

Never say “stick it on the website”

How to think strategically about online communications

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Introduction

With the latest incredible rise of broadband and the popularity of Web 2.0 Internet tools, most organisations are looking to develop their online presence.

However, too often, websites are not being developed as a part of an overall communication strategy, but rather as a publishing tool simply to give what materials are produced possible additional exposure. This is what I call the “stick it on the website” attitude.

There are two main factors behind this attitude:

- A lack of clear strategy for overall communications, whether offline or online

This means lack of clear ideas as to why an organisation is producing a specific material, for whom, to what end, and how the material will help in achieving an overall communications goal. It is common that people working on the production of materials just carry on doing what they have always been doing without checking if the output still achieves their communication objectives. Sometimes materials are produced without a clear understanding of their purpose or freedom to question the purpose that was given to them by someone else.

➤ A lack of understanding of the potential of the Internet as a communications channel
This guide is aimed at explaining what communicators in an organisation need to do and think about so they can create clear, consistent, multimedia communications for their audience(s).

Basic questions to ask

Whether you are producing online or offline content, you should check if your ideas work by asking these basic questions:

- Who is my audience?
- What is my ask?
- What is my message?
- Why am I asking this, what reaction do I expect?
- How will I know if I have inspired the reaction I am expecting?

Answering these questions is part of the briefing process. They look very simple and straightforward questions, but they are very often forgotten or answers to them not properly thought through.

For example, a project that is given the go-ahead before these questions are answered will cause confusion and poor results later on. Sometimes people are not clear on what their ask is or they are not sure what the difference is between an ask and a message.

The result can be materials that are unclear and overloaded with too many messages and complicated language.

Who is my audience?

The not-for-profit/public sector is probably one of the sectors most guilty of developing websites that, while communicating or mirroring the structure of the organisation successfully, are weak in offering to their website audience(s) easy access to relevant information. For example, if an organisation provides adoption services, their website needs to enable easy access to information on how to adopt to its users. Statistical information about the successes of different internal departments is not of an immediate interest to their audience.

There are a few common reasons why organisations communicate their internal structure on their website:

- In order to persuade an organisation that it needs a website, web people promise every team/department “control” over a part of the website.

- A part of an organisation feels less valued than others, therefore insists that they should have equal representation on the corporate website.
- Donors/sponsors of an organisation demand considerable visibility on organisation's website.

Away from factors such as internal politics and donor relationships are people who live their everyday lives, consuming information through major communication channels such as public and commercial broadcasters and multimedia marketing campaigns. The non-profit sector operates in this same environment, but with less resources and with each organisation trying to find a way of making itself heard in this overwhelming noise. Even when the message is heard, it is too often the same – an undifferentiated mass of asks for financial support to good causes.

Because of this competition and the danger of looking the same, non-profit organisations need to find a way of getting the right message through. And this is where websites can play an important role.

Websites are a publicly available face of an organisation, used by people to learn more about an organisation. They want to find answers to questions about the issue or service they are interested in. Some will want to know how they can get more involved. They do not want to spend too much time searching for this information or racking their brains to understand what the organisation is trying to do, let alone how they can be involved.

Personas

“Personas” are profiles of people your organisation already has as an audience or wants to target in the future.

Personas are commonly used in planning websites, but also for planning print, audio and video outputs. They can help you move away from trying to find out what appeals to the big unspecified group of people that is an “audience”, towards thinking about what appeals to few personalities, each one representing one of your target audiences.

You can create personas based on research (your own or other publicly available sources) and knowledge you and your colleagues have about your audience(s).

Examples of personas:

- My main audience is busy teachers in secondary schools who will use my organisation's materials because they complement the curriculum and are easy to use. These materials will also be seen by teenagers in a class. Teachers are busy and need content that clearly fits into the curriculum. Teenagers want whatever will make their class and homework easier and more fun.
- My main audience is people suffering from the illness my organisation focuses on as well as their family members. They use my organisation's materials to learn more about the symptoms, ways to live with the illness, how to receive support, medication

etc. Patients, doctors and nurses also visit our website to find information about the illness, medical research and information that would be useful to patients.

- My main audience is policy-makers as well as staff in other non-profit organisations. They use our materials because of the credibility my organisation has in the issue we work on and because we provide strong case studies from the grassroots.

