

Key opportunities for nonprofits navigating today's evolving digital landscape



Nonprofit organizations in 2023 face what is ultimately a maze of contradictions.

Many of the headwinds introduced by the pandemic have passed, but navigating the fallout remains a challenging undertaking.

The economic climate is still uncertain, and digital projects that have been waiting years for approval continue to stack up. You need to show stakeholders your organization is making progress, but committing to a large-scale capital investment remains a daunting proposition.

In short, your organization faces most of the same challenges as everyone in the for-profit sector. But let's not kid ourselves — you do not have the same resources. How can your organization's website keep up with the times in order to guarantee the kind of impact your mission aspires to deliver?

Nonprofits have long needed to balance big needs with a small budget. However, many of the digital tools on your wish list have grown more democratized as technology has improved. The commercial sector has paved the way for buzzy advances, such as personalization and SMS marketing, to become more attainable.

But first, you have to focus on the outcomes your organization needs most. Catching up on long-delayed digital priorities is smart. Doing so in a strategic way that makes a real impact on your goals is even smarter.

Nonprofits can look to small business for guidance

As you consider how to best bring your organization's digital presentation up to speed, you can't get caught in the trap of emulating a well-funded for-profit operation. But there are a lot of parallels between the challenges you're navigating and those small businesses have also faced and worked to address in an effort to keep pace with a competitive marketplace.

Small businesses and medium- to large-scale nonprofits both enjoy a national reach with digital audiences that potentially number up to the millions. However, each also is forced to make do with a shoestring budget in comparison to their overall website needs.

As small businesses have adapted their digital strategies to stay competitive, nonprofits can follow in their footsteps.



3 small business lessons worth emulating

The following three insights are worth your focus:

Outsourcing offers value over in-house resourcing

At one time, nonprofits operated on the assumption that keeping all their needs in-house would save money. That's no longer the case.

For example, website hosting once appeared cheaper to handle on-site with servers that are bought, paid for, and managed by your IT team. But with the advent of cloud-based storage, your organization gains more flexibility using a third-party provider. Along with saving on hiring staff to maintain your system, you also avoid the headaches of managing bugs and routine maintenance.

Your ability to outsource doesn't just apply to hardware. You can also evaluate using outside vendors to handle specialized aspects of your organization, such as HR, retirement planning, and continuous website support.

Working with a vendor provides another means of future-proofing your organization as well. When you rely on a few team members to perform specialized roles, you could be left scrambling when your staffing changes. Incorporating a third-party provider allows you to retain and transfer institutionalized knowledge to keep your operation moving.

Hiring a specialist is more efficient than developing one — to a point

Nonprofit teams often wear many hats. No matter whether your digital operation falls under communications or IT, those teams are already stretched extremely thin with their existing responsibilities. As your organization considers branching into in-house development, SMS marketing, or another digital niche, these roles are specialized enough to occupy someone's whole career.

Trying to retrain someone to take on another skill offers limited success. Instead of struggling to do a lot of things poorly with the people you have, you should consider hiring a specialist. One highly skilled developer can create what you need more efficiently than someone on your team trying to learn and excel in a new discipline.

However, you should ensure you have enough work to keep a specialist working at capacity. Hiring another full-time team member for what's ultimately quarter-time work is no more efficient than asking your staff to wear too many hats. In cases like these, an outside vendor with flexible terms is likely the more productive solution.

Target your audience through niche messaging and platforms

Like your nonprofit, businesses also face the mixed blessing of multiple marketing channels. On the plus side, you have more avenues to explore than ever to reach your target audience. But on the other hand, any midsize or even large nonprofit will struggle to maintain a viable presence on every worthwhile platform.

Your organization needs to focus on the platforms and messaging that are most aligned with your audience. Website analytics provide a critical means of evaluating how well your message resonates with users. Plus, your ability to identify the social platforms that are attracting an audience will inform how much time and effort you should invest in their use.

However, for all the insights generated by tools like Google Analytics, your organization may still struggle to translate data into action. What does your site data really say about your audience's interests? And how do those insights relate to the outcomes you need to achieve?

Knowing how to interpret your site data is important. But establishing a big-picture strategy to set your content priorities is equally valuable.

Outsourcing offers the clearest advantage for re-establishing your digital priorities. But critical elements like content strategy and governance can't be created from thin air. You need to be an active participant in your website journey.

Content strategy: Too important for nonprofits to outsource

Your nonprofit needs a clear, well-defined content strategy to support its digital efforts. Fundamentally, content strategy starts with the storytelling behind what your website says about your organization's mission and its efforts. But it also incorporates the high-level planning, execution, and management required to effectively tell that story to the audiences you need to reach.

