep in mind here. For example, make sure your donations page is prominently visible or linked from your homepage and through other important areas of the website.

Additionally, the actual donation process should be straightforward and painless. Minimize the number of pages the donor has to go through to complete the transaction and the amount of information they have to share. While it is very common to send a potential donor to transaction processors such as PayPal, if possible you want to complete the entire process on your website. This also makes it that much easier to continue interacting with the visitor and encourage further activity as well as social media sharing.

#### *(b) Recognize and thank your sponsors*

While similar to donors, corporate sponsors have slightly different needs. Potential corporate sponsors often require more information about the organization, such as its past success and reach, and legal classification. You don't have to post all of this information online, but you do want to make sure your website gives potential sponsors enough information to encourage them to initiate a conversation with you.

Corporate sponsors often also look for more recognition than individual donors. Sponsor recognition can include strategically including their logos in prominent places and make sure their contributions are noted in the website's content. Your website does not need to become an advertising billboard for your sponsors – but there are still ways to thank them publicly through your website.

#### *(c) Include clearly visible information and opportunities for volunteers & supporters to get involved*

Volunteers and Supporters are often the largest group of visitors to a non-profit's website. Your website should make it very easy for them to find out the latest information about your organization, as well as ways to get involved. Make sure the website describes all the avenues through which individuals can get involved, including prominently placed registration forms.

It is also common for your donors and corporate sponsors to also volunteer at your event or support it in non-monetary ways. Sharing the latest information also helps them clearly see your non-profit as being an active organization.

#### *(d) Assemble information for media & press*

As your non-profit grows, members of the media and press will often refer to your website to learn more about you. Having all the information they need easily accessible online in a Media/Press Kit also makes the entire process easier and more streamlined. Some of the content media and press are often looking for include:

- Your organization's key activities and accomplishments
- Downloadable images and logos in different resolutions
- Press-ready quotes
- Bios and photographs of key members of the organization
- Relevant industry metrics

By thinking about the needs of each audience group separately, you can avoid accidentally building a website that only caters to certain audiences and accidentally misses an opportunity. When planning out the content for each page, look at it from the viewpoint of the different audiences and decide if the page meets their specific needs (if it is relevant to them). Also remember – thinking about the needs of each target group separately also does not mean you need to split your website into different mini-websites, it just means you ensure each of them has been addressed.



*Careful considerations when planning and organizing your website content and 'flow' can help increase user action and conversion*

## Organize your content and design

Once you have identified your different target audiences and their needs, the next step is to make sure the content is relevant and presented in a way that inspires action. Below are three guidelines to keep in mind when preparing your website's content.

### *(a) Inspire your visitors through content that reflects your passion*

Key to the nature of non-profits is that they are about doing social good. Most of your visitors already care about the cause you are focusing on, and with the right content can be motivated to take action.

By capitalizing on this common interest your visitors share, your website can significantly increase its impact. Review your planned content to make sure it captures and shares the passion for your cause. Some common types of content that can help you enhance your website include:

- Relevant photographs and videos covering your cause and the different your organization makes
- Quotes from different stakeholders, including members of the organization, volunteers, partners, and those affected by your efforts. The quotes should cover the goals of the non-profit, the need for the cause, the direct impact of different initiatives etc.
- Stories and case studies of different initiatives and the results from the organization's efforts

Make sure the photographs, videos, quotes, and stories are spread throughout the website and not limited to one isolated section to inspire your visitors independent of which section they are in.

*(b) Guide your visitors to taking action*

Getting your visitors passionate in the moment makes it easier to get them to take action – and your website should be planned accordingly. Make sure you have plenty of call-to-actions (buttons, banners, forms, etc.) placed strategically throughout your website.

The best way to do this process is plan out the visitor's path or funnel from the first page to the point where they 'convert' or take an action you want – whether that is signing up for a newsletter or an event. Once you have planned out the different 'actions' you want and the paths, organize your content in a way that it guides them along it with multiple opportunities to take action.

*(c) Easily communicate your mission and goals*

For most visitors, an important part of their 'navigation path' through your website includes learning more about your organization. Make sure this is one of the first things visitors find out when they come to your website – who you are, what you care about, and what actions do you take.

For example, your homepage should include a one-sentence summary of your mission. Other items on your homepage should highlight some of the things your organization has done to help the cause. Additionally, more details about your organization's mission and goals should be easily available through links and a 'About' section.



