

**School of Business
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**Net Value: The use of the Internet by
non-profit organisations**

Dr Karin Geiselhart

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'It is a myth that computer technology is about information: it is about creating and managing new relationships.'

Schrage (1998)

Summary

The Internet offers unique opportunities for new forms of communication. The challenge for non-profit organisations is to adopt those features that can help them reach their goals. This includes some of the features of electronic commerce and some of those used by advocacy groups. The rise of the 'virtual community' and the software that enables this is another avenue for development.

Like businesses, non-profits can become extinct. They also have to respond to the demands of the time and changing trends in media consumption or suffer the consequences. All the issues that apply to business apply to non-profits, along with the four marketing principles: place, price, promotion, and product. Non-profits, however, have one extra 'p' that can give them an advantage ordinary businesses cannot generally claim: passion. Non-profits exist for a reason that does not simply equate with sales and volume. Their goals are more closely related to those of social marketing, and this can become a valuable asset when seeking to enlist their members for their activities.

Adopting new technologies brings risks and benefits, and these need to be introduced gradually and carefully monitored to achieve the best mix. Often, this involves some internal structural adjustment as well as a slight conceptual re-engineering. The literature reviewed below leads to an organisation which has turned itself 'inside out' to become truly user-centric and fully responsive to member's needs.

There are lessons to be learned from the private and public sectors that apply equally well to non-profits. Many of the challenges are common to organisations of different sizes and in different sectors. For example, organisational issues and barriers to using new technologies are not unique to non-profits. Also, the need to generate sustainable income is not limited to commercial enterprises. This report draws on a range of studies to discuss the issues organisations face as they seek to reposition themselves in an information based environment. To an extent, it is also based on the author's experience as web manager in one Commonwealth agency, and her two year case study of computer-mediated communications in another.

This survey covers three main areas:

- Organisational goals for non-profits' online communications
- Internal issues when implementing networked communication systems
- Successful online strategies

Studies from a number of areas contribute to this report: research on technology and non-profits, analyses of community networks and activism, a study of the literature on the implementation of technology within organisations, and work done on the application of electronic commerce to non-profits.

The most effective uses of online communications seem to be for advocacy and activism. This may be because these groups start with a clear idea of what they are trying to achieve, rather than needing to define it. Ie, there is a clearly identified 'other' usually in opposition.

The literature on the implementation of new technologies within organisations describes the many stumbling blocks and entrenched assumptions about technology that impede its effective adoption. Some organisations starting down the path of online communications face the difficult task of deciding where they should best place their scarce resources to achieve maximum benefit for internal and external stakeholders. In these cases, communication within and across the organisation becomes a primary task for the application of new technologies. Sometimes the 'other' may be the internal structures and people that control the flows of information.

Bridging this divide requires skill and commitment but can be much can be learned from successful approaches in the business community. This is where recognising the convergence between electronic commerce and the creation of an 'electronic commons' becomes valuable.

A wider set of issues is important for advocacy groups, but is not discussed here. These are globalisation and the emerging design of the information infrastructure, which provides the context for all information society endeavours.¹ A related issue is the expert-lay divide, which includes the concept of a 'risk society' and how citizens address this. It is simply noted that a truly interactive online presence that is sincere in gathering the opinions and stories of both experts and non-experts will have a running start on bridging this gap and empowering citizens.²

Suggested use of this report

It is hoped that this report will be useful to non-profit organisations, for its presentation of the stages of web site development and the issues for implementation, as well as the wider resources. It can be used as a background to brainstorming, as each organisation will be at a different stage in its web site evolution. Different groups may decide to experiment with different techniques, depending on their needs. The implementation of electronic commerce aspects is likely to become more important over time, if only for managing membership details and participation.

¹ See Lessig (1999) for ways in which the 'code' can design for regulation.

² There is a good discussion of the expert-lay divide in Wynne (1996).

Net Value: How non-profit organisations use the Internet

1. The communication imperative - why non-profits are embracing online culture

The changing communication context

Many forms of convergence are arising as part of the transition to a globalised, information based society and economy. These include a certain blending of home and work culture, greater overlap between information, education and entertainment, a blurring of the roles of the public, private and non-profits sectors, and much wider intersection between the various ways of receiving and interacting with information from different sources. As a result, many organisations which once had clearly defined audiences and activities are finding their 'home' ground or 'core' activities sliding into other players' hands. Pressure to use time ever more effectively also means that people are becoming more selective about how they spend their time, and what issues and organisations they will 'tune in' to. Members and even casual or less committed stakeholders now seek ever more value for their effort, engagement, and any outlays of time or money.

All sectors, including business, government, education and non-profits organisations, are finding themselves compelled to become more client-oriented or user focussed. This is happening just when the environment for providing services is becoming more complex, demanding, and subject to accelerating and unpredictable change. The online environment is not immune to these dynamics. Sensible use of online communications, developed as part of a knowledge-based strategy, can help build sustainable and responsive patterns. A more sophisticated approach, less frequently articulated clearly, is that online systems can help provide the broad base of inputs and assist in the management of information to help the leaders of these organisations adapt more successfully to their changing environment.

Stages of online communication strategies

There are stages in the development of online communications that are common to government, business, and non-profits organisations. These roughly correspond to the stages of intention and awareness of what online communications can achieve. It is noteworthy that even among local government sites, advanced uses of online transparency are far from universal. A survey of all cities in the US with a population of over 100,000 measured more than 70 variables relating to information delivery, technology, e-policies and online services.³ They found most cities view their web site as an electronic brochure, only 5% providing even forms to encourage interaction. Only 11% provide interactive features for public participation in planning, public meetings, or online meetings, etc. Only 57% of the cities offered minutes online.

