

Sue Fidler Ltd e-consultancy for charities

Digital Media.. becoming a paperless communicator

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Following Dean Russells' excellent comment that charities should be making more use of digital communications to save money, increase response metrics and help save the planet seems an ideal opportunity to offer advice and resources.

The web seems scary and expensive if you don't know about it. A full website build with a proprietary Content Management System (CMS), professional design and implementation will cost upwards of £10k whether you go for open source or Microsoft based systems.

There are cheaper alternatives. At the bottom end you can build a simple site on a tool such as WordPress for very little.. see www.theworldcantwait.org.uk Then there are open source platforms where the licence is free, such as Drupal and Joomla. However, implementation is not free. Unless you have the skills and time for DIY you will need an agency to design and build the site, and maintain/upgrade it. This can be a cheap option, but expertise costs money.

Email is an ideal way to communicate. It can be personalised; both by salutation, details and even paragraphs, just like direct mail. But it is also immediate (delivery takes seconds) trackable (you can immediately see who opened it, who clicked and on what) and very cheap. Email marketing tools are normally priced in bands according to the volume of emails sent per month. Even if you are sending less than 100 emails the costs should be no more than 10p each, sliding down to 1p for 10,000+ emails.

There are free open source email systems. But as with open source CMS you will need the skills to set up and manage the platform, templates and address books. Proprietary systems start at about £100 for which you get templates, training and everything set up – well worth the money if you can't do it yourself.

And there are lots of places to find help. As well as the usual suspects (i.e. consultants like me) there are free articles available in various places such as the ICT Hub Knowledgebase. Also well worth joining is the Charity Webmasters Forum (<http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/charitywebforum>) where users regularly get answers from people who have done it; invaluable knowledge sharing for free.

There is no excuse not to be using the web and email – you only have to ask, or search, to get all the knowledge needed. And if you still lack the confidence, get a consultant.