John Kenyon's Eight Essentials for Online Engagement

With these eight essentials in place, your nonprofit can be proud of its online presence, attract new supporters and engage audiences of all types. There is a list of resources at the end for further exploration.

1. Online Fundraising Plan and Budget

You cannot be successful online without a thoughtful plan and clear goals. A plan should address the ways you will incorporate the online space into your offline fundraising, engagement, education and/or advocacy goals. Your plan should identify the project members and activities including a calendar for the year with website content themes, enews topics and expected email campaigns.

Allocate money when budgeting for any new or existing tools, desired improvements and the time required to manage online operations.

2. Online and Offline Communication Goals

Answer these three questions:
> Who are your three primary audiences?
> What are the three things you want them to know?
> What are the three things they can do to support your work?

Articulate goals for both organizational and departmental communications. These goals should include benchmarks based on data collected about the organization's email and website activity (see #7 Metrics). Benchmarks are used to measure progress towards goals such as increased website traffic, enews signups and online donations.

3. Effective Website

This means an engaging, well organized and well designed website. Content, navigation and design comprise a website's effectiveness. Start with well thought out navigation that logically groups your content areas. Create a look and feel for the site that matches your brand identity and is accessible. Include (appropriately) engaging and interactive elements such as maps, quizzes, video, audio, blogs, etc.

4. Regular Content Creation

Stories of how your programs affect people and how stakeholders help your organization and are your best pieces of content. Get in the organizational habit of collecting pictures and stories of events, programs and supporters. This isn't just the job of the web manager,

it is everyone's job. The website helps everyone – programs, development, administration, etc., so include everyone in contributing content.

Writing for the internet is different than writing for print. Print writers need to bring a different editing eye to their writing. One rule of thumb is to take what you have written and cut it in half. Then cut it in half again. Seriously. People don't read websites, they SCAN them, and they GLANCE at emails.

I see my clients having the most success with concise, well-written stories and emails, not with long blocks of text or a 20-item enewsletters. So make your writing more scan- and glance-friendly by including images, bullet points, highlighting linked keywords and chunking your content into small pieces.

5. Regular E-Communication

Ecommunications are a primary driver of traffic to your website. If you have more than 20 supporters use a bulk email tool to send emails and enewsletters - not Outlook. The primary reason not to use Outlook is that you can't track activity, which is one of the most important aspects of using email tools. See Resources for a tool comparison.

Emails can be purely informational or focused on a campaign, be it fundraising, education or advocacy. Mix up these types of emails so you are not asking for something every time you contact your stakeholders.

Keep enewsletters short if you want them kept out of email trash. Each story should have an enticing teaser and a related image. Both should entice the reader to click through and read the rest of the story on your website. You can include practical tips or resources, but keep them to just a few. Encourage people to pass on your ecommunications and make them as engaging as possible.

6. An Excellent Online Donation Experience

Make it easy for people to donate online and find your donate button. Have the button on every page and don't ask a lot of extra questions on your donation page. The donation page should include your logo and a sentence or two about the great things you do with donations.

There are many affordable online donation tool options (see Resources). While PayPal is fine for ecommerce, I am not a fan of it for online donations as there are important aspects about the online donation experience PayPal is not designed to deliver.

Make donations at other nonprofit websites and note the experience. Was it easy to find information important to donors like financials and privacy policies? What was the email thank you like? Was it robotic or was there a nice note from the Development or Executive Director?

7. Know Your Metrics and Adjust Benchmarks

One of the best things the online environment provides is good data on your supporters. Regularly review email and website metrics via an analytics tool. Track your website activity using a tool such as Google Analytics (analytics.google.com). Email activity is monitored through your bulk email software and online donations through your online donation tool.

Basic website items to track include unique visitors, page views, time on site, top static pages, top content/stories, downloads, visits to the donation page. For email, you want to track the number of subscribers to your enews, open rate of the emails and the specific links that people click on, or "click-throughs". Every quarter, review trends in your past and current activity. Use the data to create and update your benchmarks.

8. Understand Web 2.0/Social Media Strategy

As web 2.0/social media/social networking tools and sites continue to become mainstream, it is important to keep these in your plans. These tools are ushering in a new era of communications for nonprofits, one that is a dialogue not a monologue. Nonprofits must not only share their stories and solutions, but also listen to their supporters' ideas. Listening is a new but essential skill.

Allot some time to learn about these tools and how they can support your online strategies. These tools have the power to engage whole new audiences you never could have reached in the past, while bringing people closer to your mission. See Resources.

John Kenyon is a Nonprofit Technology and Internet Strategist who provides consulting and training service to nonprofits of all types. Learn more at www.johnkenyon.org

Resources

1. www.NTEN.org - Technology Webinars, Enews and Conference (In SF this April)

2. NTEN book: Managing Technology to Meet Your Mission –
   (Read my chapter "Online Communications")

3. www.Idealware.org – reviews of software and online tools

4. www.TechSoup.org – nonprofit technology tools and discussion

5. www.wearemedia.org – social media training (coming to SF February 12 & 13)