Broadly, the stages of online development are.⁴

- 1 *Provide information via a web site*

³ www.civicresource.com/research.html

⁴ This perspective is developed from a four stage analysis provided by Symonds (2000).

This is the equivalent of brochureware, and reflects a 'control from the centre' view of the organisation, company or agency. Usually this happens because an enthusiast has encouraged setting up a web site, or it is considered necessary to preserve status or parity with competing organisations. At this point, the world is still considered stable, a mistaken assumption that is often revealed as the need to update the web site becomes a pressure and area of organisational conflict.

Example: Croatian Information Centre for South Australia
<http://www.picknowl.com.au/homepages/ciccroemu/cic2.htm>

This site offers just a brief paragraph about the organisation, and a list of relevant links. The only option offered to viewers is an email address to request more information.

2 *Allow users to input or update specific forms of information*

At this point the agency realises that it is more efficient to have users perform certain tasks themselves, to eliminate paper based forms and re-keying of information. Specific inputs may also be sought on specific issues, such as a discussion paper or voting on a particular policy. This is the start of a user-centric approach.

Example: The National Women's Justice Coalition

<http://www.nwjc.org.au>

This site allows viewers to submit events for the online calendar via email.

3 *Allow online transactions, including payments*

This stage illustrates the convergence towards electronic commerce business models, and usually reflects a desire for still greater efficiency and/or better revenues, or increased enrolment in a program or service. The agency starts to realise the value of its own databases and the information they contain about members. At the same time, the agency may realise that harnessing user feedback, including complaints and requests, is information that can help them retain members and also continue adapting.

Example: Women's Electoral Lobby

<http://www.wel.org.au/>

This site offers the option joining the organisation via secure payments online, or by phone, fax, or snailmail.

4 *Become a gateway or 'portal' to relevant information*

By this time the agency has become much more aware of the possibilities of online communications with stakeholders. Common questions from media can be deflected to a current article on the web site, members can view their status and engage with other users, and partnerships with related agencies are emerging. Goals that link groups may become apparent, and the internal structures that manage the online information and communications are becoming dispersed throughout the organisation, rather than being centrally controlled. This phase shows an integrated and pervasive approach to the online environment.

Example: Charity Village®

<http://www.charityvillage.com/charityvillage/main.asp>

They describe themselves as 'Canada's supersite for the nonprofit sector'. It features news, jobs, information and resources for executives, staffers, donors, and volunteers. Their listings include hundreds of discussion lists, usenet newsgroups, web discussion forums and chat channels on relevant topics from accountability to virtual volunteering and non-profit web design.

5 *Involve users in the planning and content of the information and communication systems*

This goal is not attained by many organisations, because it confronts too many political issues and power bases that generally inhibit progress. It represents a degree of self-reflection and openness that usually involves conflict and is also difficult to maintain. At this stage, the communication systems, both on and offline are truly interactive, self-organising and mutable, and there is strong stakeholder involvement in defining and realising the goals of the organisation.

Example: The Electronic Commons

<http://www.ecommons.net/>

This is another Canadian site, described as a 'national not for profit online space dedicated to the exchange of information, opinions and resources by and for all Canadians.' This project has partnership aspects, as it is partly sponsored by Human Resources Development Canada. It also features 'a six month experiment in visionary pragmatism and participant design'. The intention is to make the project sustainable through user involvement.

Example: Vancouver City, Canada

<http://www.city.vancouver.bc.ca/>

This site has many innovative aspects that illustrate advanced thinking on how a geographically focussed site can engage citizens. In particular, they have a Pilot Project for Community Focused Web Content, which seeks 'to involve communities in the development of their web pages and provide a means for them to get involved with municipal government and their community on an on-going basis.'

These last two examples show how Internet communications can become mechanisms for empowerment, and move well beyond provision of information or even services whose purpose and design is determined elsewhere.

Another description of the stages of development for non-profit web sites⁵ compares them to different media: brochure, magazine, tv, etc. The techsoup article says a test of a site's usefulness is when the organisation's web site is the answer to a sentence that starts out: 'I bet I can find the answer to that at...'

In the fully user-centric model, members are invited to provide and summarise, relevant sources of information. The status of such user-provided information would have to be made clear, but this is handled successfully on other sites, such as Amazon's book reviews.

How well do non-profits use the Internet?

A 1998 report⁶ found that the Internet is not yet a major tool for involving stakeholders. They could not find many examples of effective uses of information and communication technologies by non-profits in public policy activities. Rather, they found these organisations were using just a narrow set of technologies and applications, and were not managing their web pages well or keeping them up to date. Tools for interactivity were being provided, but not well utilised. This is often called the 'Field of Dreams' approach, based on the movie of that name, where it was believed that 'if you build it, they will come.' Also, interactivity was narrowly defined, consistent with a stage two approach to online communications. Many non-profits

⁵ www.techsoup.org

⁶ Democracy at Work: nonprofit uses of Internet technology for public policy purposes, prepared by OMBWatch, December 1998.

don't register their web sites or discussion lists with search engines, or choose inadequate keywords for their meta-data. Often they don't address accessibility issues adequately, thereby limiting use of their site to those without impediments.

The report also found substantial barriers to Internet use, part of the wider issue of the 'digital divide'.⁷ Since that time, some of these barriers may have diminished. These caveats notwithstanding, they found that well planned campaigns and communications strategies could yield significant results. A strong online identity was important for non-profits, and this could be assisted by using the organisational web site as a central site for conference notices, protests, or a calendar of relevant events.

Example: <http://www.protest.net>

Some of the structural and organisational issues associated with non-profits implementing online communications are discussed in part two of this report.