*An active and engaged community of repeat and frequent visitors will quickly become supporters and promoters of your non-profit*

## **Foster a community**

Some of the most powerful features of the modern web allow you to engage your audience through 2-way interaction and communication and form a vibrant community of supporters online. Some of them include social media – but there are others as well.

This is a radical shift from traditional websites – which were designed to only convey information to your visitors. These modern tools can enable the non-profit to stay on top-of-mind for more visitors, and convert many of them to repeat and regular supporters. Fostering such a community requires ensuring your website is regularly updated with new information, as well as able to leverage social media as relevant.

*(a) Keep visitors engaged through blogs, updates, and news*

The days of ‘static’ websites are long gone. Non-profit websites should always include prominently placed updates that are relevant to both, repeat visitors (to ‘catch up’), as well as new one (to learn more, as well as be assured that you are a very active organization). Exactly how updates are presented is also important – and we strongly recommend using a blog. Blogs give the non-profit an opportunity to write in a more relatable and human voice, rather than just be a report of latest news.

*(b) Include online events listing and registration*

If your non-profit organizes events for members and supporters, it is very important this information is very easily accessible through your website. Make sure the events listing is clearly accessible, and includes all relevant information. It is very easy to include user registration services such as EventBrite, which can easily integrate into most websites directly. Using registration services can also simplify and automate steps such as reminding registrants of the event, which can reduce no-show rates

*(c) Integrate and embed social media networks directly*

Social Media networks such as Facebook and Twitter are easy and effective ways to give supporters a way to stay connected, though both of them require some time on the organization’s part managing and participating in the conversation. The entire process can be simplified through planning and responsibility sharing. A great way of promoting as well as leveraging your networks is to ensure your Facebook and Twitter accounts are well integrated in your website. This means not just having links to these resources on your website, but including widgets where the latest updates are visible directly on your site.

Fostering an online community takes careful planning and dedication – but it is no different than the effort you would place in an in-person setting. If done right, online communities can offer you significantly higher success than traditional community building. Additionally, your online efforts can (and should) help enhance your offline efforts and work synergistically.



*A fast loading and secure website is very important to make sure your site is always delivering the best experience possible to visitors*

## **Ensuring a reliable behind-the-scenes setup**

The Achilles heel for many modern websites is the backend technology setup that is managing the website. Ensuring you put the right things in place from the beginning and have a plan for management can ensure your website is always performing as expected.

### *(a) Easy and reliable Content Management System*

One of the easiest ways to deliver a dynamic website is using Content Management Systems (CMS) – software that provide you with a administration section through which you can easily update and add content without resorting to writing code. Many Content Management Systems are free and supported by a vibrant open community. Ensure your website is using one that is both reliable, and easy to use and maintain, for example [WordPress](#). With a CMS, you can create accounts for different users to securely login and make updates to the site. Additionally, most CMS communities also include thousands of free plugins that can be used to add features to your site in a cost effective manner.

### *(b) Mobile ready*

With the exploding growth and popularity of mobile phones, ensuring your website is mobile-friendly is a basic requirement now. There are a number of options for any organization here – from simply ensuring your website performs well on mobiles (no flash, limited animation, etc.) to even creating mobile versions of your website. You can even take this a step further and your mobile website could include more relevant mobile-only features.

Additionally, your organization may also benefit from having its own app. Installed smartphone apps often have significant advantages over websites and are able to engage your audiences in different ways.

### *(c) SEO friendly*

SEO – or search engine optimization is a process to ensure your website shows up prominently when potential visitors search for related topics on search engines such as Google and Bing. While many websites can gain from an SEO project, at the very minimum you want to make

sure your site is created in a way that follows standard guidelines and makes it easy for search engines to navigate and understand your website and content.

#### *(d) Secure*

Unfortunately websites are frequently vulnerable to online attacks the same way most computers are. As an always-connected system, malicious codes will frequently try to gain access to your site to inject it with spam or worse.

While there is no way to be 100% secure, there are a number of ways you can make your site safer. For example, make sure your hosting provider has implemented appropriate measures. Ensure your logins use strong password and custom usernames (avoid 'Admin' for example). Most CMSs also support different measures to reduce hacking attempts and block out suspicious activity. Finally – be careful with the code you implement in your website – the most common reason for website hacks is vulnerable and outdated code.

