

website advances

There is no denying that since the late '80s/early '90s, the world and the way it does business has changed dramatically – principally because of the internet. Previously if someone wished to learn more about a company's services or order a product they would have had to physically go to the premises or use telephone or post to communicate with it. And it was much the same for charities, who would have had to rely on traditional marketing methods such as direct mail and telephone fundraising in order to muster support.

Today life is much different and it is now considered a prerequisite for an organisation to have a website. According to nfpSynergy's 2005 report *Virtual*

On the cutting edge

Technological advances such as Flash, RSS feeds and artificial intelligence mean that websites can offer much more than they could ten years ago. But how important are these technologies in helping a charity's website to deliver? Becky Slack finds out

Promise – The power of the internet for charities, 57 per cent of larger charities and 69 per cent of medium-sized organisations say that the internet has changed the way they work. Used as a fundraising and campaigning tool, as well as an advice and information resource for both supporters and professionals,

websites provide a means for people to source details and contact organisations 24 hours a day from virtually anywhere in the world.

And as technology progresses, it is expected that so too should the capabilities of these sites, with interactive games, video streaming, moving images and flashy graphics now common place. But is the use of these technologies really essential in order for a charity's website to deliver?

The answer is that it depends on who the site is going to be used by and for what purpose. As Seb Bacon, director of Jamkit, a web design agency that works with the charity and public sectors, says: "People have a tendency to panic about technology. They think they must have a website that uses lots of rich media technologies, but don't know why. We often get briefs from organisations that aren't clear about what they want and why they want it, so it's really important that they first sit down and do some research into who is to use the site and for what purpose. Only then can you really think about how you should present the information."

Beatbullying is one organisation that put its user group at the forefront of its website development process. Wanting to design an interactive site that would not only supply professionals working with young people access to free-of-charge resources, but would also

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provide young people with anti-bullying solutions and messages, it enlisted the support of several teenagers who, over an 18 month period, participated in various discussion groups, brain storming sessions and design meetings. Ideas put forward by them were then run past the development officers who advised in terms of content before the concept was then created by the technical design team.

"We felt that there were plenty of interactive sites run by corporates selling products to young people, and plenty of online learning material for educational settings, but nothing that had developed hardcore social content to engage with children in a highly interactive and interesting way. We made it our mission to change this," explains Beatbullying's creative director, Sarah Dyer. "Central to this was the input by young people. They know what they want and are far more web savvy than adults, which resulted in some great ideas being presented."

The end result, www.bbcliv.org.uk, is a rich interactive media environment that includes a plethora of advice and information in the format of videos, sound clips, interactive characters, message boards, screensavers and wallpapers. The site has won them much critical acclaim, including the Best Use of New Media award at the 2005 UK Charity Awards. More importantly, though, is that it delivers for both young people and the organisation.

"There are lots of mechanisms on the site that we use to gather data from the kids online," says Dyer. "These range from filling in surveys through to writing blogs, which allows them to tell us what they think of the site. Not only does this enable us to study patterns of bullying which we can feed back into our work, but we can take the comments and change the site where necessary. We have a massive approval rating with the majority of users scoring us eight out of ten."

This kind of interactivity very much fits with the school of thought of the web experts interviewed for the nfpSynergy report, who felt that not only would greater interactivity and personalisation be instrumental in bringing existing

supporters closer to an organisation, but that it would also help attract new ones.

The NSPCC has also trialled interactive technology as a means of saving resources around the rest of the organisation. It recently piloted a new site, www.talktiltstops.org.uk that uses artificial intelligence called Lingubot to operate four virtual characters the public can interact with if they have concerns about a child. As users type in questions they want to ask, a word and phrase pattern recognition system matches the questions with pre-programmed responses in the Lingubots knowledge base.

"If you look at companies such as Ikea or Camelot you will see them using Lingubots to handle all kinds of online enquiries," says Chris Greenwood, the NSPCC's brand manager. "So we are using this system to deal with some of the routine questions people may have, which enables us to free up staff to deal with the more complex matters, thus saving valuable resources."

However, while the use of rich multimedia technologies can help a charity's site deliver, they do have their drawbacks – namely problems with accessibility. Firstly, if a user's computer is relatively old then it may not have the software needed to access the program. Though this can be downloaded for free, it can be an intimidating exercise for those with little experience of computers. Secondly, colours and moving images can create problems for people with disabilities and in order to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act, organisations must offer an html or plain text version of their site as well.

It is for this reason that Jamkit's Bacon prefers not to use such technologies on the sites his company develops. "It's not just about accessibility though. This technology can be expensive and it's not always appropriate for our clients," he says. "Flash, for example, is often best placed on sites for younger people that include interactive games or videos. We work with a lot of health care charities and instead choose other interactive formats, such as questionnaires

Useful resources

www.ictconsortium.org.uk/

A group of voluntary sector organisations working to deliver a co-ordinated framework of ICT guidance, good practice, advice and support.

www.citra.org.uk/

A collaboration aimed at improving access to relevant and trusted IT information, people and resources.

www.rnib.org.uk

The RNIB's Web Access Centre offers advice on how to plan, build and test accessible websites.

and the opportunity to sign up to newsletters, which look impressive but don't require much time or resources to develop."

Terry Stokes, director of IT services at LASA, the London Advice Services Alliance, which is part of the new ICT consortium, adds to this, saying his experience shows that the main draw to a site is not the use of flashy graphics but interesting content. "The sites that have the biggest activity and the largest number of hits are those that offer appropriate up-to-date content for their audience. If you haven't updated your site for a year or so and all the news is out of date, this doesn't act as much of an incentive to return."

Stokes also gives the example of RSS feeds, a mechanism by which brief news stories can be sent to people's desktops or even other websites, as being one relatively cheap and easy way to offer people a little bit more. "These are great for coalitions for example," says Stokes, "where rather than having a static link on a charity's website to the coalition site, they could provide an RSS feed instead."

This example also raises the need to drive people to a site in the first place. Whether this is done through links on other sites, through promotional material or increased page ranking on search engines, it's important a website is properly marketed. After all, there is no point spending time and money developing a website if nobody knows it is there.