Additional uses of online communications by non-profits

Stakeholder relations

Non-profit organisations are using the Internet and online communications in a wider range of activities, and these often resemble electronic commerce applications. The more obvious reasons are to raise the profile of the organisation, both with the public and with internal members, as well as relevant stakeholder groups. Engagement with these groups is another reason: Capturing and retaining interest is a key goal of good web site design. Achieving better understanding of the organisation and its role is now often done via a web site, rather than depending on printed communications. Particularly for fast-moving public relations, such as media coverage, a good web site with up to date contacts, including mobile phone numbers, is essential if the organisation wants to be 'counted in' to current debates. Speedier, more responsive communications with stakeholders and members can, in turn, help the organisation's managers and executives to have a better understanding of the needs, limitations, and attitudes that make up their operating environment.

Information brokerage

The pressures to become more aware and responsive have led non-profits to become more sophisticated in the ways they use the Internet. The World Wide Web has become more important for these groups, just as it has for government and business. Some provide databases that add value for members by integrating information in new ways. This is a classic 'information broker' role that is common in electronic commerce. It develops from the idea that in an information economy, people will pay for someone to reassemble information in helpful ways. The kinds of databases members would want, and perhaps pay for, will depend on the organisation, but may be surprising. This is one role research can play in organisational web site evolution.

Sometimes setting off a 'members only' area of the web site or distinguishing paid services is another way of demonstrating organisational value. Good communications with members is the best way of determining what services they might pay for.

⁷ Australian information and approaches to the digital divide may be found at: <http://www.act.gov.au/digitaldivide> and <http://www.noie.gov.au>

Example: <http://www.scorecard.org> links chemical data with health risk information. This allows people to identify chemical sites in their area and alert others to the dangers.

Many non-profits provide information that empowers without seeking monetary gain, but some also provide more detailed information on a pay per view or subscription basis. This can help the organisation be economically sustainable.

Example: <http://www.choice.com.au> provides some information for free, including its campaign site. It offers several ways of paying for more detailed consumer reports.

More politically oriented sites incorporate links direct to policymakers or parliamentarians. Thus, when an issue is 'hot', a facility to send a pre-written to all politicians can be quite useful. On the other hand, as these techniques become the norm, their impact decreases.

Example: Political Lobby <http://www.lobby.com.au/>

Another use of the Internet is as a petition site. Rather than a chain email, which has little legal standing or impact, a good online petition can have the same standing as a paper petition.

Example: Petition for a Software Patent Free Europe

http://petition.eurolinux.org/index_html?LANG=en

This petition is directed to the European Parliament. Its goal is to warn European Authorities against the dangers of software patents. It is supported by the EuroLinux Alliance together with European companies and non-profit associations.

Skills and volunteering brokerage

The Internet can also provide brokerage for volunteers or other sets of skills.

Example: Volunteers for Isolated Students' Education

<http://www.vise.org.au>

With the help of Computing Assistance Support and Education, (case.org.au), a non-profit group in the ACT, VISE has set up a database that matches volunteers with needs for a dispersed schooling group. This provides administrative access to enable the effective processing and reporting of volunteer placement activities.

It is now common for email newsletters to contain hyperlinks that take readers to the organisation's web site and further information with a click. Most email software now offers that facility, providing another aspect of the integration of online technologies to meet user needs and convenience.

A web site can help to build a sense of virtual (and real) community by becoming a repository of best practice examples, or advice on common problems. A calendar of events, for example, need not be dependent on a centrally placed author, but could be added to by members via a simple web form.

The kinds of services members are likely to pay extra for differs for every organisation, but can be found partly through research on the site. This is another standard technique of electronic commerce: all feedback, but particularly negative feedback, is valuable in shaping services for members.

Better advocacy

For organisations with an advocacy or privacy role, integrating this with other services is important. Thus, one form of adding value is to place the organisation's submissions to lawmakers, etc. on the web site for members to see. If time allows, inviting members to help shape these submissions is also desirable. In this case,

best practice would be maximum transparency about the process. That is, all submissions would be electronically available to all members. This demonstrates that trust in the process is more important than wide participation.

Example: The Australian National Office for the Information Economy (<http://www.noie.gov.au>) posted all submissions that granted permission on their web site when developing their National Strategy. They then summarised the submissions and revised their draft strategy accordingly.

An extension of this idea for non-profits is to advise members about submissions well in advance, and invite individuals to make their own submissions. When accompanied by the formal organisational stand on a particular issue, this approach can open the door to broader participation from members. It can also increase their appreciation of the policy advocacy role the organisation plays. Another variation on this theme is to host short-term and well managed discussion on the site to develop the organisation's position. If nothing else, this deflects any criticism that the organisation did not consult with members. Members may also be invited to provide summaries or 'annotations' of policy documents on complex technical issues.

Partnerships

Linking with other organisations can build strength and impact for both. Where there are overlapping interests, an agency that specialises in an area can provide content in exchange for a link back to their site. Many other forms of partnerships are possible, both between non-profits and with commercial organisations or government.

Example: The Australian Consumer's Association (<http://www.choice.com.au>) has a partnership with the 9MSN network. A link on the commercial network provides content from the ACA and pushes traffic back to the ACA site. This is useful for both. The ACA also has articles from other groups, where appropriate, such as the Health Issues Centre.

2. Organisational issues for networked communications

There is an extensive literature on the implementation of computer systems within government, corporate structures, libraries and community groups. Today, organisational technology systems have a twofold role, both internal and external. Successful integration of these systems plays an ongoing diagnostic role, creating feedback systems that can help the organisation to continually 'reinvent' itself as it moves towards its goals. As these feedback systems become more finely tuned to the needs of members, the content becomes more focussed, and is more likely to lead to sincere, sustainable and outcome-oriented participation. Along the way, online communications can turn an organisation 'inside-out', as it becomes more transparent and responsive to members.

Just as the uses of online communications overlap for non-profits and for companies, so the introduction of these systems has similar challenges and implications for organisations of all sorts. The discussion below touches on the more important findings.