#### *(e) Fast*

Having a site that loads fast is important – a significant portion of users can get frustrated when waiting around and leave. Website loading time is a combination of the code and content the page is trying to display and your hosting provider (the user's computer also plays a role, but you have limited control there).

Make sure your website code and content is tested appropriately, and is optimized to load efficiently. Employ appropriate caching systems on dynamic websites. For hosting – be careful with the larger, more-famous hosting companies. Although they offer cost-effective plans, speed often suffers. If you're using WordPress, consider moving to a company that specializes in WordPress, such as [WP Engine](#), that can provide faster loading speeds (among other benefits).

# A Nonprofit's Guide to Building Simple, Low-Cost Websites

Affordable solutions for planning, creating, and maintaining your organization's online presence

Chris Peters - January 31, 2012A well-designed, user-friendly website can help you engage new members, raise money, and communicate with decision-makers. But creating this site affordably, and finding the right tools to build and host it, can be a challenge — especially when you are relying on in-house talent with little or no web-development expertise. In this article, learn about some tools and ideas for building a simple, attractive website without breaking the bank.

A well-designed, user-friendly website can help you engage new members, raise money, and communicate with decision-makers. But creating this site affordably, and finding the right tools to build and host it, can be a challenge — especially when you are relying on in-house talent with little or no web-development expertise.

Nowadays, however, you don't need to be a programmer to create a strong, quality web presence — nor do you need a hefty grant to fund one. Below, we'll offer guidance on how to plan a new website (or redesign an existing one) and how to maintain an online presence using tools that you don't have to be a web developer to master. We'll also offer some tips for finding volunteers with web expertise who can help you along the way.

## 1. Register Your Domain Name

Even if you don't plan on creating a website for quite some time, buy the rights to your organization's domain name. If you don't do so now, it could be snatched up by an individual or entity to create a site that has nothing to do with your organization. A domain name is a unique string of letters and numbers that identifies a site on the Internet. TechSoup's domain name, for example, is [www.techsoup.org](http://www.techsoup.org). Nonprofits and social benefit organizations usually choose domain names that end in .org, but you may also want to register at least the .com and .net versions as well. (There's no rule that requires nonprofits to choose a .org domain name, but it is conventional, just as educational institutions usually choose domains ending in .edu, for-profit companies in .com, and government agencies in .gov.)

To save money — and make things easier on yourself — consider registering your domain name or names for five years at a time, and be sure to document the registration process so you or your successor will know where to go when it's time to renew. Your Internet service provider (ISP) can help you register a domain name, or you can choose from the list of [accredited registrars](#) at Internic. Regardless of which registrar you go with, you shouldn't spend more than \$10 a year on your domain name.

## 2. Evaluate Your Needs

Even if you're eager to get something up fast and affordably, taking the time to evaluate your needs upfront can save you a lot of time and money down the road. Knowing what kind of web presence you want, how you plan to maintain it, and how you will fund it in the long run will



help you both in the technical work of building the site as well as in budgeting for ongoing needs.

A little organizational soul-searching needn't be a lengthy process, either, and may be as simple as sitting down to answer a few key questions:

- What do you need a website for? Do you simply require a place where people can find your contact info and mission statement, or do you need a site where visitors can find news, register for events, post questions, interact and network with others, or even make purchases?
- What resources do you have to build your site? Very simple sites may cost practically nothing to build and host, but more complex ones will require special skills, including programming, information architecture, web design, and editing. Do you have staff available to help plan and implement your site, or will you need to rely on contractors or volunteers?
- How will you maintain your website? Even simple, fairly static websites require a certain degree of maintenance and oversight. What kind of staff resources can you devote over the long run to the kind of site you need?
- How will you integrate your site with existing tools? Depending on your needs, you may want to integrate the same tools you use for constituent and membership management with your website. Be sure to check in with these vendors to make sure that you choose an online solution that meshes well with these tools to avoid costly customizations down the road.
- How will your site incorporate your current graphic language? Make sure you can choose a solution that brands your organization in a way that's consistent with your other printed materials. Don't have a logo or a visual style guide? Now may be the time to look into coming up with these to avoid costly site overhauls down the road.
- Can you take steps now to anticipate future needs? Even if you don't have immediate plans to keep a blog, for example, you may want to plan for one in the event you decide to incorporate this feature a year or two from now. No one has a crystal ball, of course, but projecting a couple of years into the future may help you create a website with more staying power.

