

Hot Nonprofit Web Sites

HOT NONPROFIT WEB SITES BLAZING NEW PATHS

BY CRAIG CAUSER

Prior to dial-up and DSL, information was available via the confined working hours of businesses and the local library. Along came the cyberage. The need for instant gratification helped to build the Internet into an electronic city that never sleeps.

Nonprofits plugged in and provided information and education. Have a health-related question? Need to know where that fundraising event is taking place? Want to contact an organization? Nonprofit Web sites were there to handle those concerns.

Advances in technology and target marketing have proved that information is not always enough. Users are no longer excited to sift through pages of text or .jpg images. Popular Web sites now utilize music, movies, downloads and non-carpal tunnel syndrome inducing navigation to draw in eyeballs. And, many of these forward-thinking

sites are run by nonprofits.

THE NONPROFIT TIMES examined more than 200 Web sites in selecting this year's hottest. The selection process was not scientific -- astronomical hit totals and multi-million dollar online fundraising campaigns were not required to make the list. A site's torridity was judged on how its message was conveyed with importance placed on availability of materials, rotating content, ease of navigation and unique features.

There are plenty of worthy Web sites, but those chosen were able to best convey the mission and tone of their organizations through a computer screen and a couple of speakers.

They're hot. They're cool. They educate and entertain. And they'll have you clicking back for more.

Howard Dean For America

URL: www.deanforamerica.com

TRAFFIC: 100,000 unique visitors per day

ANNUAL BUDGET: Organization would not disclose

IN-HOUSE OR OUTSOURCED: In-house and outsourced

DOLLARS RAISED: \$3.6 million (from April 2003 - June 2003)

UNIQUE FEATURES: Personalized Web pages, Dean TV, Blog for America

Welcome to the cutting edge in political candidacy. Former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean has grabbed the spotlight for his presidential bid by embracing the support of thousands of people through the Internet.

"The most revolutionary thing about our site is the way that we let people self-organize," explained Nicco Mele, webmaster at Howard Dean for America. "We have hundreds of thousands of people who want to help and get involved. We don't have enough staff to answer the email and answer the phones and tell them what to do. So, we invite them to meet with people in their area and talk among themselves and figure out what they want to do to get Dean

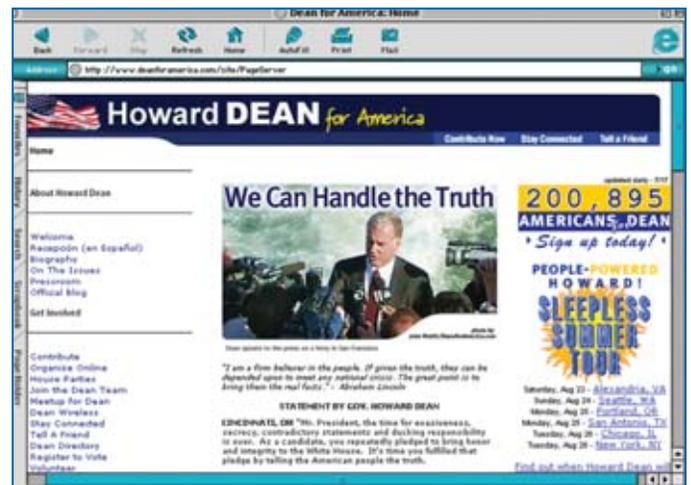
elected."

The campaign has also been in the middle of the SPAM controversy, with some accusing the campaign of sending unsolicited messages.

At press time, the site had amassed nearly 1,000 "Dean Team Leaders" -- personalized Web pages designed by people who are raising money for Dean's campaign. The site provides all the tools to interested users. Donations are directed to Dean's main site. Its greatest success found one person raising close to \$10,000 for the campaign in less than 10 days.

The Team Raiser software was designed by Internet services provider Convio and utilizes a system similar to those featured in online walkathon Web pages, Mele said. While there is a limit to the amount of content placed on each individual site, no participant has exceeded that level to date. With Convio handling the bandwidth issue, the ever-growing number of sites is not a problem, Mele added.

"Our strategy is really not about the Internet crowd," Mele said. "We have a lot of people involved in the campaign who have never been involved in politics. We have a lot of



young people. And, we have a lot of people who aren't necessarily Internet people but have Internet access and have used that to get involved with the campaign."

Viewing the Weblog, or "blog," at blogforamerica.com is one way to stay plugged in. Staffers generate an online daily journal to keep people abreast of what's going on with the campaign. The Blog for America has a personal feel to it. Many campaign Web sites do not feature the names of staffers. Mele refers to them as "nameless, faceless entities that just spit out press releases." But at Dean's site, the names of staffers are posted on the

blog for all to see.