Impact of computerisation in organisations - systemic issues

This section discusses the trends that have been observed when organisations of many types implement computerised information systems. Awareness of these issues can help an organisation avoid some of the problems that may arise.

Wang (1997) surveyed the literature on implementation of computerised communication systems and found, like many others, that electronic groups behave like real social groups. His review showed that most organisations still think the major contribution of information technology will be in terms of improved efficiency through speed and quality of service, organisational boundary spanning, and coordination of the relations among organisational units, with information overload a growing problem. He said it is a myth that technology stimulates information flow and eliminates hierarchy; rather a democratic culture makes possible democratic information flows. Wang further asserted that unless the politics of information are identified and managed, organisations will not move into the information age, and information will not be shared freely nor used effectively by decision makers.

Technology use within organisations tends to reflect existing cultural and social power bases in an organisation (Perin 1991, Geiselhart 1999). It can therefore be counterproductive to treat information technology implementation in isolation, without regard to power shifts and communication issues (Katzner and Fletcher 1992). Malone and Rockart (1991) said the time frame for decisions shrinks, and lower level people become empowered for certain tasks, but become subject to monitoring by those above. As the amount of information increases, power spreads, and people who can creatively analyse, edit and act on information in ways that cannot be automated become even more valuable.

Arch (1996) outlined the organisational steps that are required to gain acceptance of what was then an experimental technology: an intranet. He found building support is crucial, as the IT area is not always receptive to user-driven efforts. The other side of this coin was evidence that incorporation of IT department representatives into strategic planning processes leads to more successful relations (Mantovani 1994, Fulk 1993, Benjamin and Levinson 1993, Clement 1994). Intranets also have the potential to bring out latent use of IT applications (Boddy and Gunson 1996).

Another review (Grosser 1991) found benefits from treating potential users as codevelopers rather than passive receivers of technology. Technology was found to be more suited for asking, exchanging information and opinions, and keeping in touch. These are activities where conflict would normally be minimal. Technology was found to be less useful for bargaining, resolving disagreements, or tasks which are equivocal. Such tasks might include direction or policy setting and communication for the organisation, and these are the very areas where conflict, or at least misunderstanding, is likely to occur. It may be that for these more policy-oriented or value clarification tasks, online activities are best supported and complimented by face to face meetings and networks.

A long term study in the United Kingdom looked at the impacts of computer networks on organisational structures and practices. Boddy and Gunson (1996) found practices became more consistent, less idiosyncratic. Their longitudinal studies of networked systems in organisations found that technological change and organisational change have become 'increasingly indistinguishable'. Perhaps this is because it is now the norm for organisational change to have technological correlates and implications, and likewise for technological innovation or change to have strong implications for organisational procedures and structures. They warned against trying to set a strategy in one central place, with no leeway for changes. They advised only setting the boundaries of action centrally, and allowing the strategies to unfold within those boundaries, as the project evolves.

Schrage (1998) offered observations about computer design in education which apply equally to the role of computers in other settings. He said it is a myth that computer technology is about information: it is about creating and managing new relationships. He noted that knowledge communities are about much more than the

exchange of symbolic information. They involve standards, ethics, protocols, rules of community interaction. The design of relationships is more important than the design of information. Lessig (1999) expands on the concept of 'code' or architecture of the system, and its impacts on users and the regulation of behaviour. Even for a small system, design decisions can create obstacles to openness and participation or foster transparency, trust and interactivity.

Several Australian articles round out this survey. Hasan and Hasan (1997) found local government was heeding the lessons from the private sector, and information systems were becoming aimed at the whole enterprise. In a study of executive information systems they identified this as a process of democratisation, where the 'E' started out standing for 'executive', but gradually came to mean electronic, enterprise, or everybody's. These systems then became part of the mental map of the enterprise, which helped achieve quality outcomes by creating greater awareness of information as an organisational resource. They found no evidence that these information systems helped flatten organisational structures, although they clearly helped to diffuse access to information. Their findings supported Heimler's (1996) analysis, that internal innovation was limited by existing management attitudes and structures. Warne (1995) analysed the reasons for the failure of a large system development project in the Department of Defence, and found issues of power and the politics of information control were pivotal.

Becoming a learning organisation

In many cases, internal direction setting and implementation processes can be the greatest hurdle to ongoing organisational learning and innovation. To an extent, technological innovation tends to bring underlying conflicts between groups and goals to the surface. The literature on learning organisations, however, makes little reference to information technology or its role in organisational processes (Balasubramanian 1996). Zuboff (1988) provided a vision of the post-hierarchical organisation that remains remote from most organisations and workplaces. She described emergent and flexible structures, the tolerance of non-participation from some, and a use of technology that empowered at every level.

The learning organisation in relation to the difficult tasks of continual reflection and integrated thinking is probably best known through the work of Senge (1992). He referred to 'the illusion of taking charge' as a common failing of corporate leadership. Certainty undermined openness and learning. Senge also recognised the importance of leadership as design (Senge 1992:298). This perspective is one of guiding and nurturing the emergence of shared vision. The leader spends time planning how learning might be shared and communicated, rather than planning how to implement an imposed direction. This kind of facilitating, responsive leadership is also the essence of more advanced applications of Internet technologies for organisational communications, as indicated in part 1. The author's two year study of desk top communications in the Australian Department of Finance and Administration (Geiselhart 1999) shows that a shift in values was reflected by a shift in the usage patterns as staff disengaged.

Tannenbaum (1997) suggested how to enhance continuous learning in companies. Individuals learn best, and their companies are more effective, when they understand the 'big picture', can apply their learning quickly, can make mistakes in early stages of application, are given support by supervisors, are allowed to offer new ideas and question practices, and these factors are periodically reconsidered.

