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Uptime online

The internet has finally proved itself as a significant fundraising channel, says Jessica Twentyman. The problems start here

For the most part, online fundraising exercises are the result of months of meticulous planning and seemingly endless technological tweaks. Others, however, are entirely unexpected – the result of an earthquake, floods or other natural disaster. The tsunami last December was the most recent devastating example.

Soon after the news broke, charitable web sites were struggling to cope with the numbers eager to lend their support.

The pace, after all, was unprecedented. At the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), the website took donations amounting to more than £10 million in just 24 hours, between December 30 and 31. British Telecom stepped in to provide extra bandwidth and logistical support when it looked like the web site might not cope.

The second most-hit UK charity web site was Oxfam. On its busiest day, 29 December, it received 100,000 visits – a ten-fold increase on normal levels. In fact, the charity received as much money on that day as it normally gets in a year, excluding disaster appeals.

Fortunately, Oxfam's web site is based on Linux servers that can be load-balanced, so that several servers share the burden of processing donations to provide extra capacity. Those servers were able to support the incoming donations but still gave staff a few nail-biting hours.

Stories like these have helped change charities' perceptions of online fundraising. Only last year a survey by nfpSynergy showed shaky confidence in online fundraising. Yet, where many have wondered when their websites might start to turn a profit, they also now have to worry whether their sites would cope with a sudden surge in online donations.

Yet questions concerning capacity and resilience are not new. Chris Evans,

managing director at internet service provider (ISP), hso points to its client the Salvation Army, which appointed it as its preferred internet access supplier for its Global IT Hosting site in London.

In addition to the day-to-day service, hso also donated extra bandwidth to handle the massive demand over the 2003 Christmas holiday period. This meant upping the more usual 4mbps (megabits per second) service to 100mbps so the charity could process internet donations from the one million hits a day it anticipated. Without this, says Mark Calleran, head of IT for the charity's international headquarters, donors couldn't have had instant access to the online donation sites and may have given up trying.

"Essentially, the needs of charities are not so different from those in any other sector," explains Evans. "They need their web sites to cope with surges in online activity, just like any others, because the public expects all sites to be resilient and easy to use."

But calculating bandwidth and matching it to need is not the only task that charities face. They also need to consider server processing power.

Fortunately, ISPs are increasingly able to promise extra capacity to clients thanks to the use of computer server blades. These slim boards (typically 1.75 inches thick) house multiple processors yet share auxiliary components, such as fans, power supplies and network cards, with other blades attached to a communal chassis. In this way, blades can be slotted in or out of the chassis as processing requirements fluctuate.

Mark Lamb, director of managed technology services at ISP Star, boasts that his clients have access to a "free pool" of blades, in addition to their own dedicated capacity, so they can bolster

their resources when required. "What's more," he adds, "we can do that within three or four minutes of a request."

Charities also, uniquely, benefit from services such as those run by Bmycharity, Justgiving and Caf (through Allaboutgiving.org and GiveNow.org), which can process gifts for charities and divert donors away from the charities' main website. Justgiving's services, for example, have helped more than 850 UK charities raise over £10 million online.

This is just as well, because the challenge is only going to grow. After numerous false starts, the internet has finally become a major channel for donations, and increasing domestic high-speed access means charities need to make

preparations to deal with it. "Broadband has had a massive impact," says Amanda Horton-Mastin, director of new media

development for Comic Relief. "People are becoming familiar with the web and using it in droves."

In the weeks leading up to Red Nose Day in March, the IT team at rednoseday.com, put in hours of preparation with technology partners Oracle and Cisco to ensure the web site could scale. "In 2001, £2.8 million was donated online. In 2003, that figure hit £3.7 million – and we expect to exceed that this year," she says. As *Charity Times* go to press, the Comic Relief was still counting, but the total will give an indication for charities everywhere of the challenges – and opportunities – ahead.

