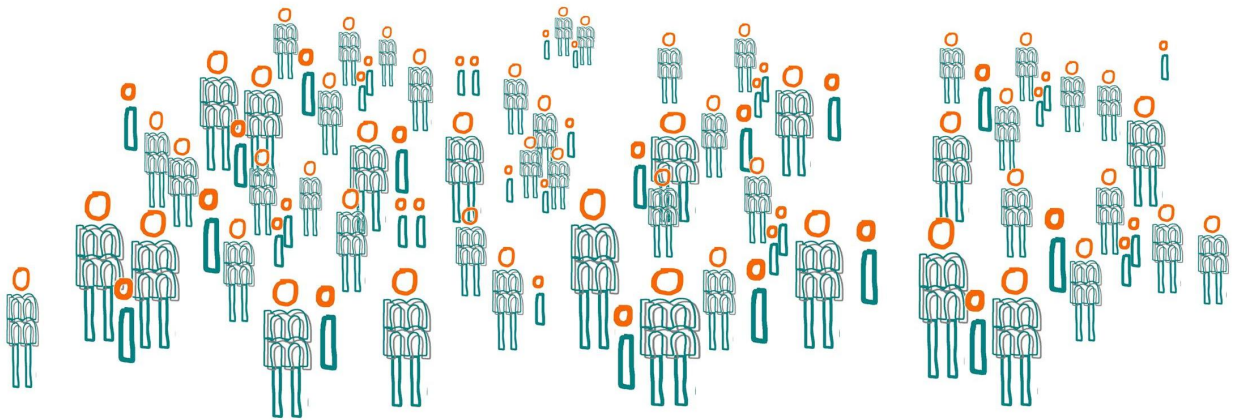


RESEARCH REPORT

Barriers to website development for not-for-profit organisations



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Barriers to website development for not-for-profit organisations

Overview

What

This is a research report **exploring the barriers** to website development for not-for-profit organisations.

It defines and summarises the **key issues and provides ideas for solutions**.

It also provides feedback from organisations on **factors for success**.

Why

The Community Comms Collective (www.communitycomms.org.nz) provides free website usability assessments for not-for-profit community organisations. Organisations receive reports that provide analysis and recommendations for how to improve the usability of their websites.

But once the report is received and digested, where to from there? Is there a gap between understanding the issues and the ability to implement the recommendations? What are the barriers to making improvements and why? Could we help more?

I contacted the organisations who have requested website usability assessments over the past three years to learn more.

How

This was an informal survey where an open-ended research question was sent via email to the participants and a 'don't hold back' response was encouraged.

The question was 'What are the **barriers** to making improvements to your website AND why?'

An extra question was also sent to organisations who have succeeded in developing effective and user-friendly websites.

Their question was 'What are the **key success factors** to the development of your website AND why?'

Who

There are 20 not-for-profit organisations represented — 11 national and nine regional. Of these, six organisations were asked the additional 'key success factors' question.

Contents

This report contains the following sections:

Section	See Page
Overview	2
Summary	4
Time and human resource (in-house)	5
Expertise and IT support	7
Money	9
Management priority	12
Success factors	14

Summary

Summary

The five top barriers to improving websites, for the 20 not-for-profit organisations that participated in this research, were the lack of:

- time
- human resource (in house)
- expertise and IT support
- money
- prioritisation

*'I think in the NGO sector resources are always pressed and it is often **just keeping your head above water** so getting on to IT work gets into the too hard basket.'*

This report explores these issues and presents the following ideas for solutions:

- save time by making a plan
- pare back (be realistic about) what you offer
- source skilled volunteers
- use online (and well supported) website builder systems
- get a web expert review
- use free (or low cost) and well-supported online tools
- apply for funding to pay for web development.

A big THANK YOU to the participants who were so generous with their feedback.

This research has been so valuable to:

- provide better understanding of the issues
 - provide great advice (from the sector to the sector) on how to tackle and overcome them – go straight to page 14 for this!
 - make it clear how we (the Community Comms Collective) can help more effectively.
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Time and human resource (in house)

Key issue summary

When you have small teams of multi-tasking staff, many working part time, there is not a lot of spare time to:

- develop and improve websites—eg, so that it is up to date and relevant
- learn how to maintain websites—eg, web editing content and using the content management system.

If organisations have communications staff often one person manages all the communications channels part time. This is a challenge.