The organisation as interactive, learning, innovative and responsive is an ideal eagerly sought but rarely found. One chief executive's description of the catalyst for

change was that 'the mean time between surprises was less than the mean time between decisions'.⁸

Knowledge management

Learning organisation concepts and information technology converge in 'knowledge management', an area which looks at the need to integrate and communicate knowledge by adding value to information rapidly and effectively.

The management of information for the creation of knowledge is related to the ability of organisations to learn (Broadbent 1997) and their ability to recognise and harness implicit versus explicit knowledge (Broadbent 1997, Lamberton 1997).

The implementation of online communication systems has the potential to improve knowledge management for non-profit organisations by inviting and articulating the implicit knowledge of members. The process of filtering, formatting and displaying this information can be used as a reflective mechanism about organisational goals and strategies.

Thus, if an organisational web site contains the information members want, structured in ways they find useful, this is a good indicator that the organisation is 'tuned in' to its members. The further ability to modify and respond flexibly to changes in members information requirements implies the organisation has strong and trusted feedback channels with members. Establishing this relationship is a challenge, and requires skillful survey techniques that 'ask the right questions.'

Implementation of online communications - practical issues

This section outlines the practical issues that arise when implementing a particular kind of computerised system, namely online communications that go beyond the organisation's office boundaries. It has been noted that a critical approach to information technology requires an analysis of how it can improve working conditions (Preissl 1997). These are considered quite broadly below, and include the less overt issues of internal transparency and opportunity for reflection. As emphasised in the previous section, these are at least as important for eventual outcomes as technical and theoretical efficiency. The observations below are drawn from research into a number of areas where online communications have been implemented, not just non-profits.

Integration with existing technologies

Today most organisations are already using some form of computerised technology, and are regularly updating these systems or introducing new ones. Thus, the need to blend the old and the new as seamlessly as possible is an important area where management, organisational change and technology converge. This 'rolling innovation' is a basic issue for all organisations using technology, and underlies the other practical issues. Striking the right balance between imposing new systems and procedures and catering to staff reluctance to change is an ongoing challenge.

Intranets and organisational transparency

Intranets are now widespread, and are often the front line for the convergence of systems. They usually pull together 'legacy' systems such as payroll, personnel, databases, sales or inventory, and make these more widely available and accessible to staff. Jurisdictional issues can be a source of conflict, but likewise, a good intranet can provide a better understanding of the organisation and pave the way for much better internal communications and transparency. An organisation with high levels of

⁸ John MacDonald, of Bell Canada, speaking at INET'96, Montreal.

internal transparency is much better prepared to apply these lessons to dealings with external stakeholders and members. Similar issues arise when developing a web site to the external world: How much should we tell them? Do they need to know our internal policies and procedures? Are there any privacy or legal implications? Addressing these issues internally is an important first step to becoming an open organisation, or turning it 'inside out' as discussed below.

Work flow

Online communications introduce a number of new elements to the organisation that impact on the way information enters the organisation, is processed, and eventually exits as new communications with or about members and their issues. It raises a number of questions, such as: who is the recipient of initial contacts via fax, phone calls and email? What are the procedures for passing this along, and is this sufficiently obvious to new staff?

Any web site reaches out beyond the organisational boundaries, and therefore raises issues of who is responsible for managing the content. If there is distributed or decentralised authorship, there need to be mechanisms to ensure that various parts of the web site are updated on a consistent basis, and that old or irrelevant information is removed. More importantly, there needs to be a place or person where decisions about what should be placed on the web site is discussed, and resources allocated for this.

The balance between technical and wider communication issues needs to be managed carefully. Thus, the production of text for external consumption and the formatting and placement and cross-linking of that text on the web site may be done by different people. If this is the case, there needs to be clear communications and agreements on priorities between them.

Work load

Concerns about inundation, particularly via email, is one of the great inhibitors of online communications. 'Information overload' is a real problem, although this may not materialise in the ways staff fear. It is more likely that there will be too little participation from members or stakeholders; large response levels are an indication of high participation, and therefore great success. Nonetheless, planning for a substantial response rate is important, although just one aspect of work load for online communications.

If goals are established for desirable outcomes, any level of participation below this requires sustained effort. It also requires asking why people are not participating, and acting on this information. Additional questions involve who is participating, whether this reflects the balance of members, and whether these communications are adding value and contributing to the goals of the networking exercise. These are all valid areas for internal reflection and research.

Management of an effective web site requires steady maintenance. This can create a 'productivity paradox', where effort, and often expense, does not seem to match outcomes. Even the time associated with keeping detailed records to demonstrate benefits might be burdensome. However, it is more likely that the savings themselves are hidden, because the tasks being replaced were also not counted. Answering phones, shunting faxes to the correct person, replying to letters: all this is easily subsumed within other job descriptions. When the task instead comes directly via email to someone's desk to deal with, perhaps at a higher level, this can trigger an 'overload' response.

Tasks which are clearly 'new' such as facilitating an email list or responding to an online discussion, are additional areas for work load and work flow management. If

this involves a shift within the organisation, it should be considered openly, rather than attempting to 'off load' these issues to junior staff. Collecting information about the costs for phone and fax might help quantify the 'return on investment' in time and money. Such issues involving technology, training and time have long been an area of contention for teaching support staff. Organisations that need to closely account for their budgets and staffing time may refer to handbooks on electronic commerce to develop their ROI and business arguments for online innovations.

Skills

Embarking on new means of communication may require new skills which are not just technical. Technical skills can be readily addressed via formal training. Achieving maximum effectiveness from online communications also means becoming sensitive to how these information flows work, and when to intervene. For example, facilitating an online discussion about organisational direction or a particular issue of relevance to members may require judicious intervention, without dominating the discussion or becoming dogmatic. The appropriate staff to do this may not be the subject expert. Another aspect is the articulation of the procedures for communication. Some lists limit contributions by any one participant to two messages per day. Spamming, or jamming a list with multiple messages, use of a list to promote products, general rudeness or defamation are the sorts of behaviours that can quickly destroy a nascent online community.

