GET READY FOR YEAR-END GIVING BY IMPROVING YOUR WEB DONATION PAGES

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As the 2011 holiday giving season approaches, non-profit organizations need to be mindful to position their websites for successful year-end giving, especially in this sluggish economy when donors are likely to be more selective than ever with their contributions.

While most attention at year-end is typically centered on maximizing reach and visibility through email marketing, direct mail, paid search marketing, and social media, it's imperative to also focus on your website donation landing pages.

All of your hard work driving supporters to your website can be squandered in an instant if they're faced with wordy, dense, complicated, and time-consuming donation pages once they get there—which inevitably leads to donor abandonment and lost revenues.

To help you get the most out of your donation pages at year-end, we've prepared a list of 'best practices' based on our experience testing and optimizing such pages for a wide variety of clients over the past 5 years.

While we've found these areas *most often* have the biggest impact on giving—this list is NOT meant to be exhaustive or to serve as a substitute for testing.

Identifying what specifically works best with your audience requires *direct testing* on your own donation pages—and the fall season is an ideal time to experiment, as findings can be deployed immediately for the peak giving weeks between Thanksgiving and December 31st.

>> BEST PRACTICE #1: FEATURE A CLEAR CALL TO ACTION HEADLINE

The first two questions any visitor to a web landing page has are: *Where am I? What can I do here?*

The most effective way to answer both is with a clear and compelling page headline. The best headlines are succinct and to the point, but also tap into the reason your donors are motivated to make a gift in the first place.

In our experience, donation page headlines that connect giving to a positive impact, e.g. "Donate to save children's lives" typically deliver stronger conversion rates than pages where the headline simply states the call to action, e.g. "Donate Now."

From a strict usability standpoint, the page headline should use a font size and color that make it prominent, eye-catching, and easy to read. We prefer headlines in bold, black font on a white background.

>> BEST PRACTICE #2: PRESENT A STRONG VALUE PROPOSITION

Once a visitor has figured out what they can do on your donation page, the next question they ask themselves is, *why should I do it?* After all, they most likely receive at least one email per day from a non-profit organization asking them for a donation (and at year-end this number explodes!)

Presenting a strong value proposition is essential to converting more donation page visitors into donors. Making an effective case for giving can be accomplished in a variety of ways, but some of the most effective tactics we've found include:

- Explaining in clear, simple language how donors' money is spent (main body copy)
- Explaining how your approach is effective, and what you've been able to accomplish already (main body copy)
- Displaying trust seals, a testimonial from a prominent supporter, or mission statement to reduce anxiety on the part of first-time donors.

We've found that trust seals such as Charity Navigator, Better Business Bureau Accredited Charity, or American Institute of Philanthropy have the most impact on donor conversion when displayed on donation pages above the fold. This is because most web users don't scroll, so vastly more visitors will see them if they're displayed on the top half of the page.

The most important audience for trust seals is folks who don't know your organization very well and have never given to you before. This group has the most anxiety about taking the plunge; consequently, they're more likely to be favorably influenced by a recognized third-party rating, so it needs to be visible very early in the process, i.e. *before* a user starts to complete the form—not after.

- Illustrating your organizational efficiency with pie charts that break down expense and program allocations. Your page should reinforce the message that donors' money is spent wisely—and mainly on the mission. This information helps to answer two important questions donors typically have—namely, where does my money go? How much of my gift gets spent on overhead?

Consider using a sidebar to display "supporting" content such as trust seals, a mission statement, and budget allocation charts. They're not essential to completing the transaction, but can combine to tell a compelling story of *who* and *what* your organization is about—and how you get results.

>> BEST PRACTICE #3: ONE-CLICK TO DONATE

You risk losing donations on your site if you ask visitors to click through multiple pages to reach a donation form, or ask them to confirm their donation with another click *after* submitting the form.

If your organization uses a multi-page donation process, we recommend re-evaluating each step and deciding whether it could be incorporated into a single page. This may involve eliminating some non-essential questions or form fields that aren't essential to completing a transaction, such as title, middle name, spouse name, phone number, program preferences, etc. and eliminating a "donation confirmation" page, which often resemble a receipt and confuse some donors.

The cumulative effect of extraneous form fields and questions on donation pages, and a confirmation page prior to transaction completion is to test visitors' patience and deplete the reservoir of goodwill you have with prospective donors when they first land on your site. The net effect is that some visitors will jump ship before completing the transaction—needlessly depressing the conversion rate on your donation page.

>> BEST PRACTICE #4: KEEP THE PAGE FOCUSED ON A SINGLE CALL TO ACTION

In many instances, we find the main web donation page on a site uses the same wrapper as the site's homepage—featuring utility links, main navigation, secondary navigation and other calls to action on the periphery of the page (e.g. Sign up for email, Like us on Facebook, Follow us on Twitter, etc.)

