

[Andrew Palmer](#) - Thu, 3/17/2016 - 00:00

At PG Calc, we build planned giving websites every day for organizations small and large, for healthcare providers and educational institutions, for arts and aid organizations. Every non-profit needs a substantive planned giving website that is the focal point of their planned giving marketing program. Most people agree with this premise, yet every now and then we hear from someone saying they don't need a website, and that websites don't matter. The argument is made that it's a waste of money or that their donors don't want to read online content. Some even think that a website prevents donors from calling for more information.

That last point can be true. Bad websites do prevent donors from calling. They also can prevent any other leads from coming in. A convoluted or overwhelming information architecture can drive a potential donor to competing non-profits and cause them to lose faith in your mission. That's because your planned giving website matters in more ways than you can imagine. It has a tremendous impact on how your planned giving program is perceived, and thus, it can be a benefit or detriment. But I am getting ahead of myself.

There are four main reasons why websites matter today:

1. First of all, every planned giving program needs a quality website. If your planned giving program does not exist online it does NOT exist at all. In today's digital world you need an online presence, and your website is your online proof that your planned giving program exists. It also gives you the opportunity to show your full "bill of fare," reflect your core mission, and establish your program's viability.

It's an 8x10 glossy of your planned giving program and your chance to introduce yourself to the audience you seek. When you meet a donor for the first time do you dress down? Sweat pants and a T-shirt? Or do you put your best face forward? It's the same thing with your website. It's your chance to let your donors see you the way you want to be seen. As such, customizing the look and feel of your planned giving site is the most important thing you can do. It must reflect your program and mission, not your vendor or communications team.

2. Next, think of your website as your planned giving ambassador. It's your program's brand and an extension of your mission. Your website is a 24/7 invitation to your donors that can provide information, and leads even when you're on the road. It should give donors an immediate feel for who you are and what you have to offer.

The layout and flow of your website creates an atmosphere and perception of the level of service donors will receive from you. If your planned giving site is complex they may think planned giving is too complicated. If it is devoid of useful information they may think your planned giving program is not sophisticated enough to handle planned gifts. A website without serious content does not just leave the donor wanting more, but what's worse, it can leave them with the perception that it's all you know. Can you really convey excitement about a gift annuity in one paragraph?

3. Thirdly, we all make snap judgements every day. It's what we humans do, and it takes only 1/10th of a second to form a first impression. This is no different with a website. The first impression of your planned giving program will be determined visually and it will be assessed within milliseconds.

Scary? For sure.

So doesn't this sound like something important enough to spend the time necessary to ensure the experience is a pleasant one?

There are a combination of factors at play here - structure, spacing, symmetry, amount of text. Even the color and the fonts matter. We believe in a simple visual experience that does not overwhelm the reader, while still pointing them towards the information they seek.

Our premise is that an easy-to-navigate and pleasing-to-the-eye design gets people to trust you and to stick around. Confusing interface design will lead to rapid rejection (high Bounce Rate), and mistrust. And once a visitor does not like some aspect of the design, the whole website can be dismissed as well. Yet, if a donor instantly likes your site, they will more than likely cut you some slack for any missteps down the road.

Thus, it is important to invest time, effort, and/or money into your planned giving website design - it's what matters the most for pulling users in. You only have one chance to make a good impression and once that is gone you cannot get it back. And what's worse is that a negative impression might cause the user to have prejudice against your entire program for years.

You want to be the planned giving program with the friendly, easy-to-navigate, and easy-to-read website that will lead to more opportunity. That said, here is some quick advice that can help you today with your online presence: make certain that the "above the fold" area of your website makes that good impression.

Although today's web visitors have no problem scrolling, your top of the home page will get the most eyes. This first touch must show your best in only 0.1 seconds. What donors see immediately above the fold must be important to your program and what you think your audience wants to see. With that first blink, the visual will always trump the content. Simplicity will beat complexity. And the friendly interface will get donors to call you more than a technical examination of the aspects of giving.

4. Lastly, your website should be your resource center - the central focus of your planned giving marketing. It should be the one place where you demonstrate your planned giving know-how for donors. Education and awareness building is the key. This easy-to-read resource will handle all comers from your main site, email, direct mail, or the search engines.

Institutions that do not see the value in their website often don't know the true capabilities of a website. But those that see it as a primary marketing tool understand its power. They see it as the point where all promotional roads converge. Not just hosting content, but also selling your mission, and planned giving expertise, while at the same time building credibly and trust. Not to mention a great place to generate inquiries.

There is an old adage in online marketing - Advertising gets you noticed. Email gets you clicks. Social gets you shared. But it all needs to lead somewhere... that's your website. Your website still matters.

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