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The adoption of websites by nonprofits and the impact on society



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ABSTRACT

An analysis is done on a sample of 1691 nonprofit organizations from division 5 of the census. The adoption rate of websites and the choice of website type by size of the organization are examined. The overall rate of adoption is far less than expected. A resource allocation view among those who have a website suggests that small organizations appear to be using their resources suboptimally compared to the larger organizations. Possible explanations of this are offered. Based upon the findings concerning growth, an improved path for success and its implications for nonprofits are discussed.

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1. Introduction

With the increasingly distressed financial condition of individual states, the role of the nonprofits in society will become more important. These changes will necessitate a shift of traditional public benefits and responsibilities to the nonprofit sector. Nonprofits will be asked to do some creative problem solving in the void that will be created. As such, the nonprofit sector will form a set of interlocking associational complexes that attempt to prevent social ills and detect and correct them before they become “social problems” [1]. In essence, Anheier believes nonprofits will become the “search engine” for social problem solving in modern societies.

If this is to be the future, then the state of nonprofits in their adoption and use of the internet becomes critical to

not only engaging the broader society in dialog but also in attracting the volunteers needed to staff and fund the nonprofits as they attempt to meet the needs of society. Without these two components, as well as the knowledge and skills of the volunteers, nonprofits will have difficulty becoming long term, sustainable entities [2]. If the nonprofits fail then the chance of society emerging unscathed is minimal.

We begin by stating the difficulties of the internet, the practices of nonprofits, and the concerns of nonprofits. This is followed by a description of the sample and the methodology used to analyze the websites of the nonprofits. This is followed by an explanation of the different types of website design that these organizations should consider and which type to choose based upon the organization’s mission, reach, and vision. Hypotheses are tested and the results presented. This is followed by a discussion in terms of the sample and the implications of the findings for nonprofits in general and the potential impact on society. We conclude with some directions for future research.

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1.1. Nonprofits and the internet

Research shows that simply transposing traditional marketing strategies onto the Internet is not effective [3]. Most marketing researchers agree that the web is at its best when it provides true interactive communication between brand and consumer [4,5]. Unfortunately, the time, money, and skills necessary to optimize this seemingly perfect fit with many nonprofits by developing an effective website are not available [6]. In fact, smaller nonprofits often lack an internal dedicated marketing function [7]. As such, they are likely to spend a significant amount of a limited budget on the wrong type of website for their particular needs.

From a budgetary perspective, it is clear that nonprofits are fighting an uphill battle. Sources of funds are restricted to the government, foundations, religious organizations, individuals, and like-minded other nonprofits [8]. Many manage with a small staff and a tight budget [9]. The volunteers often depended upon to fill the gaps do not necessarily possess the technical skills needed to design, build, and maintain a website [10]. Nonprofits everywhere are dealing with declining donations and tightening budgets [11]. The argument is that the decline is being driven by people supporting fewer nonprofits thus requiring nonprofits to do more with less [12]. In addition, since 2010, there has been a significant jump in those making donations online [13]. As such, those who wish to capture the donations need to have an effective and efficient online presence. The combination of these pressures and attitudes along with the current economic pressure leads to the necessity of understanding if nonprofits are adopting the use of the internet and optimally deploying their resources when choosing a website type.

2. Sample

Given the focus of this research, we sought a sample that would allow the generalization of the findings to more nonprofits than not. The characteristics sought to emulate are as follows: first, many nonprofits have a small, if any, paid staff. Second, nonprofits are known for drawing on voluntary labor and donations that produce both public benefits and personal fulfillment. Third, the CPS, one of the two government surveys that collect data on volunteering, reports that, when volunteers were asked what is the main type of organization they volunteer for, the most frequent answer by volunteers is religious [14].

As such, a sample of nonprofits from the religiously affiliated segment of the nonprofit sector was chosen for examination. Furthermore, according to the Urban Institute [14], this segment of the nonprofit sector needs to be examined in more detail. However, it is important to choose a sample from this segment that can control, in some way, the effects of the efforts of national organizations on the outcomes. Last, due to the social import of this research, it is important for the sample to have an external as well as an internal focus.

The sample chosen is congregations that are classified as Churches of Christ. They meet the above criteria as follows: first, Churches of Christ have a small paid staff with a leadership that is made up of all volunteers. Second, the

sample uses all volunteers, with the exception of the previously mentioned small paid staff, and is dependent on donations to fund any activities and support the infrastructure. Those involved do so out of service and receive a sense of personal fulfillment by doing so. Third, they are religiously affiliated. Fourth, these organizations are autonomous and are primarily focused on their local area. These last two traits help to mitigate possible effects due to a centralized initiative that could be the case in other affiliations or denominations or as a result of a national organization or initiative. Lastly, Churches of Christ have both an internal and an external focus. This is important because not only do nonprofits need to sustain themselves but also the society in which they dwell.

2.1. Internal FOCUS

The typical paid staff of a local Church of Christ is primarily tasked with the internal development of the church, and the work of equipping and mobilizing members, as a volunteer base, for the external tasks of the congregation's mission. Organizational health depends on effective membership retention and growth, which often correlates to the effectiveness of internal programs. The internal focus is especially played out in the congregation's weekly meetings (one to three congregation-wide events per week), which usually include an emphasis on individual response to the church's mission. This response is shaped by leaders, but individually directed. Responses may result in service directed toward the church internally, or, toward the community externally, through service by and with the church along either a direct or indirect path [15].

2.2. External focus

The external-direct path is evidenced by the evangelistic pursuits of Churches of Christ, who at one time, grew to be the fourth largest religious group in the U.S. among Christian organizations. This period of growth [16,17] was partly a result of evangelical [18] emphasis on active membership, and the role of each voluntary member in carrying out the organization's mission [19]. Churches were motivated to connect and serve locally by a belief that social good depended on expanding participatory membership [20]. Among these churches, members regarded the local congregation as "the primary sphere for one's living out his service" [19].

The external indirect path is through members being involved in different community charities and other nonprofit organizations. Congregationally organized evangelical churches require a high level of participation from members. Others suggest such participation develops "civic skills" which increase individual capacity for civic voluntarism and political participation [21,22]. This can result in both individual engagement and/or congregational programs that address local concerns or fill the void in a community.

Throughout their greatest period of growth, Church of Christ congregations called on members to support cooperative efforts, such as establishing "children's homes," facilities for displaced minors. Churches of Christ often

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