

Putting Your Organization on the Internet

By Putnam Barber

There are dozens of ways for nonprofit organizations to make productive use of the Internet. The prospects may look so inviting that you're tempted to dive right in. But before you do, think about where you're likely to land. Like any other organizational innovation, starting to use the Internet takes careful planning. It also demands a serious commitment of time and resources. Sorting out the assigned responsibilities before plunging in can save your organization time, trouble, and money.

It can also save you embarrassment. Remember that when you participate in Internet activities, many of the things you do are immediately visible to anonymous audiences around the globe. It's a little like skywriting, though a lot less expensive, and -- usually -- a lot less dangerous! To minimize the peril, everyone in the organization should be clear about what they can, and cannot, do online. At the very least, someone with executive-level authority should make sure that whatever goes out in the name of the organization accurately and responsibly portrays it to the world.

This doesn't mean that your executive director must take on the role of Cybercop. It does mean that s/he should be aware of what is being communicated online, especially in the developmental stages of your Internet presence, and what its potential impact might be on the organization as a whole.

As for the actual process of putting the organization online, as well as the day-to-day management of Internet tasks, those can be delegated to someone else. This assigned manager -- your organization's designated driver on the information highway -- should be responsible for mapping out the steps to be taken over a period of several months, identifying critical points where policy direction and technical considerations intersect, and sequencing the expansion of Internet use to match both available resources and organizational goals.

It's not his or her responsibility to establish policy, although there's no reason why s/he shouldn't have reasonable input on those matters. It is his or her job to see to it that the process is running smoothly, that the technical and operational challenges are being met, and that potential pitfalls are avoided.

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Your Internet Development Plan

Smaller organizations may be able to rely on informal communications to ensure that all interested parties are included in the development of Internet activities. In larger organizations, however, it will probably be necessary to establish a more formal framework for bringing together people from various departments whose work is affected by this new technology. Without a chance to sort things out through regular discussions, the left hand may not know what the right hand is doing. Progress is hindered and enthusiasm wanes.

There is a logical sequence to the challenges that must be met in order to use the Internet effectively. Getting past one before tackling the next will make the whole process much less frustrating. You'll probably be surprised how quickly the use of the Internet becomes routine, just one more tool that your organization uses to do its job and serve the community. Here's a checklist for you and your designated driver to review as you proceed down the road.

Equipment and Connection

First, you will need to have access to the Internet. The simplest way to make this connection is over a standard telephone line, using a modem attached to a desk-top computer. The computer and the telephone will not be available for other purposes when Internet activities are underway. Hence it is important to anticipate conflicts over the use of the equipment.

Some organizations use the same phone line for fax and Internet connections. If they're on the Internet, people get a busy signal when sending a fax, and outgoing fax messages are delayed.. You have to decide if this is an acceptable trade-off. It probably won't be for very long.

Larger organizations may already have a Local Area Network (LAN) that allows personnel to communicate internally via computer and share software, printers, etc. There are numerous options for establishing an Internet connection by adding capacity to the LAN server. Most require some attention to security -- and the building of a "firewall" to protect your internal files and operations. These are matters to discuss with the supplier of the LAN.

Choosing an Internet Service Provider

There are many ways to familiarize yourself with the Internet before you commit to purchasing monthly service. Schools and colleges offer access. Public libraries and "cyber-cafes" do as well.

In most communities, there are numerous vendors who will establish a basic Internet connection. To find the one that's right for your agency, talk to colleagues who are already on the Net and find out what they think of the service they're getting. Many providers offer free software, free trial periods, and other inducements to new customers. By taking advantage of several of these offers successively, you can test the waters without making a major financial commitment during the early, experimental stages of your Internet planning process.

The range of commercial access providers is quite vast -- from the enormous national online services to the computerized bulletin boards run out of some basement down the street. Every aspect of the way these services operate exhibits wide variation -- prices vary, software varies, technical assistance and support vary. The quality and reliability of the equipment can also vary. And services and staff are everything from coolly competent to wildly undisciplined.

You can find an up-to-date list of the access providers in your area code on the World Wide Web. The URL is <http://www.thelist.com/> Local user groups are another good source of information and insight. But keep in mind that "customer loyalty" can make some users too quick to disparage the competition. In many locales, you can get a pretty heated discussion going among Internet aficionados by asking them to rank the local ISPs (Internet Service Providers -- another name for Internet Access Providers).

