

# How to Create an Effective Nonprofit Website

# Why Your Website is Important

Your mother may not have been a web developer, but when she said, “You only have one chance to make a great first impression,” she knew what she was talking about. Your website is your calling card, the way many of your donors will first “meet” you, so make it count! Your website should represent your organization, your cause, and your stakeholders.

Your website is also a:

- Tool to inspire your visitors to take action! It should not only provide information, but opportunities for supporters to get involved.
- The official source, the final destination, the grand kahuna of all news and everything there is to know about you!

Your nonprofit website should:

- Set you apart from other organizations in your sector.
- Help you clearly communicate with volunteers, donors, and staff members.
- Lead to greater understanding of your mission and how you’re achieving it.

In this guide, you’ll learn how to make your nonprofit website more effective and how it can raise more money for your cause!

# Make Your Website a Destination

The two main challenges nonprofits face in online fundraising are (1) getting prospective donors to your website and (2) getting them excited about what you do. If you've achieved the first part, you're halfway there! Remember these three principles to make your website a donor destination:

## 1. Be authentic.

Don't come across as too "institutional." Show supporters that your organization is made up of real, hardworking people who are trying to accomplish important goals.

Identify your organization and provide contact information on every page of your website. This will lend a comforting aura of credibility to your page.

People skim websites, so think of web copy as a billboard advertisement. Users should be able to identify what your organization stands for in 4 seconds without reading paragraphs of text.

## 2. Show your passion.

Most giving decisions are emotionally based. Use large, inspiring imagery on your home page.

Give thanks to recent donors and share their stories. Seeing examples of past donors can inspire prospective donors to give.

## 3. Experiment to find what works.

No two organizations are exactly the same, nor do they have the exact same target audiences. Keep in mind, though, that there are generally two audiences: people who came to your website to make a donation and people who have heard of your organization and want to find out more. Your website should impress both of these groups.

Do [simple user testing](#) while creating and updating your website.

# Key Components of a Great Nonprofit Website

People have short attention spans online, so your website needs to provide a visitor with easy access to everything in just three clicks. Your nonprofit website needs to grab your reader's attention, provide information, and spur that person to action. Here are 10 must-haves for your nonprofit website:

## 1. A guessable web address.

Your web address should be one that users would think of when trying to find your organization online, such as "www.networkforgood.org" for Network for Good and "gardensforhealth.org" for Gardens for Health International.

## 2. Information about your organization.

Why is your organization the nonprofit to support? What are you doing that's different from others? What's special about your volunteers, constituents, programs, and events?

## 3. News on what you're doing.

Create a place to share a glimpse of your latest news and examples of your most recent content such as interesting articles, upcoming events, and social media posts.

## 4. Clear, intuitive navigation

Your website should be organized according to the expectations of the people who come to your website. Website visitors are looking for more information about what you do, how they can get involved, and why they should care.



*Side by Side Kids' website has clear navigation that immediately tells visitors what they can expect to find. Credit: [Side by Side Kids](#)*

## 5. Ease of use.

Take a moment to pause and reflect on your website's usability.

### A big donate button.



Don't be afraid to ask for donations on your website. Isn't that the whole point of online fundraising? Supporters will appreciate an easy donation flow, so make that button shine!

## 6. Icons for social media.



Social media is a key way to connect and communicate with supporters. Be sure that all those hours tweeting and blogging don't go to waste: Provide links to your social media profiles and make it easy for supporters to grab content.

## 7. Images and multimedia.

Pictures of people who benefitted from your services or volunteers in action can demonstrate your mission, illustrate the impact of your work, and complement your website's text.