For the more visual supporters, there's Dean TV. With new content arriving almost every day, it's almost all Dean, all the time.

"Dean TV is like programming for our own cable television channel," Mele said. "It's designed in high quality for people to download to their laptops and take to any place where people are meeting to see a video of Dr. Dean. It's designed as a high-bandwidth video image that we can quickly distribute to our activists so that they can take it to events. It's just another part of the self-organization process we encourage."

Easter Seals

URL: www.easter-seals.org
TRAFFIC: 75,000 visitors per month
ANNUAL BUDGET: Organization would not disclose
IN-HOUSE OR OUTSOURCED: In-house and outsourced
Dollars raised: Organization declined to provide figures
Unique Features: "Palmer's Story"

The good works done by nonprofits are often integrated into marketing strategies designed to appeal for public empathy. Like any good story weaver, Easter Seals, based in Chicago, melds together music, images, and a compelling narrative for its first foray into Flash technology. Its two-minute movie, "Palmer's Story," is the real-life tale of a young girl adapting to life following a car accident that left her without the use of her legs.

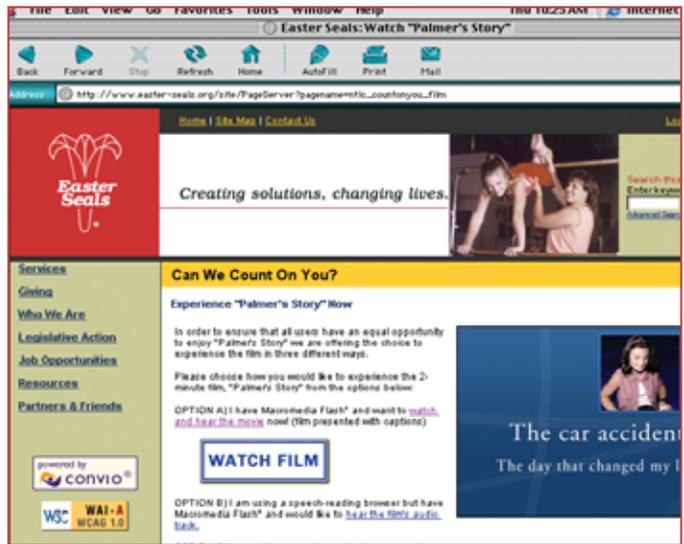
The organization had been trying different fundraising, outreach campaigns, and messages to increase its Web traffic and registered user base. Testing was instituted in hopes of discovering features that would be compelling to online constituents. The prime focus became those people who were not entirely familiar with

Easter Seals. Easter Seals decided upon the creative theme of telling its story through the eyes of one person. Its consulting partners recommended Flash technology, from which the organization previously stayed away since everything it does has to be accessible to people with disabilities, explained Shirley Sexton, director of Internet marketing.

"It (Flash) is cost-effective and not only that, but we know that a lot of our site visitors and even our affiliate staff are on dial-up and not broadband yet," Sexton said. "To do something like a streaming video probably would exclude a significant number of people from finding out what we're about."

According to Sexton, Easter Seals decided to go with Flash technology due to its ease of use and because it is built-in to widely used Web browsers, such as Internet Explorer and Netscape. Easter Seals tested the movie with a dial-up and slow connections and gave the project the green light.

The first time has been a charm. "Palmer's Story" was placed online in mid-July as a part of a larger cam-



paign, "Count on You." It doubled the site traffic and quadrupled the average number of donations from three per day to between 10 and 12 per day, Sexton said. A significant amount of traffic flowed in from other disability and news Web sites where the project was mentioned.

"The whole campaign cost about \$35,000," Sexton said. "I think the production of the movie is going to fall somewhere between \$10,000 and \$15,000. I know that if we did it again

that it would be a lot less since we've got the format down now. We pretty much worked from a blank slate and had to do a lot of edits. This is serious stuff and we had to be accurate."

Easter Seals is talking seriously about this being the first in a series of Flash movies. Sexton said that she would love to find a corporate partner that would be interested in underwriting one of the movies. Certainly there's no shortage of great stories to tell, she added.