In addition to the local providers, there are regional and national outfits providing access to the Internet (and little else) over wider territories. Then there are the national online services, such as America Online (AOL), Prodigy, CompuServe and the Microsoft Network, which offer a range of exclusive services, available only to their customers, in addition to Internet access (or at least some Internet applications). When you sign on with one of these online services, you often need add-on software to make use of the World Wide Web and other applications with roots in the Internet.

There are eight things you will want to think about as you compare the offerings of the various service providers available in your area:

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1. Local vs. long-distance calling. Obviously, long-distance charges can add significantly to your costs.
2. Hourly rates vs. a flat monthly rate for unlimited use. People who make serious use of the Internet prefer unlimited use for obvious reasons. Sometimes the same service will have several pricing plans.
3. Free trial periods and start-up charges. New customers require a greater commitment to training and support, so some services tend to discourage "newbies"; they make it relatively difficult for you to sign up as a new customer. Others actively seek to bring new people online by offering lots of goodies up front.
4. Software required for access. Ask about the availability of free pre-configured software for new customers.
5. Modem speeds available for connection. If the ISP's modems are slower than yours, its modems will determine how fast your connection can operate.
6. Hours of operation. Internet access doesn't do you much good if you can't get it when you need it. Are you at the office during "peak" times? If so, the cheaper services may not work for you. Consider, too, the hours when technical support is available.
7. How often the service experiences overloads. Are there long periods when all available modems are in use (producing frustrating busy-signals) or serious "lagging" and "latency" in popular applications?
8. Resources for standard Internet applications. National online services and Internet software suites usually provide the full range of programs you'll desire, but occasionally an ISP will limit their use. At a bare minimum, you will want to browse the World Wide Web, send and receive full Internet e-mail, and read relevant newsgroups. There may be other applications you will want as well. Discussing service limitations before you sign up can avert frustration later on.

This list may seem complicated, especially if you are unfamiliar with the Internet and its workings. But don't feel stymied. If there isn't time for an exhaustive comparison of features and benefits, you can probably feel secure in choosing one of the big national or regional online services or a well-

established local provider -- at least for the time being. Many people use the widely-touted free-trial periods to sample services from several different providers before settling on one. It may turn out that some detail or feature of a particular service provider makes an important difference to you once you've become a regular "Internaut." If so, it's relatively easy to change from one provider to another, and relatively inexpensive to have more than one. So you might as well start with the free disk that comes in the mail, or by trying out the service that hooks up your brother-in-law to his scuba diving discussion group -- and make your long-term commitment later.

Two suggestions while you are still in the exploratory stages: (1) Be sure to take yourself off any of the automated mailing lists you may have joined during a trial period before you let an account expire. If you don't, "bounced" mail from your account will make life miserable for the list's managers because they won't be able to contact you to find out if you're still interested in participating. (2) If you haven't settled on a final choice of service providers, avoid creating the impression of "official" participation in online activities. Once the Internet address your organization uses becomes well-known, it's a nuisance to change it -- akin to changing your phone or fax number. You should feel confident that the service you are buying is right before printing an e-mail address on stationery, brochures, or business cards.

Configuring the Software

Some providers give you all the software you need, with detailed advice about how to make it run smoothly. Others get you started, but allow -- or encourage -- you to add or substitute software that fits your particular work habits. Before you spend time mastering the intricacies of any available software tool, review the alternatives and assure yourself that the package you've chosen will suit your organization's needs.

Be sure, too, that it's set up correctly. There are many online discussion groups that can help you do that. Or you can check the dozens of computer-oriented magazines that specialize in product comparisons and how-to advice.

Using E-mail Effectively

Once people in your community (or around the world) learn that your organization is online, they will expect the same courtesy and promptness in

responding to e-mail inquiries that they would expect if they wrote you a letter or called on the phone. So, from the very start, it's important to make sure that e-mail is being properly dealt with. Developing a system for tracking e-mail responses should be high on the list of your Internet manager's priorities. In addition, if your work depends on sensitive or confidential information in any way, you will need to establish policies that protect those interests. The manager should be responsible for seeing to it that these policies are understood and observed

The Internet manager should also make sure that information distributed over the Net is current and accurate. One of the extraordinary advantages of the Internet is that the material you post can be updated almost instantaneously. When you're providing this sort of information online, you won't have to worry about what to do with a storeroom full of brochures containing the wrong fax number or the name of last year's campaign chair. So it's astonishing to find so many Internet sites where announcements of completed events, annual reports covering periods long past, and incomplete or nonfunctioning cross-references continue to go uncorrected. Far too many organizations seem to forget that they have posted items which have become faded or inaccurate with time, and that this stale information is still being accessed day after day. If the Internet manager takes responsibility for preventing such gaffes, the organization can spare itself a lot of needless embarrassment.