'I do all the comms in 10 hours a week and don't have time to go through a tutorial and teach myself how to do it so things like this [adding functionality to the website] get pushed to the back'

*'I'm finding that websites are relatively resource intensive. So, that's what it comes down to. Everyone is expected to have a website, ideally a useful and up-to-date one. They are relatively expensive to build, then you need someone who can use the CMS and who has a good grasp on how to structure the content. **I'm the sole comms advisor here, and the website is one channel of many**, and it's really a passive channel. I should spend more time making it awesome but I can't.'*

Solution ideas

Save time by making a plan

Develop a website plan to define priorities and make realistic goals and actions. This will ensure you make best use of your limited time whether you're developing a new website or redeveloping your current one. This is also something Community Comms Collective volunteers can help you with.

A useful structure for the plan is below.

- Purpose and audiences—who is the website for and why.
- Key tasks—what do people want to do on the website.
- Navigation and content—how will the site be structured, what will the content be and where will it come from.
- Technical issues—Domain name/URL, hosting and what system to use.
- Resources—who will create the content, who will build the site, who will maintain the site.
- Promotion and measurement—how will you promote the site, how you'll gain user insights (eg, Google analytics, number of donations or sign ups for newsletter).

**Solution ideas
cont'd**

Pare back (and be realistic about) what you offer

Does your site need all the bells and whistles? Do you have resources for the initial development AND ongoing maintenance work?

Consider paring back what you provide on your website and link to relevant well-resourced sites instead.

Source skilled volunteers

Students and new graduates have valuable IT/web development skills and need experience. Use your networks and partner up with training institutions to source skilled student/new graduate volunteers.

Use your local volunteer organisations (eg, Volunteerwellington.nz and Communitycomms.org.nz) to find professionals who want to give back and have time to help.

Charity-it.org runs regular hackathons that bring IT professionals together to fix IT problems for charities including building interactive websites.

Approach local organisations/companies to see if they'd provide volunteers as part of a corporate volunteering programme. Try to establish an ongoing partnership.

Keep an eye on the developing area of online platforms for volunteering—Collaboratewellington.co.nz, Helptank.co.nz and Becollective.com are three on the horizon.

Expertise and IT support

Key issue summary

Organisations find it hard to know where to start when there is no in-house IT and website development knowledge.

*'The trouble is, if you don't know enough, **you don't know where to start** and what to ask.'*

*'Knowing where to start is the first problem and **without appropriate knowledge this can be very tricky** if one has never had any involvement in website design'*

*'NGO workers are often multi taskers, and someone gets the IT job because there is no one else to do it, not because they know anything about it, so **it ends up being rushed guesswork.**'*

After the initial flurry of activity to get the website developed and online, work on maintaining it can fall by the wayside.

*'management absolutely underestimates how work intensive website content is, the editing and building of pages, but also content reviews etc. So when they want to overhaul the website **they budget for the developers but not for content specialists.**'*

Vendors can charge a lot for minor updates.

*'Our existing provider has quite tight control and **it costs a lot** to have them make even minor adjustments.'*

*'I have to **pay to have photo's edited!**'*

**Key issue
summary cont'd**

Often there is little or no in-house IT support.

*'As an NGO we were gifted the hosting of the website by another organisation. One of their comms team is my contact. I can make small changes to the site and manage the content but often have to ask them to make any big changes and **this can take weeks** to get done.'*

*'My biggest issue at the moment is **getting time with our IT person** to be able to work on the development/upgrade of the website, as he is swamped at the moment.'*

Solution ideas

Online website builder systems

Use a well-supported online website builder system (eg, [Wordpress.com](https://www.wordpress.com), [Wix.com](https://www.wix.com) and [Squarespace.com](https://www.squarespace.com)) to decrease reliance on an IT service provider or in-house IT staff.

The templates (or 'themes') are well designed and robust and there is online support and tutorials.

Source skilled volunteers

See information on page 6.

Get a web expert review

The Community Comms Collective's free website usability assessment service can help you refine the goals of your website and provides a research report that can be used to:

- get colleagues on board
- secure funding
- make a plan for improvements
- brief web developers.

*'I had a ... **feeling of relief and joy** when I got the Community Comms Collective to agree to do our website usability assessment, carry it out and I could then use the recommendations to secure funding [and] went on to have a web designer/ developer successfully make our new charity website, specifically accessible for people with disabilities!'*

Money

Key issue summary

When organisations have limited funding, money for core service delivery takes priority over website development and training.

