Adrian Sargeant

is a professor of non-profit marketing at Henley Management College and a professor of marketing at the University of the West of England. He is the Chair of the Centre for Voluntary Sector Management and an adjunct professor of philanthropy at the Indiana Center on Philanthropy. He is the author of *Marketing Management for Nonprofit Organizations*, published by Oxford University Press, and Editor of the *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*.

Elaine Jay

is a research associate at the Centre for Voluntary Sector Management at Henley Management College and an independent fundraising consultant. She has over 14 years' experience as a fundraiser working with a number of UK charities, including the RSPCA, where she was the head of individual fundraising for six years. She has held several agency-side roles at Amherst Direct Marketing, WWAV Rapp Collins and the Personal Fundraising Partnership.

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Professor Adrian Sargeant,
Centre for Voluntary Sector
Marketing,
Henley Management College,
Greenlands,
Henley-on-Thames,
Oxon RG9 3AU, UK
Tel: +44 (0)1491 571454
Fax: +44 (0)1491 571635
E-mail: adrians@henleymc.ac.uk

The fundraising performance of charity websites: A US/UK comparison

Adrian Sargeant and Elaine Jay

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Abstract

This paper reviews what is presently known about the use of the Internet for fundraising and provides a number of examples of successful practice. Having identified a paucity of research in relation to the benchmarking thereof, it provides a comparison of the performance of fundraising websites in the UK/USA and identifies the characteristics of those sites achieving superior performance. It concludes that for many charities the Internet remains a loss-making medium.

Introduction

Almost 10 per cent of the world's population now has access to the Internet. As of the end of 2002 there were estimated to be 186 million Europeans online, 183 million in the USA and Canada, and 168 million in Asia/Pacific. When one considers that over 40 per cent of this online population is English-speaking the value of this market is immense.

Despite the scale of the opportunity the non-profit sector has been fairly slow to capitalise on the new technology on both sides of the Atlantic.¹ The US sector press in the late 1990s hyped the possibilities of 'e-philanthropy' which, it was predicted, would attract and retain a whole new generation of online supporters and would radically change the way that non-profits undertake fundraising and communication. This online revolution in giving has largely failed to materialise.

However, examples of good and creative practice abound and the Internet is now being used effectively by a number of 'household-name' charities for the purposes of fundraising, communication and information provision. There are also clear signs that in some situations the Internet is emerging as the preferred giving mechanism for certain donor segments. The American Red Cross, for example, received \$63.4m online in response to the 11 September attacks. Commentators in the USA argue that the large number of donors who made their first online gift after the tragedy could ultimately lead to an increase in online fundraising to all charities, but that it is too early as yet to confirm that this is the case.

In both the USA and the UK, pioneer non-profit organisations are testing new routes to raising funds online. Oxfam GB (www.oxfam.org.uk) and Breast Cancer Care (www.breastcancercare.org.uk) have both, for example, run successful online fundraising auctions, and many UK charities have teamed up with established Web partners such as Amazon.com in affiliate schemes.

Examples of current best practice

In the UK, the most frequently quoted online success story is Comic Relief (www.comicrelief.com), which received £1.75m in six hours on the night of their recent telethon, representing 8 per cent of the total for their appeal. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (www.nspcc.org.uk) claims considerable success from offering password-protected access to regular donors who can enter a privileged section of the NSPCC website and alter their mailing preferences, view their giving history, change their address details and make a donation (see Figure 1). UNICEF UK (www.unicef.org.uk) offers a similar service for major donors, and ActionAid (www.actionaid.org) has pioneered a number of special sites in its youth marketing and child sponsorship campaigns.

Campaigning groups such as Greenpeace (www.greenpeace.org.uk) and Amnesty International have also been notable in using e-mail alerts in their lobbying campaigns, and employ their websites extensively in supporter communication. In the USA the Worldwide Fund for Nature offer a much-cited interactive site at www.panda.org, where users can collect 'stamps' for their 'Panda Passport' as they engage in a variety of activities (including campaigning and offering funds) to support the organisation. The Environmental Defense Fund (www.edf.org) also offers a highly interactive site (www.scorecard.org) which allows users to identify the companies that are polluting the air, land and water in their specific zipcode, and e-mail or fax them to complain (see Figure 2). While specific figures have not been made public, the addition of this scorecard is said to have substantially increased the level of online donations.