An outside vendor can help you through the content process but can't create a content strategy out of thin air. After all, you're the experts who understand your audience and what you need them to learn. You need to take part in the process. If you're not willing to commit to participating in creating the right content strategy, you won't see the results you need from your website.

Like any business, your website needs to serve multiple audiences at the same time, which can cause fissures in your strategy.

Digital products for nonprofits need to connect with two main groups:

Donors

Individuals who can help with fundraising goals.

Activists

People who would be motivated to act on your organization's behalf.

Those are two very different audiences who in turn care about very different content from your organization.

A clear content strategy saves time and effort

Too often, nonprofits create content without first targeting a specific audience. A fully formed content strategy enables you to avoid wasted effort on articles and initiatives that don't serve your business goals.

In addition, a clear content strategy provides a clear test point when stakeholders request new digital features. No matter how flashy a new website functionality looks, it's not worth pursuing if it doesn't serve your strategy. For example, embedding a social feed into your organization's website pages is a common wishlist item. But unless your activity on these platforms is consistent and connected with an overarching content plan, an inactive or arbitrary scroll of Twitter posts offers little value to website users.

Once your content strategy is in place, your agency partner will work with you to establish the technology appropriate for your needs. The right developers won't just help your organization with implementation. They'll also establish a plan for effective governance so you can maintain your tools as well.



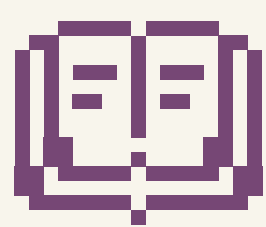
Strong governance is crucial to a sustainable digital presence

Governance consists of the policies and processes that maintain standards for your organization's website. Much like a content strategy, good governance practices are nearly impossible to implement from outside your organization. You need buy-in from your teams and leadership to develop and enforce the protections your website needs.

Without governance, you have no overarching control over what gets published on your website or how it looks. Websites that lack governance quickly operate like the Wild West. And, much like the frontier towns of that era, they collapse into chaos.

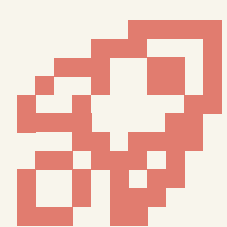
What website governance looks like for nonprofits

Governance is challenging because it places limits on your teams. People work at nonprofits because they want to affect change and see the results of their actions. However, if you want to preserve your site's design and functionality, you need governance over the following key areas:



Publishing permissions

Stakeholders should have the ability to preview content and address any pertinent concerns prior to publication.



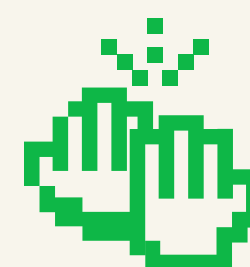
Style guides

Document the ways all content should conform with your organization's voice, tone, and editorial standards.



Design constraints

Website colors, image sizes, and text should all be consistent with design guidelines.



Accessibility

Web standards, such as alt text tags, should be used to create an equitable experience.

With the addition of a design system, your organization gains the governance capabilities to document and protect every aspect of its digital presentation. Just as importantly, your digital teams gain access to proven components to create new features quickly and more efficiently.

The right design system provides a clear opportunity to become more flexible with digital development. At the same time, you secure the assurance that your website's design remains consistent, accessible, and more sustainable.

Alleviating the challenge of website integrations

For nonprofits, establishing and maintaining the technical integrations for your website remains an ongoing struggle. Single sign-on (SSO) capability for users, API connections with external content, and CRM integrations are just a few items occupying most website wish lists.

Depending on your organization, you could feel like you have 10 pounds of technical website needs to fit into a 5-pound bag. Fortunately, technical advances are democratizing the following six areas:

SSO

Technologies like [OAuth](#) can now get your organization 80% of the way toward a uniform login for your systems.

First-party data and personalization

Tools and processes for applying user data to deliver custom experiences have grown more attainable for nonprofits.

Email management

Integration capabilities in platforms like Constant Contact and Mailchimp have grown much more robust. You no longer need to use one of the more expensive email marketing services.