As you can see from the examples above, each persona has a character which determines their behaviour in relation to organisation's materials.

Awareness of this character is essential when thinking about the message and ask that you want to communicate in your materials.

What am I asking my audience to do?

To answer this question you need to think about three "whats":

- what am I asking people to do
- what is my message to them
- what is the outcome I am expecting if people react to my ask?

These questions cannot be answered separately as each one of them helps in answering the other two.

Usually organisations are clear about what their message is, but they are not clear about what their ask is.

For example a message similar to "we are a very successful organisation and we do many things to help tackle poverty" is unclear because it can have a number of asks – please give money, please become a volunteer, please use our materials in your class.

It is best to settle on an ask first and develop a message around it. Using the examples above, if the ask is "please give money" a better message could be something along the lines of "we are an organisation that you can trust will invest your money into tackling poverty".

Picture success

The third question is – 'what is the outcome/change I am expecting if people react to my ask?'

For the fundraising example above the answer is clear – the change you are expecting is increase in income.

But if the desired outcome is a change in lifestyle or behaviour, the reaction you expect from people is to stop doing what they used to do. But how will you know if you achieved this? How will you measure it?

Try to anticipate the journey a person reacting to your ask will need to take. For example, you could say that outcome for the first year is an increase in subscriptions to your related mailings, for the second year an increase in donations and orders of your related materials and, for the third year, testimonials from people about how they changed the way they did something and how your initiative helped and/or supported them to do so.

Spend some time thinking about these questions. Answers can help you create a picture of what success would look like for your initiative.

Having a clear, tangible picture of success is important if you want others in your organisation to have ownership of the vision your initiative is set out to achieve.

User-led communications – a challenge for non-profit organisations?

When defining an ask and a message most organisations think about what is it that they want to say to their audience.

What they often forget is that, in order to create communications that will appeal to their audience, organisations need to trade places with their audience and start thinking how would the audience want to learn about an organisation and what are they likely to want to know.

This approach means moving away from the broadcasting model where information just goes one way from an organisation to its audience, towards a more inclusive model where users also have a channel to send the information back to an organisation.

With the emergence of Web 2.0, this communication model can now be more easily put into practice.

And it seems almost everyone is at it. Many organisations are enabling users to interact with it by sending in their content - from written feedback to images and videos.

But this is only real participation if that information is actually used and/or acted upon by the organisation.

User feedback is undoubtedly important in sales, broadcasting and for user-review publications and websites. For example Microsoft has been using its online forum to learn about flaws in Windows software in order to make changes to their systems that their market, represented by the forum, wants. In 2007, BBC Radio 4 developed a series of programmes on how money invested in the NHS is spent that was completely based on leads fed in by listeners.

Is this 'pure' use of Web 2.0 actually now what the majority of NGO and charity audiences expect?

Many supporters give money to organisations they historically trust - they mostly do not want or expect to input in the way the organisation operates. Does this then mean that Web 2.0 is about providing a service to supporters because of their expectations given that this approach is all around them? Is this an opportunity for non-profit organisations to develop more

‘bottom-up’ or open policies that are developed through the involvement of their most engaged stakeholders via the Internet as well as other channels?

The answer to both questions is definitely yes. One reason why people interact with an organisation’s website is because they want to have their say (as the BBC recognises in their ‘Have Your Say’ noticeboard). However, as No 10 Downing Street found out soon after it launched an e-petition in late 2006, by enabling people to interact with an organisation, you might be ‘letting the genie out of a bottle’ and you need to be prepared to deal with the feedback you receive in an accountable way.

In short, don’t do it if you don’t mean it!

Ask and message

Bear in mind few rules when defining your ask and message:

- Do not have too many asks

For example, if you want to make sure that the majority of your supporters will send an email to decision-makers, do not ask them to do this too often. For example, if you send three emails in three weeks your response rate (i.e. people opening emails and doing what you asked them to do) will very likely drop considerably.

- Do make sure that your ask is clear

If you are fundraising, state clearly that money is what you are after. If you are sending fundraising material, make sure that your ask is clear – “give money in support of our work”. Sending masses of copy about your work with donation form at the end is not a clear ask.

- Do not make people think hard to understand your ask

Often an issue an organisation deals with is very complex. It is important to come up with messages that communicate the issues in a way that someone who has never seen your materials or heard of your organisation will understand. Use simple language, short words and do not use abbreviations and internal lingo.