Despite these success stories, information in respect of the performance of online fundraising is scant. While data from Wallace² showed that

Figure 1: NSPCC supporter site

Figure 2: EDF scorecard site

donors contributed more than \$96m over the Internet in 2001, her study was limited to 126 of the largest charities in the USA. No equivalent data are gathered in the UK, and in neither country has it proved possible genuinely to benchmark Web fundraising performance or to determine the characteristics of those sites that tend to raise higher sums. It would also prove instructive to examine the how the returns accruing from e-fundraising compare with other direct marketing media. It is the intention to explore a variety of these issues in this paper, beginning with a brief summary of the extant research in relation to the benchmarking of direct marketing fundraising performance.

Fundraising performance

A non-profit organisation is in essence one which is barred from distributing its net earnings to those who exert control over it, including, for example, shareholders, members, governors and directors.³ It exists with the sole purpose of satisfying one or more identified societal needs. The generation of profit by such enterprises is, however, not banned *per se*. Some non-profits can and do earn a healthy operating surplus; it is only the distribution of this surplus that is limited. Any profit must be retained and reinvested in the production/supply of ever-greater amounts of the goods/services the non-profit was originally constituted to provide.

However, as Hansmann⁴ points out, the non-profit is far from being an ideal organisational form. The removal of the profit incentive can give rise to a number of potential problems. Non-profits could, for example, be slow to respond to the demands made of them and there is perhaps a greater potential for non-profits to be wasteful of valuable resources than their for-profit counterparts. Less scrupulous organisations might also find

Implications of the removal of the profit incentive

ways of distributing their operating surplus in the form of enhanced staff salaries, or a series of other perks and benefits. Hence, as Henke⁵ notes, 'as [non-profits] increase in size and influence, it becomes increasingly important [to find some way] to measure their performance'.

Non-profit scandals

Regrettably there have been a number of well-publicised instances where this would appear to be a genuine cause for concern. Baily and Millar⁶ cite the example of the United Way and the damage that was done to the organisation by revelations about the unnecessary expenditures (such as flights on Concorde) incurred by its incumbent CEO. In a further example Cutlip⁷ reports that the National Kids' Day Foundation raised \$4m between 1948 and 1963 and managed to spend the entire amount on fundraising and administration costs. In response to the inevitable criticism, the organisation attempted to argue that their aim was to promote the idea of aiding needy children rather than actually providing services!

Difficulties of benchmarking

Intuitively one might expect that assessing the performance of an organisation's fundraising would be an easy matter. In the UK, the largest charities have for many years been compelled to produce their annual accounts in accordance with a charity accounting statement of recommended practice (SORP). The reality, however, is that the format prescribed by the SORP does not lend itself to the calculation of meaningful fundraising performance ratios. The system of categorisation of costs and revenues is unhelpful in this context and fails adequately to control nuances in internal reporting, such as the now widespread practice of awareness recharging under which many large charities take out between 10 and 20 per cent of the costs of their fundraising and reclassify them as 'direct charitable expenditure', arguing that fundraising communications also serve to educate the public about the nature of the cause. In the USA non-profit organisations are required to report on fundraising in their annual reports to the Inland Revenue Service (IRS) on Form 990. However, some latitude is allowed in defining whether certain expenses count as programme, administration or fundraising expenses and 'some non-profits take more latitude than is suggested by IRS guidelines and generally accepted accounting principles'.⁸ Indeed, Tempel⁹ goes further, arguing that non-profits 'outright lie' on their 990 returns. Research based on 1998 returns indicated that 59 per cent of non-profits did not report any fundraising expenses, including nearly a quarter of those receiving over \$5m in contributions.