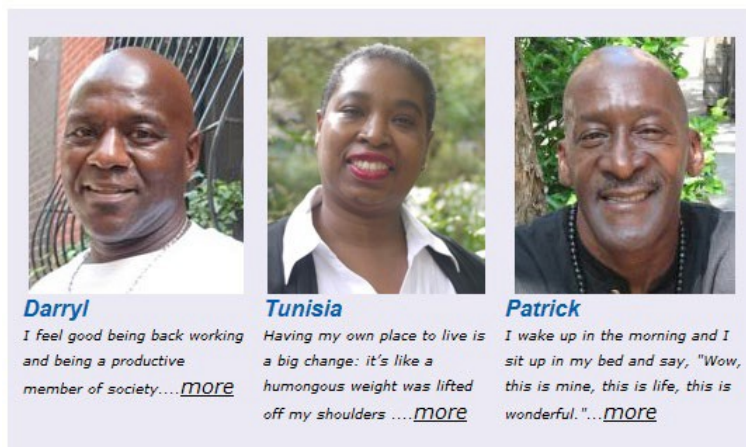


*Garden for Health International's website features a picture of a woman who is benefitting from their work, visually demonstrating the overlaying text.*

*Credit: [Gardens for Health International](#)*

## 8. A third-party endorsement.

Include ratings from GuideStar and Charity Navigator or a testimonial from a volunteer or beneficiary. A lot of the effectiveness of the messages on your website depends on the messenger. Let others help build your case.



*Project Renewal humanizes their organization with three excellent photographs of people they've helped and their stories.*

*Credit: [Project Renewal](#)*

## 9. An amazing, personalized home page.

Read on to learn why your organization's home page is so important!

# Nonprofit Home Page Tips

Think of your home page as your organization's front yard: It needs curb appeal to entice your visitors to come in. It's a crucial part of establishing yourself and should show visitors that your organization can meet their needs. Don't let it be simply an "About Us" page, but let it speak to your values, interests, and desires.

If a home page is so important, why is it last on our list of a great website's key components? Because many of those components are also needed for a home page that pulls readers in and prompts them to take action. Every nonprofit home page needs:

- A large, colorful **donate button that links directly to your donation page**.
- A place where people can sign up for your **email newsletter**.



*Malaria No More combines a short tagline in an easy-to-read font with a call-to-action button in a contrasting color to entice visitors to provide their email address and zip code. Credit: [Malaria No More](#)*

- A one-sentence **tagline** on your home page that clearly explains what you do and what makes you unique with a **separate "About Us"** page.
- A **site search option** in the upper right-hand corner with a search box that's 27 characters wide on every page. Don't offer a link to "search" that takes users to a new page for their initial search unless it's for an advanced search with multiple options.
- **Links** that quickly show readers what actions they can take. Make it easy for them to find the answers to their questions.

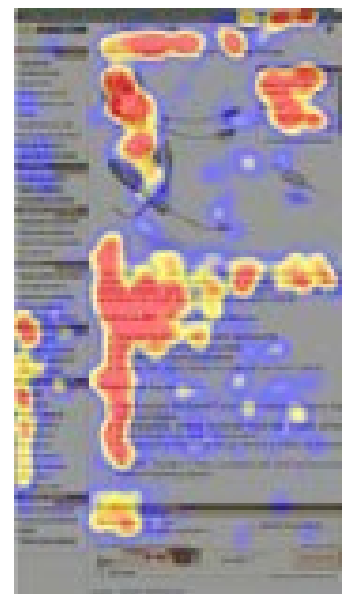
- Strategic use of **keywords** to make your site more attractive to search engines.
- A **striking image** (not a stock photo) that echoes your tagline and provides an emotional connection to your cause.



*Wildlife SOS has an image rotator that shows one compelling image for each of their current initiative Credit: [Wildlife SOS](#)*

- **Simplicity and clarity in design.** Your home page should be attractive and engaging, but uncluttered. Clutter can feel overwhelming and discourage visitors from taking action.

Now that you know what to include on your home page, be sure to arrange everything in a hierarchical manner that mimics an “F.” Eye-tracking research by [Dr. Jakob Nielsen](#) shows that people don’t read on the Web, [they scan in an “F” shape](#) until something catches their eye. Think about that pattern when placing your most important information.