- Do make sure that your tone/communication style suits your audience

Getting the tone right can be very important in securing the loyalty of each member of your audience.

If the way you address your audience echoes the way they want to be seen by others, it is likely that they will respond to your materials in the future. For example, young people will like something clever, off-the-wall and current that they want to associate themselves with. However, if your audience is middle-aged and perhaps on the conservative side, they might misunderstand this type of communication and find it confusing, even rude and inappropriate.

Messages for multipliers

Many organisations work with a group of people who are spreading the organisation's message to other people. These are multipliers - people who may undertake activities like organising a fundraising event in their neighbourhood, leading their local campaigning group or who include information about your organisation in their work like faith leaders and teachers.

Producing materials for these people is complex because you need to produce them so that they work for two different audiences – for the multipliers and for the people that they interact with.

For example, a pack aimed at teachers to use in organising a fundraising event with their students with a message “fundraise for us” might not be enough to help spark them into action. Saying “this fundraising activities are a fun way of covering X part of the curriculum“ might give better results.

Such a pack also needs to contain materials they can use with their pupils which has a message appropriate for that audience. Kids or teenagers are very likely to not get excited about the fact that fundraising activities fit the curriculum, but will be interested in taking part in a fun fundraising event instead of spending another whole day in a classroom much like any other day.

How will I know if the change happened?

Evaluation of communications is hard to do. This is largely because communication materials are never delivered or received in isolation.

If you send fundraising materials into a school, presumably, the number of events organised will be the best measurement of the success of the material? Well, not entirely, as these events might not have been inspired by your organisation's materials.

The most genuine evaluation of that specific material would be data of teachers saying that they decided to organise a fundraising event because of the material.

Quantitative and qualitative evaluation

This example shows two types of data collected in evaluation - quantitative (e.g. number of fundraising events) and qualitative (e.g. testimonies of teachers organising event because of materials). Both types of data are important and their combination can give a good picture of whether a material is reaching a communication objective or not.

Already described earlier in this guide is how important it is to think about what you want to measure and how you will measure in defining your asks and outcomes.

For example, raising awareness on a health issue can be done by many organisations in an area, so you need to identify what is specific about your organisation that will make a difference and then set up systems to measure this.

Continuing with the same example, a part of your awareness-raising objective could be creating a group of people who will go on to raise awareness in their communities. This is a big task so you need to make sure that you set yourself achievable annual targets. For example, in the first year you just want to build up an email list, in year two you want contributions to an online discussion forum and attendance of a workshop. In year three you want to hear reports of their awareness-raising work.

Mix it up

Quantitative data is very reliable when your objective is an increase in audience, an increase in income, of number of supporters etc. However, when your objectives are about raising awareness, behaviour change or education, numbers only are not enough to show that the change you were setting out to make happen has indeed happened.

Qualitative evaluation (collecting testimonies) is more relevant, but very demanding on resources (time and money). Also, qualitative data on its own is not always considered as reliable unless it is done by using recognised evaluation methodologies which, again, require expertise and time.

In order to have a fairly good overview of the impact of your work, combine qualitative and quantitative research, making sure that you have allocated enough time to do it.

Peer review

Another way of evaluating materials is through peer reviews. You and your colleagues may have enough experience to be able to judge if something is good quality material or not and to learn from the review process.

However, if you are trying to **change** the way your organisation communicates with its audience(s) you will need to provide people with some more ‘scientific’ evidence in support of your claim that the change is necessary. The evidence will be some more detailed research which includes both quantitative and qualitative evidence.

This article is based on my experience of working with NGOs in the UK and overseas over the last 10 years. I welcome your comments and questions to this article, so please post them below using the contact form below.

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Useful links

- Personas: If you want to know more about how to develop personas, there is a lot of good advice on the Internet. I found this article particularly useful:

http://www.cooper.com/newsletters/2001_07/perfecting_your_personas.htm

- Make Poverty History new media review

The dos and don'ts of new media communications based on the experience of the Make Poverty History campaign (link opens a PDF).

http://www.bond.org.uk/pubs/campaign/mph/mph_new_media_review.pdf

- Review of NGO communications in 2006 – common problems organisations have in developing their campaigning strategies.

<http://www.fairsay.com/blog/>