Setting Up Your Digital Fundraising Platform

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There are over 600 platforms for acquiring donations these days, and for charities that are just getting into digital giving, this can understandably be a bit overwhelming.

Commercial fundraising websites - such as Just Giving, Stay Classy and Convio—offer an easy way of signing up supporters and administering donations. For very small charities, the best thing to do is not to reinvent the wheel, but make best use of other people’s sites. The cost of building a site that’s as good would be extremely high, and it would take us a very long time to get that money back.

In a fundraising platform, you need to think about what is trusted, easy to use, provides quality customer service, and will share all of the contact data with you so that you can nurture donors for the long term. Even if the fees are slightly higher, the usual big players are the best place to start in my view, even for smaller charities.

The pricing structure is different among them, and each platform offers different services and different levels of support, so you should spend a bit of time looking at their websites before deciding which one is the best for you.

WHAT MAKES FOR AN EFFECTIVE FUNDRAISING WEBSITE?

1. Clarity and ease of use

Make sure it’s instantly clear to supporters where they can donate by having a “donate now” button, and consider a dedicated donation tab. Then minimize the number of steps and pages involved in the donation or sign-up process.

2. Information

If you’re asking for money, you’ll need to prove that it’s being put to good use. Your website should contain information about your aims, work and reputation. It should also contain the kind of engaging content - photos, video, audio, and case studies – that will support your case. Carefully consider what you can include that will bring your work to life and help to persuade that visitor to your website to take that extra step from reading to donating... positive outcomes will persuade people to give, not facts and figures. Also be aware that you need to clearly articulate the need, as well as how you will improve the situation.
Finally, be aware that your website is a prime place for information gathering, too. Collect email addresses whenever and wherever you can, advises Louise Barker.

3. Include offline options

Don’t just provide facilities for those giving electronically: ensure your website includes information for people who wish to give by phone or post. And, particularly in the case of legacies, trusts, major donations etc, provide a named contact as donors may want to talk through the process. Finally, remember not to exclude those wishing to donate in other ways: for example, offer the means to register interest in volunteering.

4. Relationship building and promotion

The web is a great tool for building corporate relationships and thanking trusts and foundations and, while Twitter and Facebook offer greater scope for this kind of vital fundraiser engagement, your website can also play a role. (Don’t forget, of course, that your homepage should be clearly linked to your Twitter and Facebook pages, and vice versa.)

Your charity’s website also offers a means of promoting fundraising events and appeals, whether they take place on- or offline. Further, regularly updated content and news of this kind will keep visitors – and potential donors - coming back, as well as ensure your page features higher on internet searches.

5. Using statistics

Analyzing how effective your website really is vital. Tools such as GoogleAnalytics (the free web analysis package) can give you an insight into how your site is used. Once you understand which pages people are visiting most, then you can start to design user journeys. For example, use banners, buttons, or signposting on the most visited pages and the fundraising pages that you want people to visit.
QUESTIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD YOU ASK?

Will your donations be safe?
Every online fundraising platform will have a process for transferring funds to charities. Be sure to have a look at what that process is and whether they keep the donations in a protected fund. This means that if something were to happen to that company, your money would be safe.

Is this platform new to the market?
When researching which platform to register with, it’s important to look at their history as a business as well as their reputation. How long have they been operating for? Are they well established or are they new and potentially carry more risk? Are they global? Can people give anywhere in the world?

Are they trusted by other charities?
Take a look at how many and which charities are already registered and using the platform. This will give you a good idea of whether the platform meets the needs of a wide range of charities, both in size and in type. Choose a handful of charities to contact and ask them about their experience of the platform and whether they would recommend it. Most platforms will have case studies on their website that you can read and information about any industry awards they have won.

Will they help you reach new supporters?
When choosing an online fundraising platform, it’s important to weigh up whether you want a white-label solution or a website that has a brand in its own right that could help you attract new donors. Find out how many fans they have on Facebook and how many followers they have on Twitter. It will give you a good indication as to whether they are known and trusted by your supporters. It’s also worth testing the experience people will have on the platform and see what features they have to help your supporters raise more money.

How robust is their platform?
With the rise of social media, fundraising can go viral, quickly. #nomakeupselfie and the #icebucketchallenge generated unprecedented amounts of online giving for large and small charities alike. Make sure your preferred fundraising platform can handle big spikes in traffic at a moment’s
notice, so you don’t miss out on donations. Can they increase their server infrastructure at a moment’s notice?