Factors affecting fundraising performance

While published accounts can therefore give a misleading impression in respect of the efficiency of the fundraising undertaken, a failure to understand the manner in which fundraising operates can also be a source of confusion, particularly where comparisons are undertaken between the performance of specific organisations. Indeed, there are a number of factors which can influence relative fundraising performance that have nothing whatsoever to do with the quality of fundraising undertaken, such as the size of the organisation,¹⁰⁻¹² the percentage split between recruitment and development activities undertaken¹³ and the specific forms of fundraising employed. In respect of the latter, recent UK work by Sargeant *et al.*¹⁴ identified that when direct costs only were considered,

Lack of data on Internet fundraising

direct mail recruitment from cold lists achieved a typical return of 0.39p for every £1 invested, while doordrops (ie unaddressed mail) achieved a return of 0.56p, direct response press advertising 0.61p and inserts 0.87p. Donor development activity undertaken by direct mail achieved a return of £3.69 for every £1 invested. It should be noted that all these figures apply to the recruitment of 'cash givers' and do not take into account overhead costs or the revenue accumulated from tax reclaims. It should further be noted that these indicate only the immediate return on investment (ROI) achieved and take no account of donor lifetime value.

To date, however, the performance of fundraising over the Internet remains largely unaddressed. No study has as yet attempted to benchmark the costs and revenues associated with this activity, and no study has yet determined whether those non-profit sites achieving higher levels of performance are in any way distinct. Given that the practitioner literature has generally assumed non-profits in the USA to be more advanced in their use of Internet communications than would be the case in the UK, it was felt that a comparison of practice and achievement between the two countries would be instructive.

Methodology

A similar methodology was adopted in both the USA and the UK. A list of the top 500 fundraising organisations (as ranked by voluntary income) that operated a website was compiled in each country and a questionnaire despatched to the director of fundraising in each case. In the USA this list was compiled from the Guidestar website (www.guidestar.org), while in the UK data from the Barings *Top 10,000 Charities Guide* were utilised. Those organisations actively gathering funds in response to the tragedy of 9/11 were excluded from the study, as it was felt that these would tend to bias the results. The overall response rate achieved was 29.1 per cent, comprising 25.8 per cent from the USA and 32.4 per cent from the UK.

Profile of respondents

The profile of respondents was compared with the known profile of the top 500 organisations in each country, with no significant difference being reported in terms of either the size of the organisations (by voluntary income) or the category of causes represented. One may therefore conclude that the 'sample' obtained is representative of the top 500 fundraising organisations in each country.

Throughout this paper it should be noted that, for the purposes of comparison, costs and revenues in US dollars were converted to pounds sterling employing an exchange rate of 1.6:1. It should also be noted that data were gathered for the last financial year and that as a consequence the time periods being compared may not be identical from one country to another. In the UK many charities produce annual accounts in the spring, while in the USA accounts are produced at the end of the calendar year.

Website development

The survey began by asking respondents to specify whether their website had been created in-house or by a specialist agency or consultancy. The

results for both countries are reported in Table 1. No significant difference in response could be discerned between the two countries.

Year of site development

The majority of non-profit websites appear to have been created very recently, with the mean year of presentation being found to be 1999 in each country. The costs of this original development and ongoing maintenance were found to vary significantly between the USA and UK and are presented in Table 2. Even allowing for fluctuations in the exchange rate over the period it can be seen that the costs of non-profit website development and maintenance are significantly higher in the UK.

Respondents were then asked to supply details of the amounts raised through the website over the past year. Again, for ease of comparison the figures have been converted to pounds sterling. The mean amounts raised in the period in both the USA and the UK are reported in Table 3. The figures for standard deviation are also reported, as are the medians, since each distribution was highly skewed. Levene's test revealed homogeneity of variance, and a one-way ANOVA suggested that the performance of both countries was not significantly different from each other.

Amount raised

The perception of the amount raised was also indistinguishable from one country to another ($X^2 = 3.52$, significance level 0.32). Respondents were asked whether the amount they had received was higher than, lower than or as expected. Table 4 contains the detail of this analysis. It seems clear that fundraisers in both countries have generally been disappointed in the income generated to date through this medium.