Ducks Unlimited

URL: www.ducks.org
TRAFFIC: More than 1 million page views per month (during peak duck season Sept. - Jan.); 285,000 unique visitors per month
ANNUAL BUDGET: \$80,000 (excluding Webmaster salary and Web hosting)
IN-HOUSE OR OUTSOURCED: Designed by a consulting company, current work completed in-house
DOLLARS RAISED: Approximately \$240,000
UNIQUE FEATURES: Greenwings area for children; picture of the week for members

An "online community" is the attention of many Web sites and Ducks Unlimited (DU) accomplishes this goal on two fronts. Its Greenwings site for kids is a Saturday morning cartoonish mix of fun, games, and educational materials. Kids can choose to color waterfowl or learn about animals and the environment in the *Ask Dr. Bob* segment. Teachers can also benefit by downloading workbooks and curricula available at Greenwings.

"Greenwings came about when it was decided that an emphasis was

going to be put on educating youth about the organization and getting them involved at an early age," said Anthony Jones, webmaster at the Memphis, Tenn.-headquartered DU. "The hope is to get them going to the site so that they use it for education and fun and games, and as they get older they'll be more likely to visit the national site to learn more about what we do on a wider level."

The URL for Greenwings (www.greenwings.com) makes it appear as if it is a separate entity from the DU homepage. There's some positive and negative aspects to that, Jones acknowledged. The organization has been consciously promoting a brand management strategy, where national and state sites and other sub-sites have a similar look and feel. The look and URL for Greenwings is diversified, but it also stands out as a place that is tailored to young children, said Jones, who arrived at the organization after the Greenwings site had been established.

DU's corner of the Web is certainly kid-friendly, but adult members have plenty to keep themselves busy



through a 1,500-page national Web site that is updated daily. The members-only section has been enhanced to better connect the DU community with one another.

"In the members-only area, we've recently upgraded to a new message board," Jones said. "In about two to three weeks we've had over 1,000 posts from our members. We've also recently launched a members-only photo gallery. With this you can upload photos of your waterfowl hunts, DU events. A lot of people uploaded

pictures of their retrievers, and things like that. We choose a picture of the week that we put on the homepage. That has gotten to the point where it's one of the most popular pages on the site."

The organization is in the process of instituting a new system that will allow DU's state Webmasters to upload events from local chapters so the information will be available to a national audience. The idea is to grow the site's audience together, both kids and adults, Jones added.

Heifer International

URL: www.heifer.org
TRAFFIC: 1.85 million user sessions in FY 2002
ANNUAL BUDGET: Estimated at \$400,000
IN-HOUSE OR OUTSOURCED: Technical work is outsourced
DOLLARS RAISED: \$8.4 million (Fiscal Year 2002)
UNIQUE FEATURES: The Most Important Gift Catalog In The World

In the Fall of 1997, Little Rock, Ark.-based Heifer International began a more educated and visual on-line giving program when its gift catalog appeared on its Web site. It has since grown and is now billed by the organization as: "The Most Important Gift Catalog In The World." The claim is not easily dismissed, as Heifer's site collected \$8.4 million during fiscal year 2002 (July '02 - June '03).

Users can choose their gifts based on animal equivalents. The featured animals are the most commonly used in Heifer programs. So while the or-

ganization does supply silkworms in China and Yaks in Tibet, they're few in number and not available on its site.

With the common animals that are featured, \$500 can supply one heifer, \$150 a single llama or \$120 for either a goat or a pig. For \$5,000, a person can select a Gift Ark, which is comprised of a bevy of livestock.

"It's a symbolic donation," noted Mike Matchett, director of marketing at Heifer International. "It's the average cost with the training and the livestock. That's what that money can do. It is not a one-for-one, cause-effect thing. One isn't ordered and then immediately dispatched. The tracking of that would be nightmarish. The training is an important part. We do extensive training where sometimes people train for a year before they receive their animal so they know how to take care of it properly."

By clicking on an animal, the user is taken to a page that describes what



benefits it provides the recipient. Heifer's site is designed to make a tangible representation of the impact of a donor. It wants donors to know what can happen when a family receives something as simple as a goat.

"I think a lot of Americans, especially people in cities, think, 'What difference can a llama make?'" Matchett said. "It's really life changing. In a lot of places it's kind of like giving someone a small business. For instance, with a goat you'd have enough milk and cheese to feed a family and then you sell the excess for an income."

Heifer International has been around for 59 years, but Matchett said many people are just finding out the organization and its model. They are certainly doing so online where the \$8.4 million raised on the Web in fiscal 2002 was up approximately 60 percent compared to the previous year.

Heifer's overall fundraising increased "reasonably well" but did not match the percentage increase tallied on the Web. Matchett added: "It seems that more and more people are coming to the Web. It was definitely a banner year for us."