The interpretation of online communications can also affect outcomes. Text-based messages have slightly different characteristics from verbal conversations. Staff receiving these messages may need time to fully understand how the network functions for different participants.

Lastly, technical support for the maintenance of new software should be considered. It cannot be assumed that once a new communication tool has been installed all will work smoothly. Without adequate managerial and technical assistance, online efforts cannot succeed.

Email strategy

Email is generally considered the 'killer application' on the Internet. Most people quickly become comfortable with it, and use it readily. As part of the workload and work flow issues discussed above, it is desirable to have a strategy to deal with email. A recent study surveyed the use of email by 900 organisations, as part of an analysis of the importance of email for online fund raising by non-profits.⁹ Some of the results were:

- 44% have email addresses for less than 20% of their supporters
- 64% do not collect email addresses on their web site
- 75% cannot survey their stakeholders online
- 78% do not have an email strategy

Often, email gets incorporated into an organisation's work without planning, and as the volume increases, adjustments happen in a haphazard fashion. It is advisable to decide on the priority for responding to email, and build this into a wider stakeholder communications strategy. If protocols for the use and content of email are not established, it can become a major problem for organisations, rather than helpful.¹⁰

⁹ Disconnected: The First Nonprofit Email Survey, by Michael C. Gilbert.
<http://www.gilbert.org/disconnected>

¹⁰ Email a Poor Choice for Workplace Communication
<http://www.ecommons.net/2001-1/english/main.phtml?nn=260>

Facilitation

It is well established that the 'field of dreams' approach is insufficient for online communications. That is, it cannot be assumed that 'if you build it, they will come'. Rather, a committed moderator is essential for establishing ongoing communications, particularly in the early stages. This can mean feeding information at the start and when participation wanes, replying to people who have made queries, and generally breathing life into the online dialogue.

Consultation

The role of the facilitator overlaps with that of a researcher, particularly when the purpose of the online communications is to gather input from stakeholders. Online consultations cannot completely replace face to face meetings and networks, nor should they attempt to do this. When the online community works well it complements other forms of consultation. It is often important for people to have some personal connection with the people they are dealing with, and there is a tendency for online 'acquaintances' to seek each other out when in the same city (Geiselhart 1998). It has also been observed that attendance at public meetings increased as electronic discussions within a relevant geographic area became more utilised (Stoker 2000). The large scale example below could not have been successful without hefty resources within the organisation to support this strategy.

Example: Australian Perspectives on Defence: The Report of the Community Consultation Team

<http://www.defence.gov.au/consultation2/index.htm>

The Australian Defence Force used the Internet to widely disseminate information prior to their nation-wide consultations on the future of the defence force. This consultation process was described as 'the most successful program of public consultation initiated by any Australian government'. Over nine weeks, more than 2000 people attended the 28 public meetings, more than 1150 submissions were received, more than 18,000 copies of the Discussion Paper were distributed, and there were 6453 downloads of the Discussion Paper from the website.

Privacy, equity, security and legal issues

These issues are all potentially separate, but are here grouped together for convenience. It is assumed for the purposes of this report that access is not a problem, and that key stakeholders already have the facility and ability to use online communications. Equity will also not be addressed here, except to note that making web pages usable by disadvantaged groups such as the deaf or blind is an area of growing importance.¹¹

Providing adequate privacy measures is a prerequisite for building online trust, and appropriate attitudes to the confidentiality of online communications need to be part of all staff awareness and training. If an organisation collects information about members or maintains a database, for example, of volunteers, there needs to be a clear statement of the policy regarding the use of that information. Online payments raise both legal and privacy issues. Security of the organisational web site, and a person to take responsibility for the safety of the data (along with back-ups) is essential.

When communications are invited, it must be made clear whether these will be cached in a public place or otherwise archived, or other information about how they will be used.

¹¹ The World Wide Web Consortium has done extensive work on accessibility of web pages, see <http://www.w3.org>

Reflection

Finally, an organisation needs mechanisms for reviewing all aspects of how online communications are working, both internally and externally. If there are good internal communications, and a high degree of internal transparency, this is more likely to flow through to external transparency, and foster trust and feedback from stakeholders and members. This effectively turns the organisation 'inside out' and can be a valuable way to gain insight into and incrementally improve online efforts. Articulating the online strategy and making it available for stakeholders on the organisational web site is one way to start this process. Another strategy is to simply ask stakeholders what additional services or value-adding they would like. An atmosphere of trust and openness is a prerequisite to achieving the levels of participation that can make such an approach effective.

3. Successful strategies in online communications

“The wealth of all organisations and the wealth of all communities will be based on the sum of our organisational knowledge, which in turn resides in individual human beings. Our wealth in the future will be based on how well we can communicate with each other.”

Andrew Michael Cohill, the Director of Blacksburg Electronic Village ('Sustaining Civic Networks: A Blueprint for Community Use of Technology')

This section summarises some of the strategies and approaches that have been identified as successful for non-profits online. These are mostly based on the web resources provided at the end of this report, which in turn reflect the experiences of the originating organisations. Most of these resources are available online, and provide greater detail and guidance and further links.

Most stress the importance of planning, and note that this needs to occur on several levels: strategic, organisational and communications. This advice of course applies to any form of communication, and a technological interface adds an additional layer of complexity, planning and feedback.

