

Why Nonprofits Need (an Integrated Approach) to SEO

by Melanie Phung



So why does a nonprofit need to think about SEO? For the very same reasons that it has a website.

After all, would you build a website if you didn't intend for people to see it?

According to Pew Internet's April 2009 survey, 88% of internet users rely on search engines to find information. That's not just information about products, but all types of information. Furthermore, different studies have shown that users tend to believe that sites which appear at the top of the search results are more authoritative or trustworthy.

If you're not at the top of the search engine's results listings, in other words, you are losing your ability to influence potential donors, members, activists and decision-makers. If they don't know you exist, or think other organizations are more trustworthy than yours, you lose out.

One common objection to investing in SEO is that nonprofits prefer to focus on great content, and that a strong content strategy should be enough to propel a site to the top of the search results. In fact, you could have the most useful content in the world, but if your site is built in a way that is not "friendly" to search engine spiders, your content may not even be indexed by a search engine at all. That means your fantastic content has no chance of being displayed in search results.

Let's take for example a children's nonprofit charity that wants to rebuild its website. The organization hires a designer to build a beautiful, evocative website with

lots of image slideshows and video built in Flash. Unfortunately, the new site is built so that search engines can't "see" any of the content and the brand new site not only doesn't get increased exposure, it loses the rankings it had gained naturally with the old site. Had the organization included an SEO expert in the development phase, it could have considered technical alternatives and compromises that would have met its goals without sacrificing organic search traffic.

SEO is not simply a technical discipline either. It's also about understanding which types of keywords and content attracts your best prospects, which messaging compels them to action, and measuring and refining your tactics.

For example, if the hypothetical children's nonprofit group in the example above had included an SEO expert in its site redesign project, the organization would have gained invaluable knowledge about the "best" search terms that would drive new prospects to its site. For example, it would know that the search term "childrens charities" has five times the search volume that "childrens nonprofit" gets. Understanding which terms your site should target, and why, could impact a range of decisions about the site and will help attract more online visitors at no additional cost.

(But keep in mind: just like a good direct marketer understands his success is not solely proportional to the size of his list, neither does a good search engine optimization strategy chase unqualified leads or seek rankings at the expense of conversions.)

The article has mentioned two major components of getting started with SEO, namely: making sure search engine spiders are able to "read" the content on your site and targeting the right keywords. Although I don't have space in this article to go into all the other components of a search engine optimization campaign, I hope you have begun to see not only why SEO is important but also why SEO is most effective when it is part of your website development process; everything from coding choices, to information architecture, from keywords to naming conventions, can impact your search engine visibility.

Today nonprofits face increased competition -- not just for dollars but for attention. That means that every nonprofit, whether a charity or an association, needs to be as visible as possible. It's not enough to push your existing constituents to your site via push marketing; being absent in those spaces where prospects are actively looking for information on specific issues would mean not only that you're working harder and accomplishing less but also, fundamentally, that your organization isn't living up to its mission.

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Professors Institute

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If you are interested either attending as a professor or sharing your stories and knowledge, please contact Karen Depew, DMAWEF Executive Administrator, at 301-652-7074 or Karen@northwoodconsulting.com.

Now go mark Jan. 6-7 on your calendars!