It's also important to have a procedure in place for posting messages that might be construed as representing your organization's considered opinion or policy. Some organizations require employees to use a "signature" file which explicitly states that the writer's observations are not those of the organization, even when the organization's name doesn't even appear on the communication. (After all, readers may not automatically recognize that something was posted after hours and/or solely to express a personal point of view.)

Remember: Internet activities should be managed as communications activities -- on a par with producing brochures, flyers, annual reports and public service announcements. The tools and techniques may be new, but the purpose is the same. Serious attention must be paid to what is being said to whom through this new medium, not just to the technical challenges of learning how to make the hardware and software work.

Mailing Lists and Newsgroups

Depending on your organization's field of service, it may discover scores of online sources for current events, advice and opinion. Appropriate personnel should expect to spend some time sifting through them, checking to see which ones best match their goals. One great advantage of the Internet is that these resources are usually free for the asking. Another is that you can usually join in online discussions, and drop out again, with a few keystrokes or a simple e-mail message. Don't worry that you might be burdening the person who adds your name to a mailing list and then, a few days later, has to remove it. Most online discussion groups handle all those details completely automatically.

Posting, Announcing, and Becoming a Presence

Good "netiquette" suggests sampling the traffic in any online discussion group or conference for a while before joining in yourself. Check the "Frequently Asked Question" files, or FAQs. These files serve as archives of useful information; if you look in the FAQ before asking what may be a very familiar question, you won't be starting off on the wrong foot when you join a discussion group.

A good place to jump in is when you see a question that you can provide solid information about, especially one asked by someone who says, "I checked the FAQ for this group and couldn't find anything about...." Knowledgeable answers to two or three questions of that sort will go a long way toward preparing the group to welcome a question or request from you when the time comes for you to put one out for general reactions. And it's an effective way to introduce your organization's expertise and resources to other participants.

The organization should gauge carefully how willing it is to serve as an online resource. An agency that specializes in training and technical assistance might find making judicious responses to related questions a good way to promote interest in its program offerings. On the other hand, a food bank might want to be cautious about letting itself become identified as a general online resource for advice about how to use a database program, even if it had developed a groundbreaking application for use of that program in everyday operations. The onus of responding to inquiries can quickly overwhelm an organization that's understaffed to begin with.

Creating a Web Site

Since a Web site is passive while other uses of the Internet tend to be quite participatory, it might seem that you could start developing materials for the World Wide Web while you are still feeling your way around the other parts of the Net.

It is unlikely, though, that the investment you will have to make in designing, implementing and maintaining even a relatively simple Web site will be rewarded unless your organization is prepared to participate actively in other Internet arenas as well.

If your service provider makes a simple Web site available as a part of its subscription package, then you may want to test this proposition for yourself by designing a page or two of basic information about your agency and its programs. Include some sort of feedback form so that you can track who visits it and why. Although there are strong reasons for composing materials especially for the Web, most organizations start by "recycling" documents created for other purposes. It's relatively easy and inexpensive, which is mainly why it's done. But the Internet manager should sift through such materials, and anticipate how they'll come across when they're viewed on the Web. Too many organizations thoughtlessly post a boring annual report, complete with a stodgy head shot of the chairperson of the board and his turgid recitation of last year's accomplishments. That may prove flattering to the chairperson's ego, but it's a turn-off to anyone else. If folks who access your site do bother to read it, chances are they'll never come back.

Maintaining a Comprehensive Presence

With a well-designed Web site, you don't have to spend lots of money to reach thousands, or even millions, of people all over the world. Like any communications program, however, an Internet presence requires a sustained commitment to following through on the responses you get from the public. That, too, is something that the Internet manager should make a priority.

S/he will need clear guidelines for acknowledging comments and suggestions, for responding to requests for information, and for dealing with complaints. Precisely because it is so easy to communicate quickly and informally by e-mail and in Internet discussions, the expectation is that you will respond. Failure to do so may seem even more egregious to someone who initiates

communication in this medium than it would to someone who communicates by letter or by voice mail.

Coaching the Uninitiated

One of the most important services that the Internet manager can offer is to encourage appropriate personnel in the organization to become familiar with online projects conducted by others working in their field of interest. As this happens, your staff should begin to feel more comfortable with the patterns of activity and the special "culture" that characterize online communications. At the same time, they will get immediate personal and programmatic benefits from the effort that they invest.