Google analytics

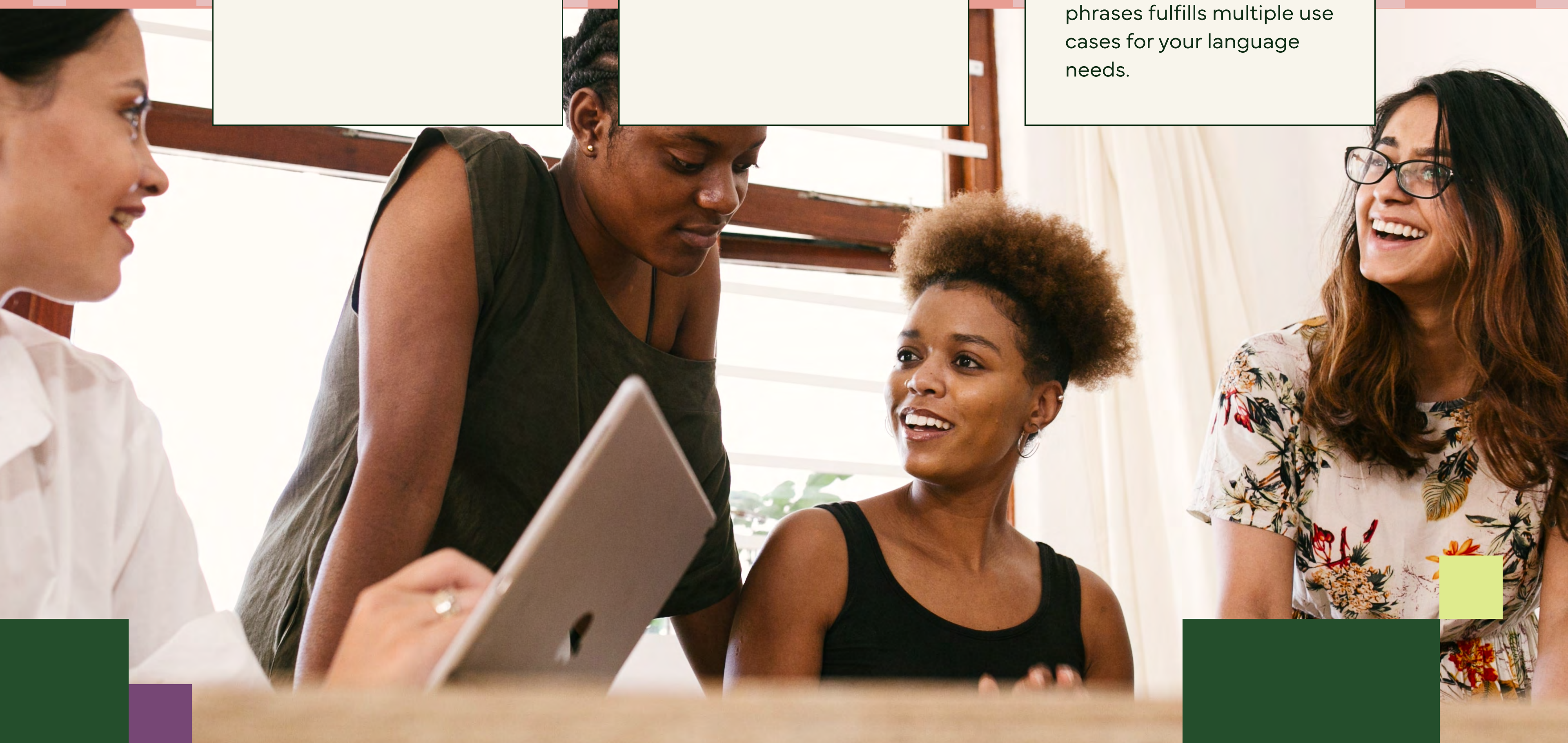
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SMS marketing

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Automated translations

Software that combines the speed of automated translations with the flexibility to customize phrases fulfills multiple use cases for your language needs.



Satisfying nonprofits' complex digital priorities requires participation

Nonprofits are emerging from the pandemic facing a changed yet fundamentally familiar environment. If your website has been neglected or missed crucial platform updates over the past two or three years, you face a daunting task of catching up.

The same challenges in terms of limitations on your budget and internal resources may stand in your way. But the digital landscape has shifted and you have a better chance of catching up with the items on your wish list than ever before.

Outside consultants can build or update your site to deliver a viable solution to resolve your areas of greatest need. But no matter how many skills and tools that are at their disposal, they won't do it right without you.



At Four Kitchens, we know how to partner with nonprofits to ensure the digital experiences they need are within reach.

We're experts in working with mission-driven organizations to build platforms that serve their goals.

Whatever you need your website to support, we should talk about how to make it happen.

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