Table 1: Site design

Designed	USA %	UK %
Agency	45.0	43.9
In-house	55.0	56.1

Table 2: Cost of development and maintenance

Cost	USA (£)	UK (£)	F	Significance level
Original development costs	6,173.73	16,107.22	6.838	0.01
Maintenance costs (past year)	4,678.80	12,899.92	5.543	0.02

Table 3: Funds raised

	USA (£)	UK (£)
Mean	4,308.12	9,552.27
Standard dev	12,968.81	19,088.73
Median	97.66	1,000.00

Table 4: Perception of amount raised

Perception	USA %	UK %
Higher than expected	18.8	14.3
As expected	40.4	54.8
Lower than expected	40.8	31.0

Return on investment

Table 5 reports the ROI achieved in each country. To calculate these figures only the direct costs of maintaining the site for the period have been included. No allowance has been made for overhead costs and/or the original development costs of the site. The reader will appreciate that the data reported in Table 5 would thus tend to overestimate the returns accruing from the medium, but given it is impossible to speculate as to the longevity of a particular site design, amortising an appropriate percentage of the development costs would be problematic.

Comparison with other media

It is interesting to note that the returns accruing in both countries are not significantly different, with UK fundraisers typically raising 69p for every £1 of direct cost incurred, and that the returns are similar to those reported for other DM recruitment media. While not all of the revenue accruing online will be from new donors, the percentage of donor development activity currently taking place online is limited and as a consequence this remains a fair comparison.¹⁵

Donation routes

Respondents were then asked how individual donors could use the website to make a donation. The percentage of sites offering various mechanisms for making a donation is reported in Table 6. Chi-square tests revealed that the only significant difference to emerge between the two countries was in respect of the availability of a telephone number that prospective donors could call to make a donation.

Where an online facility was offered, respondents were asked whether the donations were handled in-house or via an external agency. The results show that UK non-profits are significantly more likely to use an agency for online donation fulfilment (Table 7).

Table 5: ROI achieved

	USA	UK
Mean	0.81	0.69
Standard dev	1.20	0.89
Median	0.76	0.61

Table 6: Method of donation offered

Donation route	USA %	UK %	X ²	Significance level
A telephone number is provided for donors to call and make a donation	82.4	77.2	30.91	0.000
Online by credit card	69.0	77.2	1.73	0.189
A donation form may be printed which can then be posted with a gift	51.8	61.4	1.94	0.163

Table 7: Donation handled in-house or by agency

Donation handling	USA %	UK %	X ²	Significance level
In-house	61.0	31.8	11.172	0.004
Agency	39.0	66.7	11.172	0.004

Successful campaigns

Respondents were then asked which category of fundraising campaign generated the most online support. Respondents could respond positively to multiple options (which were phrased slightly differently as different terminology is used in the two countries).

The details of this analysis are reported in Table 8: chi-square tests revealed that annual fund and donor appeals typically generated more support in the USA, while in the UK the generation of fundraising income from trading was more prevalent. Using the Internet to promote events and/or membership seems a common feature of non-profit fundraising in both countries.

Website features

The following section of the survey gathered data in respect of the technical capabilities of the site. Table 9 indicates the percentage of respondents whose site included each of the features listed; chi-square tests were conducted to determine whether any differences exist between practice in the USA and the UK. The results indicate that few non-profit sites are linked to their supporter database and few allow users some flexibility in the environment they view on each visit to the site. It is encouraging to note that many sites allow users to keep informed as to developments with the organisation's work, with both e-mail and direct mail updates being offered in a significant number of cases. In terms of differences in approach between the two countries it can be seen that UK sites pay more attention to monitoring the profile of users visiting a site, through media such as online questionnaires, while users in the USA are significantly more likely to be offered the opportunity of receiving direct mail updates from the organisation concerned.

It was interesting to note that when asked whether they evaluated the performance of their website, 76 per cent of respondents were found not

Technical compatibilities

Table 8: Campaigns generating most support

	USA %	UK %	X ²	Significance level
Annual fund/donor appeals	61.9	25.0	15.244	0.000
Capital appeals	2.4	8.3	1.631	0.206
Events	28.6	33.3	0.278	0.598
Trading	2.4	19.4	6.579	0.009
Membership	27.9	16.7	2.060	0.151

Table 9: Website features

Feature	USA %	UK %	X ²	Significance level
Monitor the profile of site users	10.5	25.0	9.698	0.002
Linked to supporter database	7.3	7.1	0.009	0.932
Generation of cookies	11.5	17.4	1.903	0.167
Tailor environment to user preferences	6.6	8.3	0.272	0.602
Offer direct mail updates	58.7	35.8	14.429	0.000
Offer e-mail updates	52.0	56.6	0.598	0.439

Evaluating performance

to be monitoring the success of their site. Of those who were, the following measures were typical of those presently implemented:

- number and value of gifts
- number of visitors
- external feedback
- number of enquiries
- sales/number of items sold
- amount of free literature despatched
- simple page-hit counter
- source of visitor
- use of chat/message board
- use of voting areas
- length of visit.

