

Strategic Net Technology Planning for Nonprofits

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Why Not?

Let's get this out of the way right now.

It takes too long. We don't have time. We don't have the money anyway. We don't know anything about technology. We are a nonprofit. We are too busy with our mission programming. Our board is unenlightened. Fill in your favorite excuse here _____ and your next favorite here _____. ; -)

Why Create a Technology Plan?

Planning simply encourages you to think through what you need and what resources you would require to meet those needs. It is not all that mysterious.

Planning helps you decide what to do, what to buy, who to involve, who to train, where to purchase, and other critical decisions in a reasoned and thoughtful, yet timely, way.

Planning helps you find and use technology to further your organization's mission and vision while helping you avoid unnecessary suffering and cost.

In the article "Why a Technology Plan?" at TechSoup, Anna Mills claims that, "Technology planning is the magic ingredient that will help you to:

- **Obtain funding.** Funders will be much more likely to give money for technology if you can show them a technology plan.
- **Use technology effectively to further your mission.** The [technology planning](#) process can expand your horizons and help you see new ways in which technology can further your mission.

- **Buy the right equipment.** Purchasing [hardware](#), [software](#) and networking equipment can be overwhelming. If you don't plan, it's easy to end up with something that is way too complicated or doesn't do what you need it to. There's no substitute for thinking through your goals and researching possible solutions.
- **Save money.** You probably do not need the fanciest system on the market. Planning allows you to figure out how to spend less and still meet your needs.
- **Avoid crises.** Bad technology decisions can leave you suffering for years. A faulty system can send your stress level through the roof and make you lose crucial [data](#) and capabilities.
- **Use staff time more effectively.** How many hours of staff time have you lost to those niggling technical problems? A technology plan will help you streamline staff use of technology, and put systems in place that will make technology a useful tool for staff, not a stumbling block.
- **Protect yourself from staff turnover.** If the person who knows your technology leaves, what will you do? A technology plan can save you by providing documentation of existing systems as well as future plans.

Identify the five top reasons that your organization will benefit from a well-done technology plan.

Strategic Web Site Planning

The good news: most people actually understand the web and what it could do for them better than they've ever understood office technology or their own PC. At this point in 2005, many people have extensive experience at a wide variety of websites with a variety of approaches, understand what they value in various websites and will recognize a good idea that their organization might adapt.

In fact, I dare say that website "experts" may not understand websites as well as the average user. Experts frequently are in love with the latest technology, have faster computers, and are not necessarily clear on what a website visitor really wants. Designers are in love with the look they create. Search engine optimization specialists can warp content inaccurately hoping for a first place hit at Google. Programmers require that everything run through server-side processing and nothing be done simply.

Visitors don't come for flashy graphics, the latest technology or search engine optimization. They are at your website for information – they have a reason to be there, and they know what it is.

It is your job – almost your only job – to find out what services and information you can provide that will bring them initially and how you can keep them returning.

Then you turn that understanding into a plan.

So it really isn't that complicated to figure out what needs to be done. The how is not all that bad either, if you are clear about what you really want and need.

There are many different models for strategic planning, technology planning, website planning and loads of online resources to help you implement ever-more complex planning procedures.

But we aren't going to use all of that. I thought about it. I really did. And I'm providing all kinds of links to all kinds of things online.

But here, you are getting the short-and-sweet planning process I model after something called "Extreme Programming." You can find more information online about this, but in short, it suggests that you can plan and plan and plan, and have meetings and discussions and research with teams, and sub-teams, and stakeholders, and

management buy-in, and do everything right -- and that you will end up with a half-finished project that is three years behind schedule anyway.

With Extreme Programming, you start the project immediately. You don't wait until you have perfect buy-in, enough time, plenty of money or even a clear plan. You get something up there that meets at least one need. Then you add something that meets another need. You refine the design as you add information. Eventually, you will need to overhaul the system somewhat but by that time you will have concrete information to work with. You will have experience and feedback and simple time working with the tools.

Each subsequent version is improved, and strengthened, and proves its usefulness in the using, not in theory.

General questions to ponder briefly

- What is our message and who are we targeting?
- Where can we get funding for our site?
- How can we present our point of view more effectively?
- Can we do it in-house?
- What will it bring us that we don't already have?
- How will it improve what we do have?
- How will we reassign staff duties to provide for ongoing maintenance and updating?

So Jump In With Both Feet Already

Terry Grunwald, a long-time net guru, offers the following outline for website planning. I've added some exercises so that you can begin to apply the outline to your own situation.

1. Know what YOU want BEFORE designing the site.

Ask around. Look at lots of sites: sister organizations, national sites, sites dealing with other issues. Make lists of content, features, and design elements you like and don't like. Look at things like the location of the navigation bar, color schemes, and the use of animations. Involve the whole staff and colleagues. Bookmark a list of favorites as models. Make a commitment to control the Web design process. Don't delegate decision making to outside consultants.