This approach is most often used for the sake of consistency, but can sabotage the main call to action on a donation page, since it provides so many opportunities for visitors to detour to other parts of your site (or leave the site altogether) before making a gift.

One way to solve this problem is to create and test a streamlined page wrapper displaying nothing more than your brand logo and a link back to the homepage—while all other wrapper content reinforces the main call to action instead of competing with it.

>> BEST PRACTICE #5: IMAGES

Your organization's work may be such that images are more powerful than words when it comes to communicating how a donor's gift can help others. Groups that are especially blessed in this regard include those working in international development, emergency first responders, child welfare, animal welfare, and wildlife or habitat conservation.

Featuring an image that reinforces the core message in your marketing pitch and is well-integrated with the rest of your value proposition can significantly improve the page conversion rate.

When selecting photos, it's critical that they be authentic and relevant—stock photography that looks fake, contrived or unrelated to your mission can actually work against you—serving to distract or alienate visitors rather than reinforce your message.

Of course, some photos have a greater impact than others, so it's essential to test a variety of images to figure out which one resonates best with your audience.

>> BEST PRACTICE #6: SECURITY SEALS

It's essential to display a recognized security seal on your donation page so prospective donors are confident that their personal information won't be compromised.

We've found that the VeriSign security logo (the most widely recognized brand in online security) is most effective when it appears in the section of the page where donors enter the most sensitive information (such as their credit card or bank account numbers) and complete the transaction (click the donate button).

This is where donors are the most worried about page security—and fear can lead some folks to abandon the giving process altogether if it's not adequately addressed on the page itself.

>> BEST PRACTICE #7: OFFER OPTIONS—DON'T MAKE DONORS GO SEARCHING FOR THEM

There's a wider range of donors on your website than ever before—young, middle-aged and older donors, first timers, and long-time members.

There's no "one size fits all" approach to satisfying these folks. Your donors demand options; and they don't want to waste time trying to find them.

Make sure your donation pages provide both flexibility and clarity to meet a broad range of donor preferences. With some clever coding, you can present a clean-looking donation page that provides donors with:

- Single gift or monthly gift-giving options (experiment with tabs, drop-downs or radio buttons)

- Different methods of payment (credit card, bank account debit, Paypal)
- A mailing address to print and mail the form in for those that are still reluctant to give online (more important if your donor base skews older)
- A telephone number to make a gift by phone (especially for pages that make a monthly giving ask the primary action, where a donor is more likely to have questions before making a high-level commitment)

>> BEST PRACTICE #8: A COLORFUL, EYE-CATCHING DONATE BUTTON

Large and colorful donate buttons that look clickable and feature goal-oriented language often outperform donate buttons that are small, grey and feature generic language (e.g. a standard grey "submit" button).

Our testing work has found **no single color works best** on donate buttons—every audience is different. However, most audiences respond better to bright colors (e.g. blue, red, orange, green) than pale colors (e.g. grey, yellow) and button language that makes the action clear, e.g. Donate, Donate Now, versus language that is vague or unclear on what happens next, e.g. "Process" or "Submit."

Like images, we've found that changes to button color *often* have a significant impact on the donation page conversion rate—but it can be positive or negative, so you'll want to test a variety of options to see which one works best for you.

>> BEST PRACTICE #9: FONT SIZE AND COLOR THAT DONORS CAN EASILY READ

While many of us rely on web developers and designers much younger than ourselves to create web content, it's important to remember that most online donors are over 40—and a significant portion are over 50.

Small font sizes and pale text (grey is surprisingly common) can make reading your donation page a real challenge. Make sure that your page copy (both headline and body text) uses a dark font (preferably black) on white background and is of sufficient size to maximize readability.

Don’t make donors strain to read what’s on the page—and that includes form field descriptions. If they can’t read it, they most likely aren’t going to make a gift!

>> BEST PRACTICE #10: TEST EVERYTHING

Don’t take shortcuts, assuming that what worked on organization x, y or z’s website will automatically work on yours, too.

Too often, we’re hired for a testing project and find that our clients have adopted changes to their donation pages without testing them first, only to find out later through testing that the change was negative for donor conversion—not positive!

Don’t make these costly, avoidable mistakes. Always test new ideas before adopting them wholesale.

These ideas should get you started down the path to unlocking greater value on your web donation pages!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dawn Stoner is Donordigital's Director of Analytics & Testing and works with clients to help them increase online revenues with web usability best practices and landing page testing. Dawn speaks regularly about testing and optimization at industry conferences and publishes papers highlighting what's working and not working with our testing clients.

ABOUT DONORDIGITAL

Donordigital helps nonprofit organizations, campaigns, and socially responsible businesses use the Internet for fundraising, advocacy, and marketing. We provide strategy and implementation to enable organizations to use e-mail, the Web, and other communications to build their constituencies and change the world.

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