In 2015, one of our events for Hack Into the Cause was raising money for Detroit2Nepal Foundation when Nepal earthquake struck the week before the event. This cause a surge of donations and traffic to their fundraising site.

7 What value do they add beyond the technology?

Finally, it’s worth considering what they do for the charity sector as a whole. Do they sponsor and attend conferences or hold training events of their own? Do they share fundraising tips and insights to help all charities?

BUDGET

What is the budget and plan?

Fees vary between platforms, with some having higher set-up and/or monthly fees, while others have higher administration charges per donation. Generally speaking, the larger sites will charge higher monthly fees. This will need to be weighed up against the income expectations of the campaign and what additional functionality might be available for the money. If paying monthly fees, it’s important to make sure the charity budgets appropriately for this. Start-up fees and commission on donations will usually apply so balance all the costs against the expected income. Some campaigns may raise a lot more income than expected and it may be helpful to set a sliding scale of fees or an overall fee cap.

How is the money transferred to the charity?

This process will depend on whether the platform is a charity or a private company. They typically work by collecting donors’ money and placing it in a secure bank account (this may or may not be a separate designated trust account but the funds should be clearly identifiable nonetheless). The donation is then transferred minus the relevant charges to the charity.

Admin fees

Some online giving platform providers charge charities an administration or a transaction fee for processing each donation. These typically range from zero to $2 per donation and can make a significant difference to the overall amount a charity receives, especially if the total comes from lots of small donations which are all subject to a fee.
The relatively low cost of setting up a fundraising initiative via an online platform and any associated administrative costs needs to be weighed up against the costs associated with other forms of fundraising, such as direct mail or media advertising. Consideration also needs to be given to the balance of administration fees per donation and any set-up or fixed fees for using the platform such as monthly subscriptions.

**Card charges**

Some sites may charge fees for using a particular credit or debit card, which will affect the donated amount. Credit card companies (e.g. Visa, Mastercard) always charge a merchant fee, usually at about 3%. Not all sites pass these fees on to the charity.

**Commission**

Some platforms will charge a service fee based on a percentage of the amount raised, typically between 2% and 5%.

**Set-up fee**

To establish an account, some online platforms will charge a one-off payment before it allows the charity to get started. Subscription A recurring fee paid throughout the charity’s membership to some online platforms.

**TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

**Are mechanisms in place to receive money, such as direct from a bank account or digital wallet (such as Paypal)?**

The charity will need a current account, or other mechanism such as a digital wallet, to receive money from the site. Some platforms may not be able to pay money into separate accounts for different activities, so the organization will have to consider how this fits into its internal processes.

**Is a database in place?**

Charities should think about how the donor information they receive from the platform will link to their internal systems, in particular what data fields are essential and which may need development of the supporter database. Considerations include whether the site is compatible with the database and/or whether the data is received from the site in a format that is easy to import.
What technology is already in place within the organization, such as up-to-date browsers, downloading software, etc.?

It is important to check IT capabilities and compatibility with the platforms selected before signing up. How the platforms can be viewed on a variety of mediums including mobile phone, tablet and laptop should also be taken into account. Also, be sure to reach out to your web master to make sure that everyone is on board and understand the timeline, processes and requirements of adding the fundraising platform to your website.

HUMAN RESOURCES

How much resource is available to manage the online platform?

Online platforms vary from requiring minimal maintenance to daily monitoring. Small organisations with limited capacity will need to be realistic about how much time can be devoted to maintaining the pages, particularly if they rely primarily on volunteers.

How often will pages need to be updated or content amended?

The administrative function of the platform is important as this will determine how much resource is required to update and manage the page regularly. If there are multiple staff accessing the pages, charities will need to find out how easily they can log in and what permission levels different people within the organization might need.

What are the internal processes for receiving the money?

Charities will need to consider the way that their income is reported and how the finance team will record it and communicate with them prior to registering on a site.
FUNCTIONALITY

What functionality is required?

Some functions to consider include:

- **Feedback to donors**: Does the site send thank you emails/letters to donors where can content can be tailored?

- **Usability**: How easy is it to navigate and is it something potential donors will be comfortable and confident using? Many prospective donors will be smartphone users, and as such sites should be responsive, or have compatibility with both iOS and Android. Some donors may have their own preferences for specific sites and consequently expect charities to also use them. Charities should consider whether this may impact on take-up, should they select to use a different one. A memorable or short address for donors could be beneficial, particularly if the fundraising campaign includes post or advertising activities.

