



Cyberspace Isn't Infinity

Nonprofits putting static material on-line, if they have access at all

Agencies and organizations that have jumped into the electronic arena are eager to use the potential of this new communication medium — if they can only figure out their options. Predictions about the power and impact of computer connections make everyone starry-eyed. But even the most avid fan will admit that right now the Internet is a very strange place.

It can be a metaphor for the Wild West. Out on Main Street there are several major gun fights going on — America On-Line (AOL) battling CompuServe and Prodigy, Microsoft riding into town with a machine gun, and the World Wide Web challenging all the commercial services.

Down several side streets there are fist fights about who will serve the nonprofit community. Will “home pages” on the World Wide Web (WWW) be enough or will “gateways” such as Impact Online be needed? Will Access Point’s Civic Involvement System on AOL attract the most users? What does it mean when publications such as *The NonProfit Times* announces to subscribers that the publication is now “online”?

But the biggest thing that strikes the visitor to this noisy, quarrelsome Wild West town is that the majority of the populace is back inside the saloon, with no intention of leaving the bar! At the moment, most nonprofits are not online nor are they eager to connect. Many are unconvinced that there is yet a worthwhile payback for the work and money it takes to go online. And, in truth, some agencies are really not prepared to make use of the Internet today.

Right now, agencies are using cyberspace as an electronic version of print media. They are posting job openings and volunteer opportunities — in exactly the same wording and format as they would on paper. WWW home pages may have some fun use of color, but are also largely static “pages” of text presentation. What’s the sense of going into a new medium without adapting to its capabilities?

Instant access

For example, the main value of electronic communication is instant information. So why are so many Web pages actually “cobwebs” in which outdated material lives on for weeks? Where are weekly, even daily or hourly, updates of critical issues? The whole concept of a “newsletter” takes on exciting dimensions when the cost of printing and mailing is removed. A virtual newsletter can be short and sweet, but contain only the most current, “hot” information necessary.

In print, an invitation to a big event remains static from the moment it is put on paper. In cyberspace, the invitation can show a running tally of how many have signed-up by the end of each day, which famous people have agreed to appear, and any last-minute changes due to weather.

Further, one can assume that if someone is accessing information online, he or she feels comfortable interacting electronically. So what is the logic of “posting” information about an agency if that agency does not even have an e-mail address through which the person already online can make contact?

There is a growing number of cyberspace sites wishing to list the names and descriptions of nonprofit organizations and it is amazing to see how few include an e-mail address. And, of course, another interesting question is whether agencies with e-mail addresses open their virtual “mail” daily or let it pile up, missing the point of instant communication.

User profile

Who actually is online? Most studies say that the profile of the Internet and commercial services user is largely male, between 20 and 35, well-educated, and employed in a technical job. There are indicators that this is changing rapidly, but mostly to connect women who are well-educated.

Other than academics who use their university networks and pay no charges person-

ally, and corporate employees in the same circumstances, most people surf the Net on their own private time and computers. There are also a great many teenage boys spending hours (and dollars) at the computer screen. The potential for serious use of cyberspace is enormous and there certainly are already glowing examples of creative, meaningful interaction. But, at the moment, this is a recreational outlet.

So what are the implications for nonprofit organizations and, specifically, for volunteer efforts?

If one agrees with the profile of today’s Internet user, another issue is whether or not the information currently posted about nonprofit agencies is of any interest to the “surfer.” Ironically, the volunteer world is hungry to recruit “Generation X” males. Will a volunteer opportunity posting about the same old assignments be more attractive when read electronically? Or, is this a wonderful chance to design new volunteer assignments tapping the special skills and interests of this target audience, and then use the electronic medium as a way to spread the word specifically to these young men?

The up-to-the-minute capability of electronic communication itself offers several new ways to involve volunteers. People who are in love with cyberspace are clear candidates for becoming virtual news alert editors, electronic marketers for special events, and creative thinkers about how to make a Web site more interactive.

Such volunteers can even do much of the work at home on their own computers. Further, volunteers who are comfortable with the Internet can spend their time online doing research on any subject under the sun, finding those newsgroups, databases, and electronic sites of greatest value to your nonprofit organization.

Instant research

In terms of volunteer recruitment, the real value of electronic postings is their abil-

ity to do "needle in a hay stack" searches. The more specific a need, the more the computer becomes a tool to find the one-in-a-thousand person best suited for that need. So the key is to craft the recruitment message carefully. Don't post a bland request for "friendly visitors."

Instead, put out the appeal for volunteers to match each client in need of a visit: list the real and distinct interests of chess playing, watching a particular soap opera, speaking Lithuanian. And remember to appeal to young adult men and teenagers!

Finally, the ways in which people can engage in "virtual volunteering" are only now being imagined. These are assignments in which the volunteer contributes time and expertise via computer. The technical assistance possibilities are obvious—and transcend geographical boundaries.

Education and training will also change dramatically once the expert no longer has to be in physical contact with the student. And even more exciting are the ways in which people can reach out to one another to offer support and even caring by computer contact.

Cyberspace is not the answer to most problems. The limitations of the medium are obvious. So are the cost and the high degree of literacy necessary to communicate effectively. But effective use of electronic communications can substantially add to the ways we inform and involve people. It should not be limited to duplication of the printed word. It can expand the boundaries of how we serve our clients and customers.

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