Publicising the website

Promotion

In the final section of the survey respondents were asked what vehicles were used to promote the website. Respondents could respond positively against multiple options. The percentages employing each technique are illustrated in Table 10. As one would expect, a wide variety of means are employed to promote charity websites, although comparatively few organisations appear to work with partners to promote their existence. This is particularly the case in the UK, where charities are less likely to link with ISPs or other voluntary organisations.

Characteristics of effective sites

The relationship between the performance of a site (in terms of absolute funds raised) and a number of the other variables represented in the questionnaire was then explored. Firstly a relationship was identified between the year of a site's launch and its current performance. Those sites with greater longevity were achieving greater levels of total donation and higher average gifts (Pearson 0.431, significance level 0.000). This suggests that it may take time for a non-profit site to establish itself and/or that as experience is gained in online fundraising the quality of performance improves.

Table 10: Website promotion

Promotion route	USA %	UK %	X ²	Significance level
Appears on communications such as annual reports, leaflets etc	92.9	96.9	2.483	0.115
Appears in direct mail	84.8	76.4	3.113	0.078
Appears on letterhead	81.7	86.3	1.126	0.289
Appears in advertising	78.6	75.8	0.312	0.577
Links established with other charity sites	75.4	54.0	13.900	0.000
Corporate partners promote the site	25.4	31.7	1.356	0.244
Links with an ISP	20.6	11.2	4.868	0.027

**Does performance
relate to investment
levels?**

There was also a positive correlation between the amount spent on development and the total amount donated online to the organisation. The greater the amount spent on development the greater the amount that was currently being raised (Pearson 0.541, significance level 0.000). A similar relationship was reported between performance and the amount spent annually on site maintenance (Pearson 0.245, significance level 0.002). It is interesting to note that no difference in the ROI could be discerned between sites with low development/maintenance costs and those with high costs. This suggests that while a more substantial initial investment would tend to raise more funds in absolute terms, the ROI will be unlikely to improve significantly over that achievable through a lower investment. It is also interesting to note that those charities employing an external agency for the purposes of site development were no more or less likely than those which did not to achieve above-average performance. They were, however, significantly more optimistic about the likely future performance of their site.

Finally, a comparison of fundraising performance against the presence of specific site features and methods of site promotion was undertaken. Table 11 presents the mean amounts raised when the feature was either present or absent, and a series of one-way ANOVAs and their associated F tests confirmed whether the difference in these mean values was statistically significant. For the sake of brevity only significant relationships are reported.

**Aspects linked to
fundraising
performance**

It thus seems clear that those sites which do monitor the profile of site users, link to the supporter database, seek to drive traffic to and from the site via e-mails, generate cookies and tailor the environment to user preferences generate significantly higher funds than sites without such facilities. It also seems clear that those sites forging strong links with other non-profit organisations to promote their site will also tend to generate higher levels of funds. No other links between the primary marketing methods employed and site performance could be discerned.

Discussion

It seems clear that successful non-profit sites are likely to contain many of the features and characteristics of their successful for-profit counterparts. Authors such as Peppers and Rogers¹⁶ have long argued that successful commercial sites ‘customize, identify, differentiate and interact’, thereby

Table 11: Characteristics of effective sites

Feature	Present Mean (£)	Not present Mean (£)	F	Significance level
Monitor the profile of site users	16,825	3,964	9.915	0.002
Linked to supporter database	20,490	5,001	8.094	0.006
Generation of cookies	14,623	4,024	5.641	0.020
Tailor environment to user preferences	17,469	4,739	7.14	0.009
Offer e-mail updates	9,553	2,481	4.129	0.045
Links to other non-profit sites	3,703	13,165	6.771	0.011

Importance of 'one-to-one' relationship

building a stronger sense of a 'one-to-one' relationship (see also Geiger and Martin¹⁷). This paper provides empirical support for the proposition that this facet of site development is equally as important in the non-profit context. In practical terms, non-profits should be looking to tailor their sites to reflect donor preferences, to use e-mail to drive traffic to and from the site, to promote the site online through partners and links as well as via offline marketing communications, and to monitor and profile site visitors if they are to maximise fundraising performance over time.

