Nonprofit Website Assessment Guide

Assess your site's effectiveness & identify common problem areas
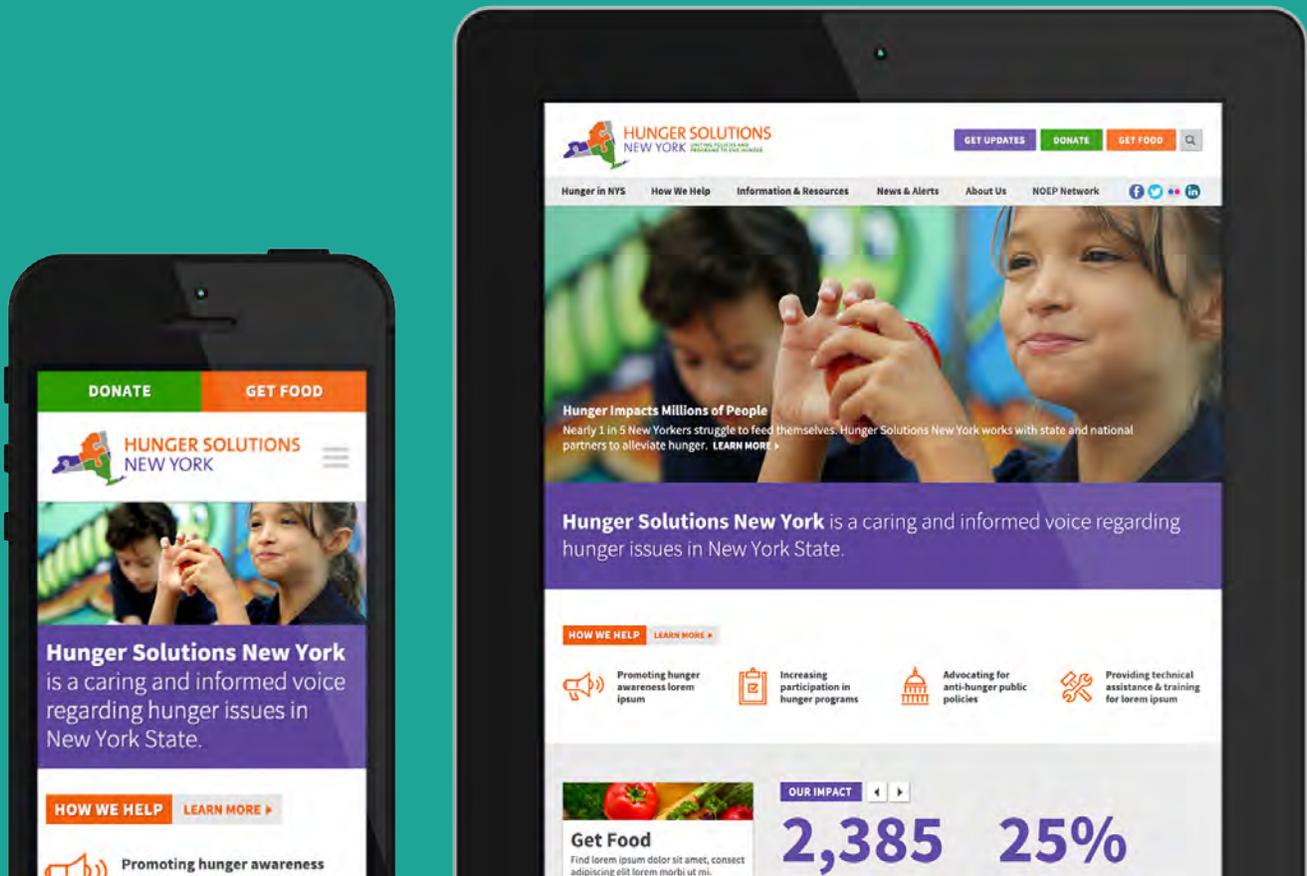
Bureau for Good

Branding & web design for folks who do good

Bureau for Good builds websites & visual brands that help nonprofits educate, advocate, inspire & serve.