‘service delivery trumps the website in our budget. “No budget line – you will need to find the funding otherwise it’s a no go”.’

*‘[the] new website is not important ... because **overwhelmed by other practical issues** of running the charity.’*

‘most courses have an associated fee.’

Improvements to website management systems take a back seat.

*‘**upgrading** various word press plugins, paying for a premium theme and other such things would probably help towards improvement, but **we don’t have the budget** for that at the moment.’*

Funding may be granted for a website redevelopment project but not the ongoing maintenance costs.

*‘the thought that we may find a way to get some improvement (say funding for a redevelopment project) but it will be short-lived as the pace of technology races on and **we don’t have the ongoing funds** to maintain and build on any progress so momentum and currency is lost.’*

*‘As a charity it is reasonably easy to secure money/volunteer services for projects but difficult to source finance for ongoing costs. For instance our new interactive website is still sitting in the background awaiting plain English and assessment by users etc. It is what our clients want but this is a long way from our area of expertise. Even if we can get the cash and expertise to finish the project – **who do we hand it over to?**’*

Key issue
summary cont'd

*'we are faced with the general **preference of most funders to support a programme**, a defined 'thing' which is going to be delivered to some people so you can say "X number attended this programme. Most of them rated the programme highly and as helpful, and 90% of them have said they are making life changes as a result."*

***Funding for infrastructure** in the broader sense of the word **doesn't seem to rate**. It seems that we are supposed to magically exist somehow so we can deliver things that provide extensions to funder egos.*

*We are not expected to make a profit, nor are expected to have funds in reserve. **But we are expected to innovate.**'*

Solution ideas

Source skilled volunteers

See information on page 6.

Use free (or low cost) and well-supported online tools

There are a number of great tools on the Web that can make it easier to create engaging content, automate processes, and communicate with your community and supporters. All you need is some enthusiasm and willingness/bravery to give it a go. The more you use them, the more you'll learn about how they can work well (or not) for you.

Below is a list of online tools you may find useful¹:

- website builders – Wordpress.com, Wix.com, Squarespace.com
- photo editing – PicMonkey.com
- infographic creators – Piktochart.com
- graphic design – Canva.com
- email and email marketing – Mailchimp.com
- surveys – Surveymonkey.com
- database creators – www.lifewire.com/best-free-online-database-creators-3486264 (check if they can integrate with your website builder tool)
- collaboration – Slack.com
- social media – Facebook.com
- data storage – Dropbox.com
- event management – Eventbrite.co.nz
- website statistics - Analytics.google.com.

¹ A quick search online will bring up many more!

Solution ideas
cont'd

Apply for funding to pay for web development

If you would like your website to be a key communication tool and useful resource, and have got as far as you can with the help of volunteers and free online tools, then it may be time to source funding to get some professional help.

A website plan (see page 5) and web expert review (see page 8) can help support funding bids and ensure any money received is spent effectively.

*'By attaching the Community Comms Collective Website usability assessment to **our funding application (from one of the gaming trusts) was successful!** Obviously I cannot know for sure it would have been unsuccessful without it but it would certainly have been a huge challenge for me to endeavour to make my point clearly and it would certainly not have carried the same authority.'*

*I would have had to invest a huge amount of time in order to learn enough about web usability and accessibility for people with disabilities, instead [CCC volunteer] did it all for us **and I was able to spend that time on other funding applications**, ensuring that the charity can continue to provide a service to our members with disabilities!'*

Management priority

Key issue summary

The 'traditional' communication style of some managers can mean the effectiveness of online communication channels is not understood and therefore realised.

*'He really **didn't understand its full value** and I guess part of that is he is a policy person who really enjoys face to face communicating. He isn't a visual communicator and to be honest written communication is not one of his strengths either, and a website obviously uses predominantly these forms of communication.'*

*'Traditional outlook on how connections are made ie word of mouth, personal connections, "reputation" and **not fully ready to embrace current and future means of communications** "we have always done it this way"/ fear of change'*

*'[there is a lack of] Understanding that **websites need to be** seen as an ongoing project and **set up to evolve and change.**'*

*'The committee may not always understand/value the effectiveness of a good website. **It was difficult to convince the committee** that time and resources should be put into improving the website so outcomes could be improved.'*

The focus can often be on the organisation's communication and information needs, rather than the stakeholders.