If there's a technically adept person who is willing to tackle that side of the equation, take advantage of his or her expertise. If you need to look outside the organization for support, talk with colleagues who have already put their organizations online. If there's a technical services organization or support center in your community, consult with them.

Should you determine that you can only get the technical support you need by looking outside the organization, proceed with caution. Your assigned manager may oversee the work of outside consultants, but responsibility for making sure that your organization is being represented accurately and effectively through the Internet should always rest with someone whose first loyalty is to the organization and to the success of its programs. And since the ultimate responsibility for managing your Internet presence should eventually reside within your agency, staff development should be built into any contracts you make with paid consultants.

Extending Internet Use in New Directions

Use of the Internet will probably come to your organization through active participation by some staff members, while others will have relatively minor - or no -- involvement. A good Internet development plan includes a provision for periodic review of the potential for increased productivity and effectiveness by extending usage to other offices or units, to board members, donors, volunteers, clients or community members.

Senior management should also keep an eye on the developing technology in the field. Uses that seemed impossibly difficult yesterday are likely to become

commonplace tomorrow. Audiences that were beyond any practical reach a few months ago may be regular Internet users today.

Technological breakthroughs occur with dizzying speed. Already much of the work you do using libraries, reference books, conferences and workshops, the postal service, faxes and the telephone can be done better -- cheaper, faster, and more conveniently -- using the Internet.

Making the transition may seem like a daunting task, but it is also an exciting one. Thousands of nonprofits around the globe are already using the Internet to expand and strengthen their services. New ideas and opportunities are circulated every day.

There is no better time than today to start building your organization's communications plans for tomorrow.

Technical Institute of Midway

Imagine a technically savvy university where an institution-wide commitment to using the Internet has taken hold. Everyone -- students, faculty, staff, alumni, vendors, parents, donors, applicants for admission -- has an e-mail address. (T.I.M. even generates a little revenue through a reselling agreement with a national Internet provider.)

A simple software program lets anyone set up a mailing list. The undergraduate bicycle club uses it to plan rides. Alums in the New Orleans area use it to send out notices of their quarterly meetings. Each course has its own mailing list for exchanging information between meetings. Fans of the baseball team, whether they are in Kansas City or Copenhagen, can find out the latest score at the end of every inning.

High-school students receive catalog information by sending e-mail to admissions-info@tim.edu. If they want, they can download a file with the complete application package on it, take a virtual tour of the campus through the T.I.M. Web site, or request a CD-ROM that captures sample sessions from actual classes.

When it's time to register, students access the Web site and sign up for classes. The online registrar automatically flags possible scheduling conflicts or missing prerequisites. Students can forward their tentative class schedules to an advisor for prompt feedback via e-mail.

Nearly every lecture is broadcast live on the World Wide Web, with low-key support for slide-shows, whiteboard demonstrations, and even animations of molecular structure and the operation of kinship systems. T.I.M.'s webserver archives every lecture and classroom discussion, so students are spared the distraction of taking routine notes. After class, they can "surf" other presentations -- using a system-wide search tool that builds inquiries with "fuzzy logic" in order to find related concepts and cross-references.

New grads have an online support network to help them enter the job market. Interested alumni participate in subject-specific discussion groups with active input from members of the faculty and their peers at other institutions around the world.

Researchers from other universities can access the T.I.M. Library, through its Internet link, 24 hours a day. Use of the library's original documents and special collections has increased steadily as online cataloging makes sophisticated searching of the library's holdings more feasible.

When the purchasing department wants to buy something -- anything from pencils to a new computer center -- requests for proposals are sent to prospective suppliers with a few keystrokes.

The alumni office uses self-selected mailing lists to correspond with graduates, parents, and other stakeholders. The effect: a great reduction in costs, clerical work, and wasted paper; plus a significant increase in enthusiasm among recipients.

For the development office, telling the Institute's story has become an interactive process (not a one-sided public relations campaign). It's easier to stay in touch with donors far from campus, and contributions are rising as a result.

A futuristic fantasy? Not really. The truth is that there's nothing about this imagined scenario that couldn't be happening right now...

Putnam Barber is president of The Evergreen State Society and keeper of the soc.org.nonprofit FAQ/files at <http://www.nonprofits.org/npofaq>. He is also writing The Grantsmanship Center Guide to Nonprofits and the Internet, from which this article is adapted.

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