- **Will there be team activities?** Some sites have a team pages functionality to enable groups to fundraise on behalf of a charity, with details of each individual fundraiser and their targets.

- **Donor care**: Is it possible to tailor the communications and information people receive. Plus, is it easy for donors to contact the charity directly?

- **Donor development**: Do charities receive the information/data needed to follow up with donors?

- **Query care/resolutions**: Both queries from donors and potential dispute resolution from the charity. Is there a number to call? What are the service level agreements? How are refunds handled?

How important is it to communicate with donors?

If communication is important, then a site must provide the capability to access a donor’s details. Also, it is crucial to ensure that the site collects donor consent to receive communications.

What data is required?

Charities will need to be clear about what they will need in terms of donor data and how/when this will be provided. Some of the larger sites have functionality that allows data reports to be customised. It is important to check how quickly these reports are required as some have a longer turnaround time than others. Also, check whether the data supplied is in a format that can be easily used.
PROCESSES

How will payments be monitored and received?

How the finance team factors in the receipt and reconciliation of payments into existing internal processes will need to be considered.

How quickly does the organization need to receive the donations?

Some sites send payments weekly, while others may require a longer turn around such as monthly, or even at the end of the charity campaign. Charities should consider their longer-term financial planning and budgets when considering the timeframes of receiving payments.

IMPLEMENTATION & TIMELINE

Implementation

Once a provider has been selected, there are a number of steps that charities will need to go through to ensure all stakeholders are aware of their responsibilities and that implementation is smooth and effective. This includes setting up an appropriate timeline for going live, organising the documents required for registering with the site, setting up communications for internal and external stakeholders, establishing how the site will be managed on an ongoing basis and carrying out testing to ensure all is working as it should.

Timeline

When planning a timeline for setting up the platform it is important to consider how many internal departments will need to be involved, and how much preparation is required to ensure all documentation is in order. The scale of this is likely to depend on the size of the organization and how accessible the required paperwork is. You may also need to factor in time to gather the documents – sourcing information from trustees and other teams can often take longer than anticipated so it is worth bearing this in mind during the planning stage. It is also important to investigate how long the registration is likely to take on the provider’s side. Some will require check an application internally before it is approved, time which will need factoring into the schedule. Another time consideration is whether clearance from the trustee board or others in the charity is required, such as to approve the budget for the project.
SOCIAL MEDIA INTEGRATION

Social media is another way in which charities can effectively promote their campaigns. Recent examples such as the ice bucket challenge, Stephen Sutton’s story and the grassroots #nomakeupselfie campaign powerfully demonstrated the potential to harness social networks to spread giving to a good cause.

Some of the larger sites have functionality to link Facebook or Twitter accounts to the online page, through which the campaign can be promoted, which is a relatively simple process. A number of sites also have functionality to add a “donate now” button to link from the organisation’s own website as well as responsive design donation processes that are optimised for smartphone usage.

Peer-to-peer sharing can be very powerful: motivating people to fundraise online and share their personal fundraising stories with their friends is more effective than a simple “ask” to donate to a charity.

LinkedIn can also be very useful, with more than 313 million members globally – 122 million in the US, 19 million in the UK, 11 million in Canada.

MOBILE (SMS) GIVING

One of the best additions to online giving is SMS giving. This is a perfect way to reap the benefits of an event with public interest such as Over The Edge. You can encourage the spectators and guests in the Drop Zone to make small one-off donations quickly and painlessly.

In practice, the donor sends a text to a 5-digit number with the charity’s name or a chosen keyword along with the amount they would like to donate (usually up to $10). They then receive a reply with a ‘thank you’ message as well as a link for a tax receipt, and the amount simply comes out of their next phone bill.

Some apps advertise themselves as being completely free, but often have hidden charges. These services also have limited functionality like collecting donor data or providing tax receipts.

A paid-for option like www.mobilecause.com, www.givelify.com or www.gofundme.com might be worth considering, as they also provide donor data that you can use, as well as the option for setting up regular text donations.

While these options are great, they should be looked upon as an addition to your digital fundraising, not a replacement. Your best bet remains a prominent, easy to find, easy to use donation page launched from your website.
Top-Requested Nonprofit Software Functionality

- Constituent/donor tracking: 72%
- Outreach/communication tools: 39%
- Reporting: 33%
- Contribution tracking: 29%
- Automatic receipts: 21%
- Event planning: 16%
- Membership management: 18%
- Interaction notes/records: 16%

Percent of sample

N = 200