Blau notes that successful ventures will have these characteristics:

- achieve right scale
- secure necessary distribution
- cope with the likely feedback
- respond quickly and flexibly to changes, and
- adopt new work processes

These relate to the concept of a learning organisation, and highlight the changing, dynamic nature of non-profits in a knowledge environment. Develop little case studies and analyse them: go back over the process and articulate what worked and then build on it.

When planning a technology system, the key elements have been described as:

- Identification of agency change objectives.
- Identification of the new and/or reengineered information systems requirements needed to meet those objectives.

- Identification of the role that ICTs and other information-handling technologies have to play in meeting objectives.¹²

When building participation online, it is important to ensure that visitors to the site are welcome and treated well, while members might be offered extra benefits.

Membership can offer a feeling of belonging and help build virtual community, by making known that even a small percentage has chosen to participate. Small practical tasks may be expected to achieve a greater participation rate than more abstract, policy oriented tasks. Thus, more people might send a prepared letter to a member of Parliament than would take the time and thought to write their own submission to an enquiry.

The Benton Foundation describes the seven characteristics of an online organization as:

- 1) Email addresses and desktop Internet access for every staff member
- 2) A local area network (LAN)
- 3) Technical expertise to keep the systems going
- 4) Technology as a component of organizational planning
- 5) Email addresses for important online constituencies
- 6) Virus protection and routine data backup
- 7) An organizational Web site

There are many similarities between professional and interest-based non-profits and those that are more focussed on activism. Non-profits generally have a strong interest in communicating with members, both to keep them informed about what the office holders in the organisation are doing, and to maintain their support and at least occasionally, their participation. Thus, the use of the Internet by activist groups offers many useful lessons for non-profits generally. The US based Onenorthwest network¹³ sees effective use of email lists as a central strategy for communicating with members and facilitating participation. They note that this has to be done carefully, and in stages. Gathering email addresses is essential, and different lists can be used for different purposes.

When comments and contributions are desired, an existing email network makes this quick and simple. One organisation developed a form with a general message and space for additional personal messages.¹⁴ This online form was publicised using the email networks and when filled in, went directly to the relevant government department, as well as providing a copy for the organisation. The lessons they derived from this were:

- 1) Online organizing can be a quick, inexpensive and effective tool to get members engaged on time-sensitive issues such as public comment processes
- 2) If you have your members' email addresses, you can easily and effectively promote online action tools to them via email.
- 3) Embed the URL of online comment Web site in the email message so it becomes a clickable hyperlink that will take people directly to the online activism page.

¹² Information, Technology and Small Enterprise, A Handbook for Enterprise Support Agencies in Developing Countries Version 1, 2001 <http://idpm.man.ac.uk/idpm/esahndbk.html>

¹³ An Activists' Strategy for Effective Online Networking, presented by OneNorthwest, Online Networking for the Environment <http://www.onenw.org/toolkit/modestproposal.html>

¹⁴ Using Online Advocacy to Generate Public Comments <http://www.onenw.org/toolkit/success-wec.html>

4) Send a reminder! More people responded to the second email reminder than to the initial alert.

Agre (1999) summarises the elements of effective online action alerts. He notes that Single alerts are broadcast in the hope that they will propagate to the maximum possible number of sympathetic Internet users.

Structured campaigns, on the other hand, are typically conducted through mailing lists specially constructed for the purpose, and their intended audience may include either the whole Internet universe or a narrower group of already-mobilized partisans. His tips are relevant for all forms of online communications with stakeholders:

1. Establish authenticity. Include clear information about the sponsoring organisation and provide the reader with several ways of tracing back to you -- e-mail address, postal address, URL, phone number, etc.
2. Put a date on it
3. Include clear beginning and ending markers
4. Beware of second-hand alerts
5. Think about whether you want the alert to propagate at all
6. Make it self-contained. Don't presuppose that your readers will have any context beyond what they'll get on the news
7. Ask your reader to take a simple, clearly defined, rationally chosen action.
8. Make it easy to understand
9. Get your facts straight!
10. Start a movement, not a panic. Do not say "forward this to everyone you know". Do not overstate. Do not plead. Do not say "Please Act NOW!!!".
11. Tell the whole story. Most people have never heard of your issue, and they need facts to evaluate it. Facts, facts, facts.
12. Don't just preach to the converted.
13. Avoid polemics. Your readers should not have to feel they are being hectored to go along with something from the pure righteousness of it
14. Make it easy to read. Use a simple, clear layout with lots of white space. Break up long paragraphs. Use bullets and section headings to avoid visual monotony.
15. DO NOT use a chain-letter petition.
16. Urge people to inform you of their actions
17. Don't overdo it. Action alerts might become as unwelcome as direct-mail advertising.
18. Do a post-mortem.
19. Don't mistake e-mail for organising.
20. Encourage good practices. The Internet is a democratic medium that provides us all with the time and space to do the right thing. So let's use the Internet in a positive way and encourage others to do the same.

On the role of electronic commerce for non-profits, Williams offers some observations:

- E-commerce has to fit in with your mission
- It's not that expensive

- ❑ It pays to be a non-profit
- ❑ Don't expect instant gratification
- ❑ Legal considerations need to be considered, such as intellectual property, defamation, and spamming.
- ❑ Like anything on the Web, it's ongoing

An analysis of why advocacy sites fail¹⁵ indicates that many have not truly become user-centric, to the extent that the site becomes 'a product of the interactions of its users... This means content, form, function and even philosophy. A user should come away with a feeling of ownership of the site.' They suggest that in addition to being user-centric, an advocacy site should be objective, and present all sides of an issue, so that it is not merely speaking to similar minded people. It should provide 'fact-based information as opposed to heavily interpreted or analyzed'. This also helps to build trust. Rather, the site gives members 'the tools to define their own needs and to make informed decisions.' Slashdot (www.slashdot.org) is used as an example of a site where users determine both the content and the organisation. Users contribute most of the content, and, through the use of collaborative filtering, rate the messages, so that the prominence reflects the rating. Management retains some editorial control. Admittedly, this is a site that caters to highly technical viewers, but these techniques are becoming more widespread as the general becomes accustomed to online purchases and discussion on commercial sites.