EXERCISE 1-1. List five sites whose design you admire. Briefly discuss your reasons.

List five sites whose design you despise. Briefly discuss your reasons.

EXERCISE 1-2. List what graphic design elements you already have to use in your website. (Hint: Your web site and print material should maintain a consistent look. Period.)

Color:

Typeface:

Logo: Color / BW

Tagline:

Stock photos:

Other:

EXERCISE 1-3. List any major missing graphic elements and consider how you might get them.

2. Define your audience. Think expansively.

Who is included in your constituency? Board members, potential members, supporters of your advocacy agenda, colleagues, funders, policymakers? Do they have computers? Are they online? Do they actively use the Web? Who are you not reaching now? The media? Future cross-sector and cross-issue partners? Potential donors? Competitors? The general public in your local community?

EXERCISE 2-1. Define your website in terms of services that it might provide.

EXERCISE 2-2. Define your website's audience and the benefits and services that your website might provide to them.

Ask yourself the question, "what can the website do for this group?"

Current Members:

Potential Members:

Board Members:

Artists:

Funders:

Media:

Local politicians:

Schools/Educators:

Advocates:

Other local arts organizations:

Civic planning:

Cultural institutions:

Economic development organizations such as chambers or cvbs:

Tourism businesses or initiatives:

3. **Develop a wish list of Web features.**

Look at other Web sites to find features that you would consider incorporating into your site. Don't worry about cost -- yet. Treat this as a brainstorm session and make it an agenda item for a staff meeting or retreat. Involve board members.

EXERCISE 3-1 List at least five non-website technologies that you might consider implementing.

Listserv:

Email newsletter:

Calendars:

Giving:

Ticketing/registrations:

Auctions:

Resource databases:

Other Net-based tools to consider:

4. Identify synergies with existing or proposed content.

This includes program descriptions, background information on your issue(s), recommendations, papers, success stories, and especially best practices and lessons learned. Does it cluster into categories? Note any obvious holes in your organization's story. This is also a good time to consider your need for other Internet tools since you may want to integrate them into your web plan. For example, you may want to allow people to subscribe to your [listserv](#) through your Web site. In addition, make sure that you coordinate your online and print media design strategies.

EXERCISE 4-1. Identify content that you already create that might be "repurposed" to your website or other Net tools.

Newsletters:

Weekly updates:

Print calendars:

Press releases:

Bios:

Committee or Board reports:

Membership lists:

Resources lists:

Books:

Planning tools:

Directories:

Collection information:

Regional resources:

Suppliers:

Other content that might be reshaped usefully:

5. Evaluate the administrative implications of each feature.

Look for opportunities as well as added workload. Whatever you do, don't wait until your site is launched to start thinking about how you will manage it. Web sites require significant tending: adding new content, updating and revising old content, evaluating usage, responding to information requests and feedback, managing the demands of a higher profile -- both good and bad.

Think about the right balance between static information (easier to maintain but doesn't generate repeat traffic) vs. dynamic information (serves as a "carrot" but adds an administrative burden).

Think about all of the outdated content you've found on the web. Ask yourself what you can realistically keep updated. Don't be heroic. Limitations have to be part of the design.

EXERCISE 5-1. Think over the various possibilities you've identified for your site – service to various constituencies, features to offer, information to reuse. Now ask yourself HOW and WHO?

Who are the people (use actual names here if possible) most likely to manage this process? For instance, who will make sure the newsletter is converted to PDF and posted once a month? Who will update the online calendar with new events? Who will make sure that photos and sound clips are posted for the media?

5-2. Identify the reasons that are likely to cause a failure. For instance, no one will regularly update the calendar due to priority conflicts. The newsletter won't be posted because it is done by someone outside the organization.

6. Consider building in-house vs. hiring a Web designer.

Building in-house capacity to do your own Web design is a definite option for some organizations depending on staff know-how and interest. But be prepared for turnover -- especially among your more technically savvy employees. Make sure that your Web design and management is not dependent on a single individual. Most organizations will choose to out-source their Web development, whether to a Web design firm or, in some cases, a volunteer. If you have the funds to hire a Web designer, look for those who have experience working with nonprofits. Ask for recommendations from colleagues whose Web pages impress you.

When meeting with the designer, ask lots of questions. Specific issues to address in advance include design capability; Web hosting arrangements; license or monthly maintenance fees; ownership of the site, design, and content; usage analysis; and ease of migration in the event the site needs to move to a different host.