# Branding Your Website

*“There are approximately 1.5 million nonprofits in the United States. And a lot of their websites look like they were created from the same cookie cutter. Our advice? Be a different kind of cookie” –[Nonprofit Hub](#)*

Since your website is where most people searching for your cause will first encounter your nonprofit’s brand, make sure you’re thoughtful about how you depict yourself online.

- Put your **logo** at the top of your home page and on every page on your site. (Users will expect it to link back to your home page.)
- Use **consistent colors and fonts** for your logo, home page, and other communication materials. Using consistent visuals throughout your digital and print materials will establish unity and tell your visitor that she’s still on your site.



*Pacific Ridge School uses a color palette of blue, gray, orange, and white to create unity across its website. Credit: [Pacific Ridge School](#)*

- Make your website **match your voice**. Is your nonprofit serious, funny, traditional, or experimental? Write a statement that defines your brand’s personality and refer to it when choosing what to post online. Are you consistently representing yourself to your audience?

- Many nonprofits are outposts of a larger outfit. When creating your individual group's website, make sure it's **consistent with the mother ship**. It's likely that your parent organization has a positive reputation and consistent branding—so take advantage of that. You'll build credibility if visitors are able to make the connection between your nonprofit and the national organization.
- Think about how **images and multimedia** can tell your story and create buy-in with your website's visitors. Just like including your contact information, images help humanize your organization. Putting a face on your work will provide an emotional appeal.
- Use **calls to action** to encourage your supporters to donate and participate on your site. Make all calls to action and donation buttons urgent, prominent, clear, and impossible to miss.



*The home page of Feeding America, Kentucky's Heartland, features clear calls to action, "give: donate now," "learn: learn more," and "take action: volunteer now." Credit: [Feeding America, Kentucky's Heartland](#)*

# SEO: How to Have a Search Engine Friendly Site

Imagine someone looking online for volunteer opportunities or services you provide. Would they find your organization? Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of improving the volume and quality of traffic to a website from search engines via “natural” (aka organic) search results. Here are some tips to make your nonprofit website more search engine friendly:

## 1. Keyword research is the first step for Search Engine Optimization (SEO).

Take the time to figure out which words are used by the people you want to find you, and then use those words on the relevant pages of your site. For example, if a relevant and popular search phrase for your cause is “food banks in Georgia,” make sure you use those keywords in the first few words of your page title, page keywords, and in your page content. Remember: Don’t just stuff the keywords in there; it still needs to make sense!

## 2. Make navigation easy.

Build clear text links to all parts of your site. Search engines can’t follow image links or links embedded in animations like Flash, they like their navigation plain and simple—and so do many users.

## 3. Get links from trusted, relevant sources.

Links are like a vote for your page and you can’t rank well without them. Links must be relevant to the content matter of your site and they must be from high-quality websites. Use keywords in the links you have coming into your site. For example, “See our adoptable puppies in Houston” is a much better incoming link than “View our pets.”

#### **4. Build a sitemap to help search engines discover every page on your site.**

Sitemaps list the pages in your site along with brief, keyword-rich descriptions of the page. If you have too many pages on your site, create as many sitemaps as you need and make sure they're linked together.

#### **5. Track your progress with web analytics.**

Most likely your web hosting service or content management system already has reports and tracking included. In addition to this, [Google Analytics](#) is easy to use and provides a wealth of information for free. Web analytics tell you how people interact with your site and where traffic is coming from. You can track the progress of any changes that you make to see if they are working.

#### **6. Tell the search engines where you are by submitting your site details.**

You can use [Google Webmaster Tools](#) and [Bing Webmaster Tools](#) to submit a list of all the pages in your site. If you verify your site with Google and Bing you'll also find valuable information about how well and how often your site is being examined by search engines.

#### **7. Content is King.**

Create content that is interesting to your users, such as updates on what your organization is doing or relevant how-to's, and keep it up to date. Search engines love sites like blogs, which are regularly refreshed. At the end of the day, even a site that ranks well and gets lots of visitors is no good if visitors don't like what they see.