### 3. Pick a Web-Development Tool

If your organization requires a very large site (50 or more pages), or a sophisticated, highly customized site with a lot of integrated tools, you are unlikely to find a fast, easy solution. Unless you have a web designer or programmer on staff, you'll need to hire a web designer or firm to build and maintain your site, or invest a lot of time and possibly money to purchase and learn web-authoring tools yourself. Even a content management system (CMS), a tool designed to help manage and automate complex websites, requires a significant investment of time, money, or both — and there is no tool out there that can write content for you.

However, if your needs are less complex, there are a variety of free or low-cost ways to create an attractive, dynamic online presence without a lot of web development expertise. But keep in mind that even simpler sites require upkeep. Just because a solution isn't expensive to implement doesn't mean it won't require a lot of time or money to maintain.

Tools your organization may wish to consider — either alone or in tandem — include:

## Blogging Software

When most people think about a blog, they envision an individual, personal publishing platform. However, more and more organizations are also using free blogging tools such as [WordPress](#) and [Blogger](#) as their primary web presence.

Most blogging tools allow more than one author, meaning many people from one organization can work on them. Moreover, you don't need to know HTML to use them, and, as with the site builders, you don't have to host the site on your own servers. Blogging tools may also provide easy-to-use design templates with the option of some customization.

WordPress's features, for example, include a wide variety of free design templates (for \$30 a year you can modify the templates with your own code). Widgets from several third-party providers let you embed calendars, photos, videos, and more. Blogger is a little easier to set up and configure than WordPress and it offers more third-party widgets, but it also provides fewer design templates to choose from. Both Blogger and WordPress will provide you with a free subdomain — meaning that your site name would appear in the URL line alongside the blogging tool's name — but also allow you to purchase your own domain name so that people can find you directly through your own unique address. Domain names cost \$10 per year at Blogger and \$15 per year at WordPress.

Another popular blogging tool, [TypePad](#), starts at \$4.95 a month, with a full-featured Pro account costing \$14.95 a month. At the Pro level and above, TypePad offers excellent tools for creating custom themes, and you don't need to modify the CSS code to do so. If you want to make advanced customizations to a WordPress or Blogger design template (beyond just tweaking a header image or changing some colors), however, you will need to know some CSS and HTML, or you will have to know how to borrow and tweak the code written by other template developers.

*[Editor's note: TechSoup also offers [LightCMS](#), a cloud-based content management system.]*

## Assistance from Current Web Service Providers

The same company that provides your donation processing services or constituent relationship management (CRM) software may also be able to help set up your web presence. What this means will vary significantly depending on the vendor. Before signing up for this service, be sure you understand what types of pages are available to you, and to what extent the vendor will customize the look and feel of your site. In most cases, you can choose one of the vendor's pre-designed templates, or you can send them a design template (usually a CSS style sheet and some graphics) that you've created using Dreamweaver or another web authoring tool. If you have your own template, these services may even work with you to tweak your design so that it works with their software.

Bear in mind that vendors often charge an extra fee for this type of customization, and the more you ask the online vendor to personalize your pages, the more they're likely to charge. [Wild Apricot](#) is one online provider that offers strong website features at a decent price, integrated with event registration, contact management, and donation-processing functionality.

An advantage of this approach is that you need to deal with only one vendor (and one bill), and it frees you from worrying about integrating your donation tools, mailing lists, and other community-management features into your website. If you find a vendor that offers most of the features you're looking for at a price you can afford, it's often worth paying extra to avoid the hassle of managing multiple web presences. In the article [Comparing Lower Cost Online Application Providers](#), Idealware compares eight major all-in-one online software vendors.

### Nonprofit Soapbox

If you have a few thousand dollars to spend on a website (and a few hundred dollars for annual maintenance), you may also want to consider [Nonprofit Soapbox](#), a service that specializes in setting up websites for nonprofits based on the Joomla content management system. Nonprofit Soapbox can also help you create a unique, branded web design. Pricing for Nonprofit Soapbox is based on an organization's annual budget — if it's less than \$250,000, the cost is \$2,500 for initial setup and \$49 per month after that.