Reents and Hill also discuss the need for 'fair exchange'. This means information collected about viewers is fairly exchanged for the ability to do something they couldn't do otherwise. This may be accessing information, or engaging in dialogue about an issue they want to discuss. Striking the appropriate balance is different for each group and each site.

Conclusions

The world of online communications opens limitless horizons for non-profits that are willing to experiment and learn from others. It can help with organisational efficiency and sustainability, as well as reaching core goals such as advocacy or informing. The stages of online communications, if adopted incrementally, lead an organisation towards more openness and transparency to members, but also towards greater resilience through improved member feedback and understanding of internal operations. There are many challenges along the way, in the areas of organisational change, planning, technology integration and continual reflection on how well the organisation is meeting members' needs. Many of the resources for online non-profits provided in this report are available online, and this can offer some comfort to groups overwhelmed by the scope and complexity of this new world. Like other aspects of the Internet, once you are 'wired', everything else that is needed is mostly online.

Online Resources

Agre, Phil. (Version of 24 April 1999) Designing Effective Action Alerts for the Internet
<http://dliis.gseis.ucla.edu/people/pagre/alerts.html>

Awakening Technology – Community of Inquiry and Practice -
<http://www.tmn.com/~lisa/awaken.htm>

¹⁵ see Reents and Hill 'A Citizen Centric Net'

An Activists' Strategy for Effective Online Networking

<http://www.onenw.org/toolkit/modestproposal.html>

Benton Foundation: Virtual Library - <http://www.benton.org/Library/>

Blacksburg Electronic Village: Research -

<http://www.bev.net/project/research/index.html>

Blau, Andrew. More than Bit Players: How Information Technology Will Change the Ways Nonprofits and Foundations Work and Thrive in the Information Age

<http://www.surdna.org/>

'Building Online Communities: Transforming Assumptions Into Success' -

<http://www.benton.org/Practice/Community/assumptions.html>

Canadian Consumer Information Gateway

<http://consumerinformation.ca/>

Choosing & Using Technologies in Education & Training – Case Study: 'Firstclass On-Line Community At Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE' -

http://home.vicnet.net.au/~cute/pd_frame.htm

Cohill, Andrew Michael. 'Sustaining Civic Networks: A Blueprint for Community Use of Technology'. <http://www.bev.net>

Community Building On The Web: Secret Strategies for Successful Online Communities by Amy Jo Kim (Peachpit Press, Berkeley, California). See her online summary <http://www.naima.com/community/>

Communitybuilders.nsw – Secrets of Successful Communities -

<http://www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au/ext/modules/secrets/>

Community Networking: Resources - <http://www.scn.org/ip/commnet/resources.html>

Coyote Communications Technology Tips for Non-Profits

<http://www.webcom.com/jac/tips.html>

Democracy at Work: Nonprofit Use of Internet Technology for Public Policy Purposes. OMBWatch, December 1998. Nonprofits Policy and Technology Project. [web site for OMBwatch.org no longer responds]

Electronic Civic Consultations:

<http://www.minbzk.nl/international/documents/pub907.htm>

Email a Poor Choice for Workplace Communication Says University of Western Ontario Expert <http://www.ecommons.net/2001-1/english/main.phtml?nn=260>

Farmwide – <http://www.farmwide.com.au>

Gilbert, Michael. Disconnected: The First Nonprofit Email Survey.

<http://www.gilbert.org/disconnected>

info Xchange – <http://www.infoxchange.net.au>

Information, Technology and Small Enterprise: A Handbook for Enterprise Support Agencies in Developing Countries Version 1, 2001

<http://idpm.man.ac.uk/idpm/esahndbk.html>

Johnson, Martin. Non-profit Organisations and the Internet

http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue4_2/mjohnson/index.html

Knowledge Management and Collaboration: Tools and software -

<http://www.collaboration-tools.com/tools.htm>

My Connected Community – <http://www.mc2.vicnet.net.au>

NOIE Community Groups Online Project report -
http://www.noie.gov.au/projects/access/community/publicinternetaccess/community_groups_online_report.htm

Online Dialogue on Public Involvement <http://www.network-democracy.org/epa-pip/>

Online Networks in VET <http://www.tafe.lib.rmit.edu.au/online/>

On Line Opinion <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au>

Reents, Scott and Hill, Thomas 'A Citizen-Centric Internet: Why Candidate, Advocacy Group and Other Political Sites Fail, and What They Can Do about it'
http://www.democracyproject.org/about_us/citizen.htm

Seven Characteristics of an Online Organization <http://www.onenw.org/toolkit/online-organizations.html>

Strategic Communications ...A best practices toolkit for achieving your organization's mission...in the digital age <http://www.benton.org/Practice/Toolkit/>

The stages of Site Development for Nonprofit web sites www.techsoup.org

'The Use of the Internet for Civic Engagement: A View from Blacksburg, Virginia' -
<http://www.bev.net/project/research/VAMuniLeague.address.pdf>

Using Online Advocacy to Generate Public Comments
<http://www.onenw.org/toolkit/success-wec.html>

Virtual Teamwork: Tools and Techniques for Working Together Online -
http://www.3m.com/meetingnetwork/articles_advice/bernie/00-12.html

Williams, Monica. E-commerce and Nonprofits: Three Case Studies
<http://www.benton.org/Practice/Ecommerce/>

WorkersOnline <http://workers.labor.net.au>

VICNET – <http://www.vicnet.net.au>

World Bank discussion forums: www.worldbank.org

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