Grant Professionals and Web Development: An Opportunity to Transform Organizations at the Intersection of Strategy and Technology

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Abstract

This strategy paper advocates for grant professionals' involvement in website development to improve organizational capacity and grant outcomes. The paper first qualifies the importance of the organization's website for grant seeking. The paper then urges mission-driven grant professionals to proactively guide technology strategy at all levels of the organization as it is needed. Finally, to further encourage technology skill building and application among grant professionals, the paper details activities and expected outcomes of various web development projects.

Introduction

When thoughtfully planned and well-resourced, a nonprofit website works hard.

- It drives traffic and converts visitors to donors: From 2013 to 2014, nonprofit website traffic grew by an average of 11% and groups raised $612 for every 1,000 visitors to their site (M+R, 2015).
- It engages people: Websites consistently rank as the nonprofit sector's most important communication channel (Nonprofit Marketing Guide, 2016).
- It improves productivity: By helping to align operations, appropriate website infrastructure and integrated services create organizational efficiencies (Schwartz, 2015).

A nonprofit's website also can influence a grant maker's decision, because with increased dollars raised, people engaged, and efficiencies created by the website, a grant seeking organization may be stronger and better positioned to achieve its goals. But do we know if grant makers actually visit websites during proposal reviews to help guide grant decisions? The topic has yet to be studied, though author and nonprofit icon Beth Kanter has said, "I know many program officers look at websites as part of proposal review due diligence" (Kanter, personal communication, December 10, 2015).

Grant professionals often do not give websites the attention they deserve, which may explain why the topic of websites and grant decisions has gone uninvestigated. Of the 82 workshops listed on the 2015 Grant Professionals Association (GPA) Conference schedule, no session title or linked description included the words "web," "website," or "online presence" (GPA, 2015). Likewise, GrantChat, a weekly grants Twitter conversation, has yet to explore the importance of grant seeker websites. When grant readiness was a GrantChat topic, participants did not mention website audits or updates as a component of grant proposal preparation (GrantChat, June 2015; GrantChat, July 2015). And among GPA peer-reviewed publications, only one article encouraged grant professionals' formal involvement in website development and maintenance (Lucas-Matos, 2010).

Tech Strategy and the Role of the Grant Professional

A survey conducted in 2015 shows that 25% of U.S. nonprofits lack a responsive web design to make their site mobile friendly (Arneal, n.d.), even as one in seven online donations comes from a mobile device (Granger, 2016). Only 45% of North American nonprofits regularly publish a search-engine-friendly blog (Nonprofit Tech for Good, 2016), even as 40% of nonprofit site traffic comes from search (Abramovich, 2015). Moreover, ineffective websites reveal deeper problems: a) a failure to include technology in organizational strategic plans, and b) inadequate staff to execute a long-term technology plan. Grant professionals who are familiar with technology, or have a functional understanding of composite parts, can help strengthen such organizations.

Advocates for Technology in Strategic Plans

At least 23% of nonprofits have yet to include technology in organizational strategic plans (NTEN, 2015). Long-term plans that fail to embed technology indicateorganizational leadership has not embraced change, even as they operate in a dynamic field. Meanwhile, their competition can respond to new ideas and innovations by making use of proper equipment, technology training, and suitable compensation for technology employees. What the leaders of the lagging groups need is a guide to connect strategic technology to organizational outcomes.

Grant professionals are well-positioned to help drive tech strategy for their organizations, because they are at the right place at the right time. They know what the most discriminating of donors are beginning to demand. They can see funders' imperatives stacked up against their organization's current operations or potential capacity, and understand that the markers of an effective *modern* nonprofit have just shifted. Nimble and effective for-profits are now competing for the same dollars. Large funders are beginning to make a smaller number of grants of larger award sizes, with capacity building support included. Tech grants are becoming more common. And non-tech grants often allow a technology component. These developments are clear signs that the most effective nonprofits look different today than five years ago.

Filling Gaps in Tech Staff

Nearly 57% of nonprofits do not have staff solely dedicated to technology (Care2 et al., 2015), and 42% of nonprofits lack any budget for staff training in technology (NTEN, 2015). Also, 74% of nonprofits say that "staff shortage" is the biggest challenge they face in planning digital strategy (Care2 et al.). Many nonprofits have ended up with an "accidental techie" who is typically under-resourced and underappreciated.

However, even on a restricted budget, technology for business has become incredibly accessible to non-tech professionals, such as those in the grants field. Advances in technology mean that network servers and security can be inexpensively outsourced, leaving time for strategic work such as identifying long-term needs and selecting and vetting various tiers of software products (BetterCloud, 2016). Also, today's technologists have many supportive resources that aim to help nonprofits understand software and

service provider opportunities. Resources include pro-bono organizations, community organizations, crowdsourcing companies, and outsourcing agencies or consultants (Peskay and Beldjilali, 2016).

Web Development Achieves Strategic Objectives

To encourage grant professionals to learn and apply tech skills, Table 1 details how web development can make dramatic improvements in organizational capacity and outcomes. For example, professionals who create effective website content help establish their organization's authority and connect them with supporters. Applying web design skills within a cross-departmental web planning committee can help build a site that is fundamentally welcoming to all users and provides a great experience.

Table 1

Expected Results When a Grant Professional (GP) Applies Web Development Skills

Tech skill	Recommended activities	Outputs	Organizational outcomes	Grant outcomes and opportunities
Website audit	Assess existing content Prioritize challenges	Website needs are understood	Leadership makes informed decisions about web development	Web challenges that undermine proposal success are exposed
Content creation	Revise or create text and images, including static content Guide blog creation or recovery	Content and SEO are improved Program impact is continuously documented	Donors and funders are driven to site through search Authority built New people are connected	Proposal efforts are supported Potential funders find the organization Success is demonstrated
Web design	Active in web planning committee Revisit brand, navigation, and page layout Promote transparency and responsive design	Website is welcoming to all users User experience is enhanced Visitor action is prompted Organization's story is brought to the forefront	Trust and confidence is inspired Visitors are converted to supporters and donors Brand is reinforced	GP's committee involvement promotes grant strategy Website impresses and inspires funders Increased donation revenue supports grant seeking efforts
Web technology planning	Active in web planning committee Help select vendors, CMS, CRM, and other web-connected service options Promote cloud-based service integration, quality of code, and a sound maintenance plan	Efficiencies are created Communication flows more easily Time spent gathering, moving, and analyzing data reduced Administrative user experience is enhanced	Operations are aligned Data-based culture of continuous improvement created Capacity to manage website and other software is improved Productivity increases	GP's committee involvement promotes grant strategy Appropriate systems and services (databases, donations, marketing, and analytics) build organizational capacity
Notes. CMS = content management system; CRM = constituent relationship management				

Conclusion

Grant seeking organizations must keep up with technology and web development if they are to create real change for those they represent. It is time for grant professionals to see themselves, first, as agents of change and, second, as writers and researchers.

Grant professionals can guide organizations' use of technology to help organizations achieve their goals, including those that are grant-related. Mission-driven grant professionals who inform technology decisions, or contribute to web design or content, provide their organizations a seamless capacity building experience that will make their organization stronger and better positioned to seek and receive grants.

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