*'**Not understanding** user/stakeholders different **needs**'*

*'Low understanding of **need for multiple integrated communication channels** and increasing online needs.'*

*'Websites are not only a view into an organisation **they can also house valuable tools and resources to help** individuals who do not necessarily want or need to come to an office.'*

**Key issue
summary cont'd**

Website development projects can seem overwhelming and difficult so it's easier to avoid.

'Seen as a huge project when it could be managed in stages.'

*'As a membership organisation, internal consultation and **getting commitment** is also a barrier.'*

If the website is not directly related to generating income then it's not a worthy investment.

'Not seen as an income stream'

Solution ideas

Report user feedback – qualitative and quantitative

Gather feedback on your website from your community, supporters and staff and report back to management. This can be informal eg, face to face, phone or email interactions, and/or formal eg, an online survey (incentives are helpful when doing formal surveys!).

Use website statistics to prove a case for improvement eg, we had a high-profile campaign, and website visitor numbers increased, but there was no equivalent increase in action eg, donations, sign ups or enquiries.

Give examples to help educate and influence

Show a successful website (perhaps a competitor) and explain why it would be wise to take a similar approach.

Here are two great examples:

- Redcross.org.nz
- Savethechildren.org.nz.

These sites may be well resourced however you can learn from and emulate them as much as you are able, with the resources you have, as long as you keep in mind that **usability is not just design but understanding user needs**.

Success factors

Feedback from organisations on success factors

Here is some feedback from NFP organisations who went through the website development/redevelopment process, broke through the barriers, and came out the other side with effective and user-friendly websites!

Have a project manager

*'it was **crucial to have someone from the organisation who was willing to roll their sleeves up and just figure stuff out**, and to own the project. There were so many aspects to getting the website up and all the facets had to be brought together and any gaps filled by one person. Having someone not afraid to just figure stuff out and project manage the rest of the team was vital!'*

*'I personally drove some of the website improvements over the 6 years I've been here, but my role has changed such that it's not as much of a focus as it used to be. **Unless there's a champion for something, it inevitably falls off the radar.**'*

Get expert advice

*'Very **useful and practical feedback** from comms/website professionals through the Comms collective, plus this was very quick time frame to get this feedback. Feedback on things such as colour contrast ... I wouldn't even have thought about.'*

*'I can honestly say that Community Comms Collective was the key success factor in the development. You delivered a plan in a clear and basic way that I could understand and **it didn't freak me out.**'*

Allow time (it can take over a year!)

*'**Having the time** to do the redevelopment, we had a large lead in time for this and focused on writing, editing, reviewing and getting feedback.'*

Feedback from organisations on success factors cont'd

Do user research

*When we first looked at the website **we took all of our stakeholders and thought about what we thought they needed to know.** As you can imagine this made for quite a list. From there we started clumping information together into aligned categories as there was a lot of crossover. We used personas and got quite descriptive with them. We looked at many, many websites and got really specific about what we liked and didn't.*

*What we found was that **our lists of information we wanted to tell people, and what we liked** – images, simplicity, clear, clean & concise - **did not marry up.***

Get a user-friendly web developer...who listens!

*'Identifying a user friendly company and framework to develop the new website in the first place. And a company that were **able to talk to non-computer geeks**, able to provide support and training and at a competitive price.'*

*'As we were in the middle of a rebrand we found a designer & a website developer who were **happy to listen.** We gave them heaps of examples of websites we liked, and images we liked, and navigation we liked!'*

Invest in good imagery

*'Good images – we made sure we had **more visual content** in this website to showcase what our sector does'*

Take time to develop the written content

*'We had the team contribute writing & then one person edited, wrote and rewrote and so on so it was (hopefully) **concise and clear** and sounded like us so in a nutshell'*

Feedback from organisations on success factors cont'd

Think about the why and simplify

*'Your audit encouraged us to **think about the why** – why were people coming, what did they want to do & were we making it easier to do it!*

*We narrowed the main purpose of our site. We focussed on that persona and the heart of who we were as an organisation. That in turn dictated what our images were, how we 'spoke' to people, our personality, and **the content was drastically reduced giving us the simplicity we were looking for.***

***Being clear** about who we were wanting to talk to & what they wanted to do.*

*Remembering that it was **not about us but it needed to reflect us.***

Take the opportunity to reflect and refocus

*'The redevelopment has had a big impact on how we reflect on ourselves and how we communicate. **It has made us take a step back and ask how we are perceived** e.g. simplifying who, what and where we are'*