# Common Nonprofit Website Mistakes

You've thought out your home page, you've created links and buttons, but your website's visitors aren't spending much time on your site. Why is that? Banishing these small-but-easy-to-fix problems can make a big difference:

**Too much text:** Think in terms of headings, bullets, lists, and images. Make each word count and be ruthless when deciding to add more text.

**No emotional draw:** Put a compelling image of your work front and center. Displaying vivacious imagery can enchant visitors and encourage emotions in a stronger way than text.

**Small, aimless donate button:** Make your button big, bold, and above the fold. Busy is bad: Keep it uncluttered and easy to read. Clarity and simplicity are huge, so this point bears repeating.

**No focus:** Have one clear focal point and one call to action for each page, otherwise the visitor and their eyes won't know what to focus on.

**No social sharing:** Include links to your social media profiles to make it easy for website visitors to connect with you on other platforms.

**No blog or embed features:** If you have a blog, feature it on your website. Include sharing functions so others can embed your content on their site to drive traffic back to you.

**Unintuitive navigation:** Don't divide your site by your departments because your visitors don't know them. Instead, think about what your user needs.

**Lack of an email sign-up:** Don't miss out on the opportunity to make regular and meaningful contact with people who show an interest in what you do. Collect visitors' email addresses and provide them with interesting content in return.

**Difficult search:** Make sure to test your search function. Is it easy for users to find what they're looking for? Tools such as Google Analytics will help you determine if visitors are quickly reaching their desired destinations.

**No contact:** Including phone numbers and addresses is the single best way to build trust with visitors. Put an easy way to contact you on every page.

# Make Your Website a Donation Machine

Don't let a lack of digital effort deter would-be supporters. According to research by Google, 75% of donors start their charity research online versus offline. Focus on your donors' expectations and what you can do to meet them.

## 1 Make your donate button easier to find.

If you want to make donating to your cause simple, make sure finding your donation button is effortless. If it takes a visitor more than 2 seconds to find your button, then you need to make it more prominent. Your call to donate should be eye-catching: bold, colorful, and well positioned.



## ABOUT THIRST RELIEF

WE ARE CHANGING THE WORLD THROUGH CLEAN WATER. FIND OUT HOW.

*Thirst Relief's donation button stands out with a contrasting color.  
Credit: [Thirst Relief International](http://ThirstReliefInternational.com)*

## 2. Frame the donate button in a more compelling way.

Now think about why someone should click on your Donate button. Your financial needs are not enough. What tangible change will result if they give? Will it feel good to make the donation? Is clicking on the button fun, touching, or compelling?



*International Child Care's donation button is emotionally compelling with an image of a child. Credit: [International Child Care](#)*

## 3. Add a sense of immediacy.

Your supporters might think you have a cool website and that they'll give later, never to return. You want to inspire someone to give right now, but how? Create a sense of urgency to donate through a campaign with a goal, deadline, matching grant, or an appeal for specific, tangible items or programs.



*Malaria No More creates urgency with a countdown clock and a way to stop the countdown with a donation. Credit: [Malaria No More](#)*

## 4. Provide information on where donations go.

Be sure to share information or links to information about where donations go. Transparency is the key to building trust with your supporters: Consider sharing what percentage of donations goes directly to mission-related activities and making a connection between donations and services provided.



**How Much Would You Like to Donate Today?**

<b>\$ 10</b>	Provides one beam to support the roof.	<b>\$ 15</b>	Provides one sheet of roofing material.
<b>\$ 35</b>	Provides materials for 5 children in one after-school workshop.	<b>\$ 50</b>	Provides a backpack full of school supplies.
<b>\$ 85</b>	Provides the labor for the roof installation.	<b>\$ 350</b>	Provides a computer for the community.
<b>\$ 500</b>	Provides the materials and labor to install the roof.		
<b>Other</b>			

*Vive Peru's DonateNow page tells donors exactly what their donation can do.  
Credit: [Vive Peru](#)*

## 5. Recognize that getting clicks requires cultivation.

While you want someone to donate right away, it's important to remember that it takes time to cultivate donors. Be sure your website includes a way to capture the email addresses of visitors so that you can build a relationship with them and turn them into donors in the future.