US/UK comparison

Perhaps the most striking aspect of the results is that, contrary to expectations, the quality of fundraising performance is strikingly similar between the USA and the UK. While a number of key differences in approach could be discerned, the impact on performance was not significant in terms of either the absolute amounts raised or the ROI achieved. The only notable difference to emerge was that the costs of both site development and maintenance seem significantly lower in the USA. While best practice examples from non-profits on both sides of the Atlantic can therefore be used to guide future website development, it appears that UK and US practice is very similar and that few practical lessons can be passed between the two countries.

This paper has also shown that the performance of the Internet for fundraising purposes is poor and charities are to date losing money in this facet of their operations. Charities in both countries are failing to generate enough income to cover the costs of ongoing maintenance, even before the costs of site design and implementation are considered.

As noted above, the returns generated from the Internet are broadly commensurate with those accruing from other direct marketing media used in donor acquisition. While this may be encouraging given that the Web is still largely a recruitment rather than a development medium, it would seem appropriate to factor in a proportion of the costs of initial site development to this performance ratio, thus reducing the figures reported above. The authors have deliberately avoided such a calculation since the accounting profession and in particular the SORP Committee have yet to agree an appropriate basis on which to accomplish this. It is a complex issue, since while the site might well be intended to raise funds it will also frequently have other functions connected with the furtherance of the mission of the organisation. Thus a significant percentage of the expenses connected with the site could legitimately be regarded as direct charitable expenditure rather than fundraising *per se*. Nevertheless, any allocation of development costs would reduce the performance alluded to above. It should also be noted that those sites relying on agencies to handle donations for them online will incur further costs that the authors have been unable to account for above. Such agencies typically charge either a fee or commission for the processing of individual gifts, thereby reducing the net value of the donation.

Costs may be higher than reported

Nevertheless, the complexity of online fundraising performance should not deter benchmarking efforts. Intense levels of public interest and concern in respect of the costs of fundraising make it essential that charity trustees, fundraisers and direct marketers at least give some consideration to the cost structures of their own charity. There may be difficulties in

**Misplaced optimism
in the future of
Internet fundraising**

comparing one organisation with another, for all the reasons alluded to above, but as potential funders and/or the media are likely to undertake such comparisons, so too must the non-profit concerned. At the very least fundraising organisations should understand the reasons for their own performance, and either capitalise on this or be prepared to defend themselves against the criticism that could be forthcoming. With few organisations as yet gathering even simple metrics in respect of their Web operations it is clear that many charities have either neglected or ignored the relative performance of their Web-based fundraising to date.

It is also interesting to note that despite disappointment in respect of the sums they have been able to raise, respondents still believe it will take only three to five years for their presence on the Internet to be justified, relying on a development in the size of the market, increasing feelings of security in Web transactions and a growing awareness of the presence of their site. The authors' view is that this may prove to be naive, especially in the light of the findings from the USA where the penetration of Internet technology is higher and the Web market-place is better developed, and yet Web fundraising results are no better than those being seen in the UK.

Indeed, the Internet may well prove not to be the panacea that many have hoped for. To raise funds an organisation must first successfully drive traffic to its site. While when an emergency occurs of the scale of 9/11 Web users have been shown actively to search out organisations to offer their support, in the normal course of events it seems unlikely that donors will simply 'cruise' the Web seeking non-profit causes to give to. It is rather more likely that individuals will be prompted to make a donation after having been tempted into the site because of other cause-related content. It is this that is likely to show up on search engines, and this that is likely to give supporting partners a reason to drive traffic on to the site. One may thus reasonably hypothesise that only those charities with a strong degree of cause-related content available online, and thus a strong rationale for a visit, will ultimately be successful in Internet fundraising. Further research will be required to determine the nature of the content provided by successful sites, and to profile the significant characteristics of Web donors.

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