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Introduction

Your site is often the first (and sometimes only) point of contact between your organization and your audiences. Most, if not all, of your outreach, marketing, PR, and social media efforts will point directly to your site. A bad site will turn audiences away, and that translates to lower outreach and marketing ROI.

How do you know if you're turning your audiences away? Although a low bounce rate is often cited as proof of audience engagement, what it really says about your site is much more specific. It may show that there's good alignment between your content and keywords, or that your site contains landing pages with clear and appealing offers. Your bounce rate has less to say about audiences who arrive at your site with or without a specific goal in mind, and click around for several seconds before they get frustrated and give up.

Other analytics data, such as funnel analysis, can help pinpoint engagement issues. However, some common usability problems can actually obscure your data. Got ambiguous navigation labels, or bad navigation that sends your visitors clicking in circles? Your numbers may be reflecting confusion, not engagement. Analytics tell you *what*, but not *why*.

User interviews can provide invaluable information about your site. But gathering a large interview sample can be cumbersome for many organizations, specially given the multiplicity of audience types for the average nonprofit site.

The good news is you don't need to run large-scale usability testing to identify the most common problems that may be plaguing your organization's site. This guide will help you identify some those problems, and it's a great place to start if you're looking for actionable ways to improve visitor experience and engagement.

Share This Guide

What makes a good site?

A good site is one that successfully addresses the needs of two parties: the organization and the audience.

Out of those two, the audience is boss. You can't make audiences read content that isn't relevant to their interests, or click around to find information if they're not motivated to do so, or stay on your site if they don't want to.

Many organizations have an unconscious inward perspective that creeps into their content, their calls-to-action, and even their navigation labels. In other words, they have an organization-centered mentality. To improve your site, you must adopt a user-centered mentality, and make sure your content has an outward perspective.

A better site experience, begins with asking three basic questions:

1. Who are your audiences?
List the groups you'd like to communicate with and influence through your online presence. Examples: prospective donors and volunteers, clients, the media, the general public.

2. What do audiences want when they visit your site? (audience needs)
Think about what each of your audience groups wants when visiting your site. Include both first-time and repeat visitors. What kind of content about your organization would be most useful to them? Examples: "I want to understand what this organization is all about." "I want to learn about the impact it has on the communities it serves." "I want to figure out how I can help."

3. What would you like them to do? (organizational needs)
What would you like your visitors to learn and do once they're on your site? These are your core messages and desired responses. Examples: become aware of an issue, support us, donate, spread the word, sign up for our mailing list. When your desired responses are successfully met, we call this a *conversion*.

A bit about your audiences

Audiences are smart. But they're also busy and easily distracted, with their attention often split between several tasks: email, TV, work, chores.

When asking yourself what your visitors want, think about the context they're in when accessing your site. Are they at work, in a professional environment, or at home, surrounded by family? Either way, respect your visitor's time and busy lives, and aim to communicate efficiently.

I want to understand what this organization is all about, **FAST** (before I get distracted)

I want to learn about the impact it has on the communities it serves, **STAT** (before I turn to a different nonprofit website)

I want to figure out how I can help, **NOW** (while I have some spare time)

Prioritizing desired responses

When feeling overwhelmed with too many choices, audiences tend to choose none—they simply give up! That's why it's important to prioritize desired responses. Focus your entire site on a small handful of high-value responses, and narrow down to an even smaller set (only one, if possible) on conversion-oriented pages. By doing so, you can drastically increase conversions.

DONATE!   SIGN UP!   PARTICIPATE!

DONATE YOUR TIME!   SPREAD THE WORD!

SIGN OUR PETITION!   SHARE YOUR STORY!

START A FUNDRAISING PAGE!   JOIN US!

WRITE TO YOUR CONGRESSPERSON!

GIVE US YOUR OPINION!   VOLUNTEER!

VISIT US!   SHARE OUR CONTENT!

ADVOCATE!   TELL A FRIEND!