**FEEDING AMERICA**

**Sign up for Food Bank Mailing List**

Email Address  **Subscribe**

[Twitter](#) [Facebook](#) [Instagram](#)

*Community Food Band of Eastern Oklahoma has an easy, visually appealing way to capture supporter information and encourage visitors to visit their social media sites.  
Credit: [Community Food Band of Eastern Oklahoma](#)*



# Testing and Improvement

If you were a first-time visitor to your website, would you understand the mission of your organization? One of the easiest and most overlooked ways to improve your website and your donation process is by putting it through some basic testing. People hear “testing” and often get scared off, but all you need is somebody who isn’t already familiar with your website. Ask a couple of volunteers, donors, and others in your target audience to perform the following three tests, all of which will give you great insight.

## 1. The Friend Test

Ask three friends who don’t know much about your website to view it. Watch how quickly it takes for them to figure out what your home page is for, what the major sections are, how to navigate them, and how to return to your home page.

## 2. Hypothetical Information Test

Give your test subjects a hypothetical situation that requires them to find information: They’ve heard of your nonprofit and would like to make a donation, but first they need to research and be certain that you’re credible. Have them talk you through the process as they try to determine if you should receive their donation. Determine how easy your information was to find, what information is missing, what they like, what they don’t like, what catches their eye, and what does not meet expectations.

## 3. Task Testing

This type of test evaluates one specific task, in this case, donating to your cause. Now that your testers have proven that your organization is legitimate, have them try to make a donation and talk about what they are doing, where they are navigating to, what is difficult or confusing, and what they are clicking and why. Look for parts of the process that are confusing or difficult for them, as these may be points at which potential donors leave your website.

# Going Mobile

With so much web traffic now coming from mobile phones, it's important that your website is easy to use no matter how it's being viewed. Luckily, you don't need a special site or a custom app to improve a visitor's experience. With a few simple design tweaks, you can make your site more usable—and improve your conversion rates by removing unnecessary distractions from all platforms.

## 1. Make it snappy.

Keep your website's page load times under 5 seconds—less than 3 seconds is even better. Remove anything that makes your pages stall or fail to load.

## 2. Minimize data entry.

It's already a best practice on a desktop to minimize the amount of typing your visitors do (they'll be more likely to fill out your form), and it's critical for mobile users. Typing a lot is a drag on even the smartest of phones.

## 3. Your copy must be short and sweet.

Online visitors don't read, they skim, so make sentences shorter, break up longer blocks of text with headings, and use an easy-to-read font.

## 4. Focus on one high-quality image.

Images can quickly communicate, but you only need one high-quality photo rather than multiple images. More images will take longer to load and they won't look good on a small mobile screen.

## 5. Remove the roadblocks.

Swap out Flash, popups, or other animations for best results because most mobile devices can't correctly display content in these formats.

## 6. Keep relevant content front and center.

Don't force mobile users to scroll across three columns and all four corners of your site. Place key information top and center for easy access.

## 7. Make links and buttons easy to use.

Are your links and buttons large enough to click on from small screens without zooming in? Provide plenty of space between items.

## 8. Keep it simple.

A simple, clean design is good for any site. Embrace the use of white space and narrow your visitor's focus to one or two calls to action.

# Remember

- Include a tagline about your organization, a place to collect email addresses, and a large donate button on your home page.
- Brand your website with your logo and a consistent color scheme, fonts, and voice.
- Make it easy for your donors to give with an easy to find donate button that goes straight to your donation page.
- Ensure your site is user friendly by performing simple tests and making improvements.
- Keep everything simple, clean, and uncluttered.