Stuttering Foundation Of America

URL: www.stuttersfa.org
TRAFFIC: 494,500 homepage hits per month
ANNUAL BUDGET: Estimated at \$15,000
IN-HOUSE OR OUTSOURCED: Outsourced
DOLLARS RAISED: Organization does not track online fundraising
UNIQUE FEATURES: Brochures available for download

One of the Internet's greatest features is being able to access information around the clock. Nonprofits are increasingly posting detailed educational materials on the Web for public consumption. While it doesn't hurt to cover all of the bases, the Stuttering Foundation of America (SFA) is proving that brevity breeds success when it comes to providing online materials.

The organization has made available on its Web site more than one dozen of its popular educational brochures by simply downloading and printing a .pdf file. The various brochures offer advice to parents, teachers, and employers to better understand stuttering.

Unlike long-winded manifestos,

the brochures offer streamlined tips and points of interest making it easier for individuals to locate the information they need.

The idea of putting brochures online is an extension of what started 20 years ago when SFA established a toll-free telephone number to allow people to order materials on stuttering, explained Jane Fraser, president of the Memphis, Tenn.-based organization. "We had materials for many years, but getting the word out was the key. The brochures were free and the shipping costs were assumed by SFA," said Fraser.

Those costs have decreased since the brochures were posted on the Web. "Those brochures are all four-color. And, even when we print 100,000, we're still paying 15 cents a brochure," Fraser said. "So, we're actually saving a lot of money by people downloading them off our Web site, especially since we're sending them out free of charge."

SFA's "If You Think Your Child Is Stuttering..." brochure gets more hits than any other feature on the site. Prior to its Web presence and despite



SFA's same-day mailing policy, a person who ordered the brochure would have to suffer the usual snail mail delays. Now, an unlimited number of professional-looking replicates are possible at the click of a mouse and with 8-1/2" x 11" glossy paper and a color printer.

The brochures are the first step in a process that will see the organization's videos and possibly conference

materials hit cyberspace.

"We'd love to put our multimedia up. It's just a question of getting it done and technology - how many people actually at this time can download it," Fraser said. "But that would definitely be the next step as would offering some continuing education opportunities to therapists that want to upgrade their skills in working with people who stutter."

Surfrider Foundation

URL: www.surfrider.org

TRAFFIC: 60,000 unique hits per month

ANNUAL BUDGET: Approximately \$40,000

IN-HOUSE OR OUTSOURCED: In-house and outsourced

DOLLARS RAISED: Organization does not track online fundraising

Unique features: Music, ocean illness survey

One look at the homepage for the Surfrider Foundation does not immediately elicit the ooohs and aahs brought about by cutting edge multimedia. But if you're a surfer, beachgoer, or just plain love the ocean you'll quickly notice how the site perfectly captures the vibe of the organization, even if you can't tell the difference between a Billabong and a Bruce Jones surfboard.

Music has been a staple of the San Clemente-based organization for years as evidenced by its popular "Music for Our Mother Ocean" compact discs. Artists such as Paul McCartney, Pearl Jam, The Beach Boys, Jimmy Buffet and Jewel have supplied their pipes to

help raise money for Surfrider. Visitors to the Web site can not only purchase these albums but also listen to various tracks before buying.

Surfrider has also provided a number of relevant services, including an ocean illness survey for those who believe that an illness has been caused by ocean water contact. Web visitors can

purchase water testing kits at the online store.

"The site does a great job of capturing what Surfrider is all about and its vibe," said Matt McClain, marketing and communications director at Surfrider. "One of the problems is a lot of sites are technology rich but content poor. Surfrider has sort of the opposite problem. We've got pages and pages and pages of content. Our challenge is to sew it together in a bit of a palatable manner."

McClain wishes that the site offered a bit more of a technical knockout and less scrolling to view each page. But the organization's goal right now is to go out and deliver the Surfrider message, which is protect oceans, beaches, and waves, and incorporate that into people's lifestyles, he added. That begins with the organization's endemic culture – the surfing population. But Surfrider has positioned itself on the Web to embrace anyone, whether they are frequent beach users, snorkelers, beach volleyball players or people that are just recreational beach visitors.

Surfrider has a planned overhaul for its Web site in 2004, which comes at a time when commercial surf companies are seeing an infectious surfing interest in previously untapped pockets, such as Kansas City and Chicago.

"Right now, surfing and beach culture is something that has America's fascination," McClain said. "You've got movies and reality television. While it might be kind of the activity du jour in terms of mass media, it's always been that cool, sexy, underground activity that speaks to people. We want to make sure we hold on to that because it separates us from a lot of the other environmental organizations."