Overwhelmed? So are they

Creating user-centered content

In keeping with their inward perspective, some organizations create content *they*, not their audiences, would want to see or read. No matter how much you love your content, visitors won't consume it if it doesn't address their needs and interests. What's worse, unnecessary content makes your useful content harder to find, and will cause your audiences to give up and move on.

Long-winded text, generic images, and boring videos are some examples of content that will cause your audiences to lose interest. Keep your content brief and to the point, avoid repetition, and always ask yourself: Can we say it in less words? Would anybody outside our organization care about this?

This doesn't mean you need to restrict the amount of content on your site—as long as it's relevant, write away! But it does mean you need to keep your content organized. If you haven't already, make sure to keep your evergreen content (mission, impact, staff, locations) separate from your editorial or time-oriented content by using your blog or news section.

event photos

last night's gala

how to help

long-winded descriptions

irrelevant videos

what we do

outdated stuff

policy updates

our ED's whereabouts

generic photos

our impact

Unorganized or irrelevant content makes everything harder to find

Spotting navigation issues

When you go to the mall, you may start by heading straight to the floor plan to figure out where you are and where you want to go. You may also rely on signs posted throughout the building.

Here's what you would **NOT** expect when visiting the mall: floor plans that contradict one another; finding a corner of the mall containing dozens of stores that aren't on the floor plan; walking west and somehow ending up in the east wing. If you did, you'd be confused and frustrated. You'd want to leave as soon as possible.

On a website, navigation works in a similar way to a mall floor plan. Good navigation should help users understand where they are, what section they're in, and what path they used to get there. A site with bad or inconsistent navigation will cause audiences to quickly become frustrated.

Some symptoms of bad navigation include:

▸ Branching sections that go too many levels deep (on most nonprofit sites, more than 4; news and information sites are an exception)

▸ An excess of main navigation items (for most nonprofit sites, more than 8-10; news and information sites are an exception)

▸ Navigation labels or calls-to-action that visitors would find confusing or unclear

▸ Lack of wayfinding cues, such as clearly marked parent sections and breadcrumbs

▸ Inconsistent navigation, such as a mismatch between the main navigation drop-downs, the sidebar navigation, and the section landing pages

▸ Content pages that are listed in the navigation under several sections, giving the impression that they are either repeated, or that they don't belong to any one section

▸ Content pages or entire sections that appear nowhere on the navigation or list pages, and are accessible only through an inline link (form pages are a possible exception)

Optimizing forms

Conversion-oriented forms, such as those for donations or email subscription, represent a delicate balancing act. You want to gather as much actionable visitor information as you can: full name, address, phone number, work number, the works. But each additional field can drastically reduce conversions. Your visitors can't be bothered to fill in long forms, or don't want to give away personal information without a good reason to do so.