EXERCISE 6-1. Creating a new or expanding an existing website:

Designing inhouse

Advantages

Disadvantages

Outsourcing design

Advantages

Disadvantages

Maintaining your site inhouse

Advantages

Disadvantages

Outsourcing the maintenance of your site

Advantages

Disadvantages

7. Get a handle on the technology challenges and cost factors.

Now is the time to turn a critical eye to your wish list. Identify special features such as audio or video streaming (think RealAudio), Web-based conferencing, "splash" pages, electronic slideshows, online searchable databases, Geographic Information Services ([GIS](#)) mapping, heavy graphics or animations. Here you will need expert advice on the implications for cost, user capacity to handle advanced applications, loading times, and management requirements.

An innovation in Web creation now provides for the entire site to be designed as a database. This approach simplifies site administration enormously, as it's all done through "fill in the blank" templates, but the trade-off is higher development costs and less flexibility in design. Always plan for future growth. Even if you are not prepared to add advanced features at the outset, they can be phased in over time.

EXERCISE 6-2. Other Net services that seem most intriguing at this point

Designing services and tools inhouse

Advantages

Disadvantages

Outsourcing design of services and tools

Advantages

Disadvantages

Maintaining services or tools inhouse

Advantages

Disadvantages

Outsourcing the maintenance of your site

Advantages

Disadvantages

8. **Design your Web site from the perspective of your audience, not your organization.**

The single biggest error groups make is to try to mirror their organizational chart on their Web site. Boring! "Capturing eyeballs" on the Web requires a drastic reorientation to the point of view of a typical overburdened Web user. What information will they be looking for? What resources will attract their eye and motivate them to click through different sections of your site? Make sure the "gems" are easily accessible from your home page and not buried three clicks deep. Label the various sections (especially your main navigation bar) clearly and accurately. Using shorthand such as "About Us" or "Feedback" is better than cutesy names that may confuse users. Make your site as interactive as possible.

Give folks something to do: respond to a poll, take a quiz, sign-up for a mailing list, send a letter to their legislator, pledge money or check your organization's wish list for equipment or service needs. And this exercise is not only useful for your Web site; it can provide you with a whole new perspective on marketing your organization as well.

Ask yourself what people will most want to see when they come to your website? What can you make easier? What services or tools would really make a difference for your biggest supporters? Most important funders? The artists who rely on you?

(Hint: It is not about you! It is not about your organization! It is about your visitors! Be a great host! Think about your guests first and always! Make them comfortable, welcome and meet their needs!)

This question is about priorities really. Review all of the information you've considered so far, and then make a few decisions about what is most important, and most useful, and yet easily done.

EXERCISE 8-1. Think in terms of CONTENT, CONTENT, CONTENT.... not how. What information do your visitors want from your website?

CONTENT, CONTENT, CONTENT continued

EXERCISE 8.2 Features and services that provide convenience, speed, accessibility or net-centric capabilities that you feel strongly that your visitors would appreciate. Be sure to identify which users you feel will want those features.

Sign up for e-news button

Donate Now button

Calendar of events

Photos of performances

Press coverage

Financial reports

Links to performers' sites

Links to other arts sites

Advocacy links

Donor lists

Membership lists

Auctions

Listservs

Discussion groups

Other features and tools that you feel certain that your visitors will appreciate.

9. Understand the unique way that people navigate the Web.

As you prepare text for your Web site remember that people "read" the Web differently from the way they read print media. In fact, according to Jacob Nielsen, the guru of Web usability, most people don't read Web pages at all; they scan them. According to a recent study, 79 percent of Web users scan any new page for individual words and sentences; only 16 percent read it word-for-word. The implications? Nielsen suggests using highlighted keywords, sub-headings, bulleted lists, one idea per paragraph, and half the word-count (yes, half!) of conventional writing. As for graphics, be creative but be careful of using too many "bells and whistles". They can take a long time to load on older computers. When in doubt, keep it simple.

EXERCISE 9-1. Repeat the following when you are tempted by the latest and greatest look or technology:

Visitors want to easily find information or access services. They don't really care how they do that. Keep it simple.

10. Keep focused on your vision.

The last guideline mirrors the first, but bears repeating. Throughout the process, make sure that your organization is in the driver's seat. If you work with consultants, ask lots of questions. If things don't make sense, get second opinions.

Don't be sold on flashy features you don't need. Above all, see this as a strategic initiative, not just an add-on activity that can be easily delegated to one person -- either inside or outside the organization. A thoughtful Web planning process is a unique opportunity to gain a fresh perspective on your nonprofit. Once you "own" the vision, the site will truly be your own.

EXERCISE 10-1. Your mission and vision.

Your Mission Statement:

Your Vision Statement:

EXERCISE 10-2. Identify the ways in which your new website and net services and tools will further your mission, support your vision and provide progress on your organization's strategic plan.