## 4. Think About How You Will Integrate Your New Site with Your Existing Tools

No matter what web-development option you select, be sure to consider any tools that must be integrated with it. If you have any constituent databases, donation processing tools, or membership management software, for example, talk to your software vendors before committing to a web-development tool. (As noted, if the vendor can provide all the website features you need at a price you can afford, you may not need a separate web-development tool at all.)

If you choose a separate service for creating and hosting your blog or website, your database vendors may be able to integrate their services with your primary web presence in one of the following ways:

- **A badge or a button.** If all you want is a "Donate Now" button that connects to your page on a donation processing site, you can copy the code (usually some combination of HTML, CSS, and JavaScript) from that site and paste it into your primary site. A disadvantage to this approach, however, is that donors will immediately notice that they've left your website. Experienced Internet users will feel comfortable with the transition if it's clearly labeled, but novices are more likely to get confused and decide that they are unwilling to interact with the unfamiliar site.
- **Customized pages.** If you want your users to have a more seamless experience, you may be able to work with your vendor to create a common look and feel between your primary website and its service. When this integration works well, the domain name in the end user's address bar may change, but the colors, graphics and navigation options won't change significantly and most users won't realize that they've left your website. Novice Internet users will be more comfortable if there's a common design and consistent navigation options between all of your web presences. Also, by keeping the navigation menus and sidebars consistent, browsers can move back and forth easily between your different web pages, even if these pages reside on different servers hosted by different companies. This customized approach often requires more time and effort from you and your vendor, and will likely be more expensive as well.

## 5. Recruit Volunteers, if Needed

Once you've selected a tool for getting your site online, you'll have a better idea of what your support needs will be. If you choose to use blogging software to create a simple site, you may be able to manage the entire site on your own. More complicated solutions, however, may require a little outside support.

[The Taproot Foundation](#), [NPower](#), and [VolunteerMatch](#) can all be good places to find qualified volunteers for your project, and [Grassroots.org](#) matches nonprofits with web designers, graphic designers, project managers, and others with web-related expertise. Grassroots also offers free web hosting, as well as free access to Doodlekit. All of these services are free only to qualifying 501(c)3 organizations (pending or approved).

You might also locate volunteers through Craigslist.org or college placement offices, which may be able to connect you with new developers and designers eager to build their portfolios.

## Additional Considerations

Once you proceed beyond the basic solutions outlined in this article, you may be confronted with a variety of questions in the course of planning your website. These may include:

- **Should you hire a professional web designer?** [Idealist](#) is a resource directories for nonprofits, and includes listings for web designers who specialize in working with nonprofits. Bear in mind that web design costs for large sites often run into the tens of thousands of dollars, and you'll want to choose your collaborators carefully. Before you hire any designer or developer, always check references. You may also want to enlist the help of a third-party volunteer designer or web developer to give you an unbiased, professional evaluation of their work before you hire them. (A portfolio site might look fine to the untrained eye, but it may be poorly coded or contain formatting errors you might not notice until later.)
- **Should you consider a content management system to manage your site and other online content?** A content management system is a type of software that helps you manage the creation, modification, and organization of information and pages on a website. A CMS also offers tools for managing site design, navigation, and user access. A CMS attempts to combine a high degree of extensibility, flexibility, and customizability for website administrators with ease-of-use and simplicity for authors and content creators. For an authoritative look at the major CMSs used by nonprofits, see Idealware's guide, [Comparing Open-Source Content Management Systems](#).
- **Should you rent server space from a web hosting provider?** A web hosting company will rent you space on its web server, typically charging customers on a monthly or annual basis. Hosting companies specialize in providing the hardware, software, and high-speed Internet connections necessary to maintain a fast, reliable website. Hosting providers generally offer users a lot of control over the software served out from their rented web space. If you build your website using one of the tools described in this article (such as Blogger or WordPress), the provider will constrain your options to keep the service easy to use and administer. Rented server space, on the other hand, gives you the option to install and configure your own site, but it involves more decision-making and a steeper learning curve. (For more

guidance in choosing a hosting provider for your nonprofit site, see Idealware's article [A Few Good Web Hosting Providers](#).

For smaller organizations with simple web outreach strategies, creating a new website (or updating an existing one) needn't be overwhelming, time-consuming, or expensive. Fortunately, the web is a fairly pliable medium. With a solid web presence in place, your nonprofit will be in a strong position to adapt, innovate, and learn as your organization — and your web needs — change and grow.