Digital Strategies for Australian non-profit organisations

Digital planning

In a highly competitive funding environment, the non-profit sector faces new challenges in maintaining and building human and financial support. The effective use of digital technologies has the potential to enhance engagement and build organisational effectiveness, however non-profit organisations (NPOs) need to be mindful in providing technology that matches what their givers are looking for. Digital strategies have been most successful for NPOs that know their supporters well, can generate and execute innovative ideas and are open to change.

A digital strategy that flows from the vision and mission of the organisation reinforces the perception that recruiting volunteers and funders is integral to its operations.

Relationships are still the key to successfully retaining donors and finding a balance of online and offline presence is essential.

Support from the top

Technology is most effective when built into the structure and culture of an organisation. It is also more successful when driven from the highest level, with the goal of embedding an IT culture across the organisation.

A digital strategy is one of the most important strategic conversations NPO leaders can take forward. Digital leaders, board members or senior staff members within an organisation are key to fostering innovation and ensuring investment in financial and staff resources. This statement is supported by the outcomes of surveyed NPOs' views on technology leadership as per Figure 1 below.

FIGURE 1: EXTENT OF AGREEMENT TO THE STATEMENT 'POOR MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP CAN LIMIT THE POTENTIAL OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY'
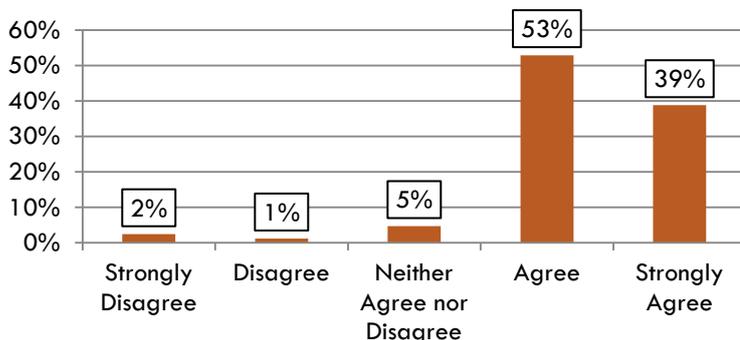
To ensure an internal culture grows with technology, organisations should set their own pace and take on different technologies progressively.

A digital activity calendar and opportunities for communication are useful starting points and provide opportunities for team members to gain skills in different media suitable to engage supporters.

A well planned, supported and sustainable strategy will be more effective than enthusiastic short-term responses, such as when a technical volunteer or keen staff member moves on.

Trusted third party providers can provide assistance to NPOs. To reduce costs, a cross sector partnership with an IT business could be engaged and recognised on the NPO's website.

NPOs with the most successful digital strategies generally use a combination of websites, social media, email and direct mail to communicate with their supporters and donors.

Staff at all levels should have the skills, training and capacity required to engage with the relevant existing and emerging technologies and platforms. Regional and rural NPOs may require special focus to build online access and professional development.

Technology allows an organisation to know and serve its supporters better. Knowing the supporters of the NPO and understanding the reasons for their support is key to managing their expectations and encouraging greater participation. Supporters want to know what happens as a result of their donation, be it time or money. Cloud or low cost software or hardware and IT services can be used to maximise the use of technology for building a donor database for ongoing volunteer and financial support.

NPOs should be willing to try a variety of strategies and ensure they are able to measure the performance of their campaigns by reviewing data.

Websites

Most NFPs have a website which they use to communicate and present information. Of these, 80 per cent also use their website to receive donations and fundraise. Successful websites:

- are easy to find online
- are clear and accessible
- have information about the NPOs purpose and activities, and
- provide links to key documents, including annual reports, strategic plans, organisational objectives and mission statements.

A web management team is important to update the information regularly and ensure quality content on digital devices from mobile phones to desktops.

To encourage active engagement by visitors to the site a prominent button can be included on top of the page encouraging users to 'Donate Now' or indicate 'Ways to Get Involved'.

Optimising the website for mobile use is becoming increasingly important. Mobile phones are the most commonly used personal communication tool and more than half of all people who visit an NPOs website do so from a mobile device. Furthermore, mobile-friendly (responsive) websites yield 34 per cent more donations than non-mobile friendly websites.

Mobile giving, whether through SMS or mobile enabled websites and apps, is predicted to be one of the biggest trends in the next 5-10 years.

Social media

Social media use and reach is growing faster than other technological outreach and is seen as having widely untapped potential. The majority of NPOs use some form of social media, with Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn among the most popular, as shown in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2: PERCENTAGE OF NPOs THAT USE SOCIAL MEDIA AGAINST EACH PLATFORM
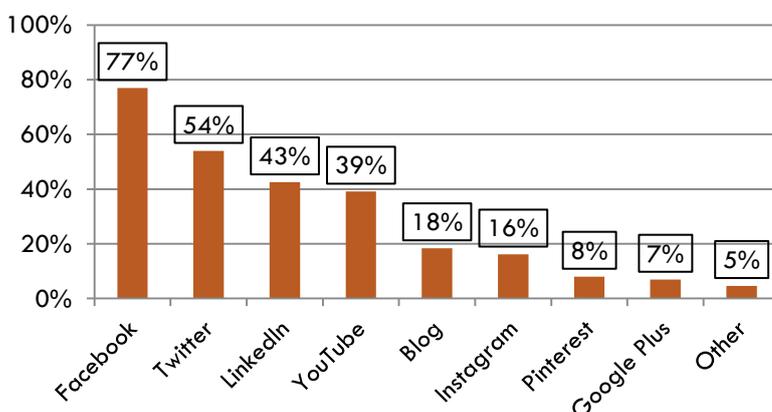
Social media is the most effective tool for getting more people talking about the cause or the issue and is particularly effective for peer to peer campaigns and online volunteering. It also facilitates various forms of online volunteering including micro activism.

An area of concern is the low conversion rate from social media presence into donations.

Matching platforms

A range of potentially useful and easy to adapt technologies already exist and may be leveraged by NPOs yet to develop their own dedicated platforms.

A number of platforms have been established for encouraging volunteer involvement. Some of these seek to match volunteers with NPOs such as Go Volunteer. Some platforms specialise in matching business opportunities such as Good2Give and Goodcompany. Other options for organisations that don't have their own website include:

- using existing staff resources systems to better manage and serve volunteers
- using Skype to facilitate virtual volunteering
- utilise the Cloud for web-based software delivering tools to nonprofits without their having to buy, host, or maintain the system
- piggybacking on large established sites such as Facebook or E-Bay for brand promotion, fundraising or as another charity shop outlet, and
- linking with organisations/industries that have large databases and staff numbers.

Benefits from effective IT use

Some of the rewards for an NPO that has implemented a detailed IT plan include:

- an increase in virtual volunteering
- better, more personalised engagement and donor accountability
- an ability to tap into the need to respond immediately to causes
- increased transparency
- increased visibility and marketing
- the ability to prioritise existing technology