Optimize your forms by gathering only the most high-value information about your visitors, so you can keep form fields to a minimum. In addition, keep your conversion pages focused by providing a single call-to-action—the purpose of your form. Additional calls-to-action distract your users and reduce conversions.
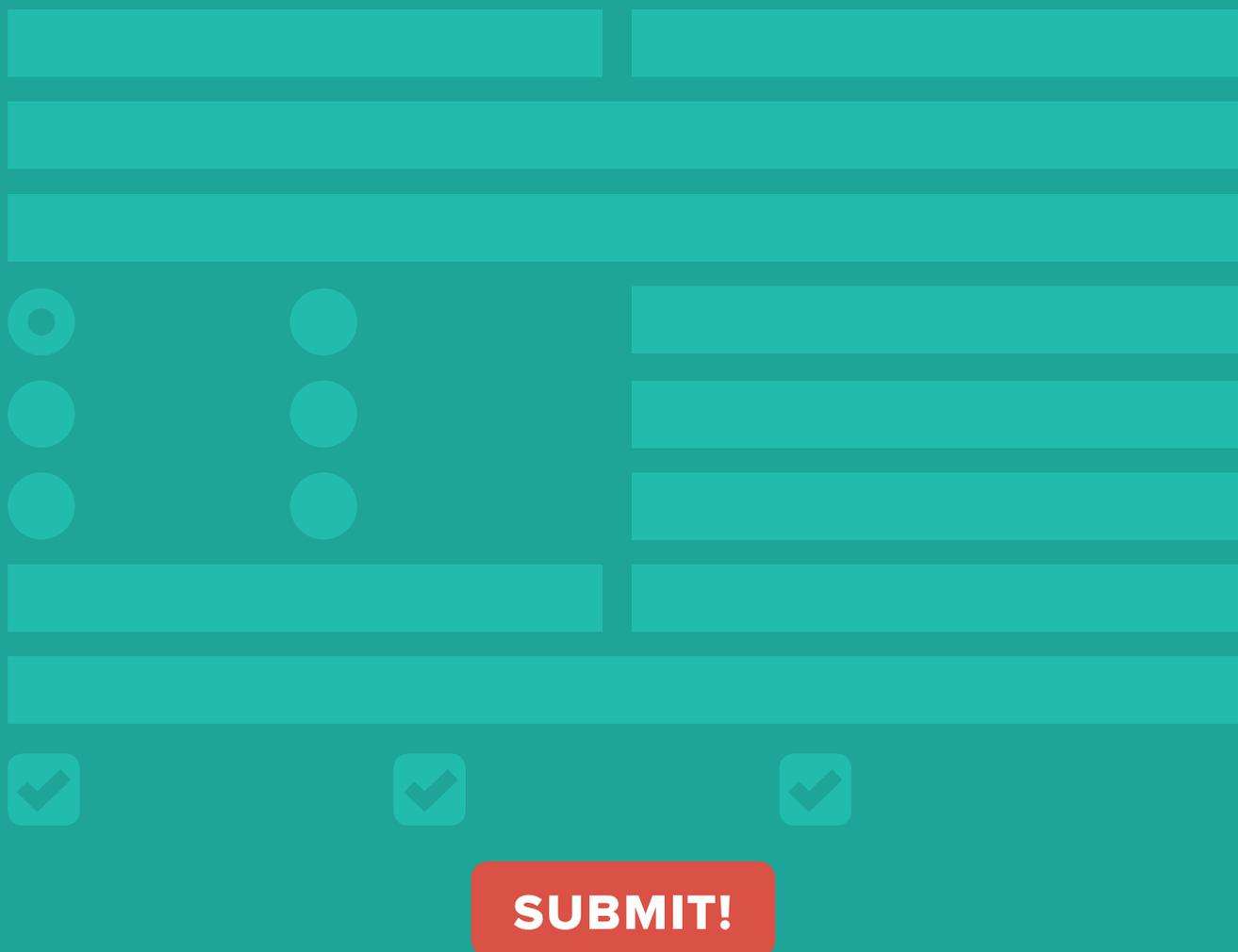
SUBMIT!

Too many questions can lead to too few answers

User-centered layout & design

Good layout is about visual hierarchy—some elements are emphasized in relation to others. Good designers use size, color, and negative (empty) space, among other things, to create emphasis. The skillful use of these techniques serves to guide the visitor's eye.

The design process often fails because of a lack of clear goals: the elements to be emphasized have not been established or prioritized. An improvised approach results in messy layouts with no clear focus. As a result, audiences don't know where to look. The design process can succeed only when core messages and desired responses dictate design decisions.

One notable characteristic of the online experience is scrolling. Most website layouts are taller than visitors' browsers, and are designed to be viewed, not as a whole, but an area at a time. This means you can have several areas, stacked vertically, each with it own focus or purpose. This works particularly well on homepages. What remains essential is that each area be executed with a goal in mind.

Compare these two nonprofit homepages. Which one displays more clearly defined goals? Which one better communicates core messages and desired responses?

Which one does your own site resemble more?
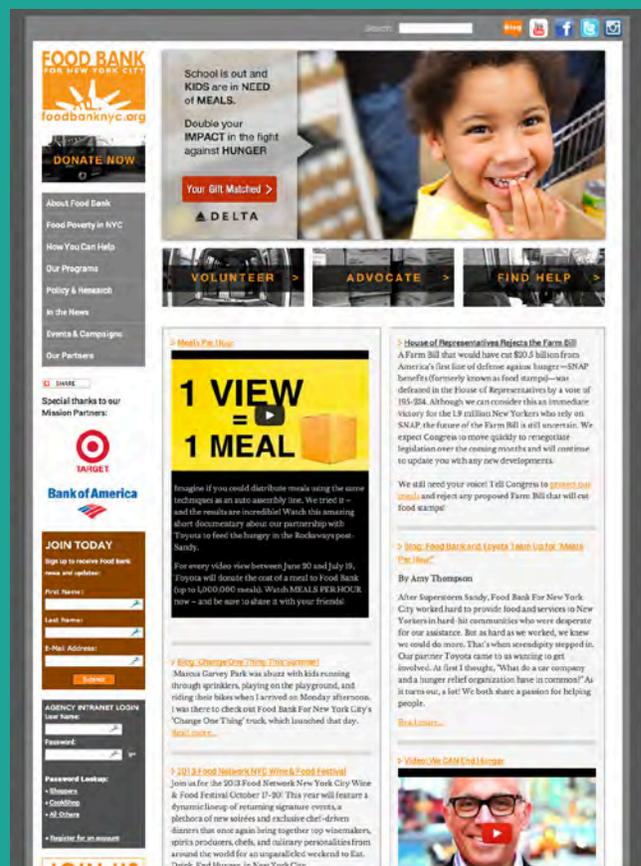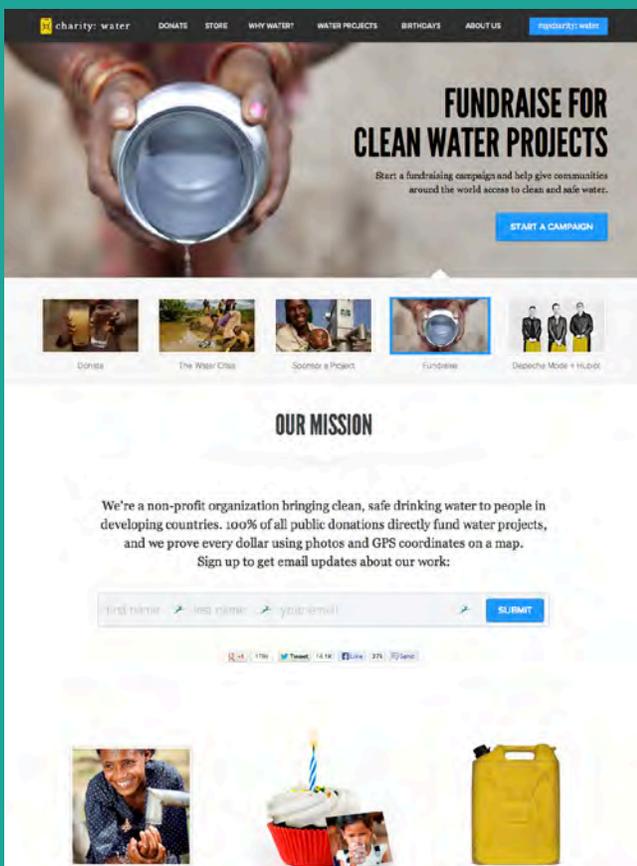
Seeking outside help

Once you complete your website assessment, you're ready to determine the extent of the work required to improve your site's experience. Perhaps all you need is to rethink your content creation strategy, and train your team to create more user-centered content. If the changes need to go much deeper, you'll want to seek a web design firm to help you redesign the site from scratch. A good web design consultant or firm is a knowledgeable partner that can help you establish messaging and desired response priorities, think about your site in more user-centered ways, and bring up issues and problems you hadn't even thought about.

Hope you found our guide useful!

Don't start your nonprofit website without me

A checklist of functionality, features & third-party services for **nonprofit websites**

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or visit **bureauforgood.com/checklist**