

Promoting the Websites of Community-Based Organisations

Scott Bingley, Victoria University, Australia. Scott.Bingley@live.vu.edu.au

Stephen Burgess, Victoria University, Australia, Stephen.Burgess@vu.edu.au

M Gordon Hunter, University of Lethbridge, Canada. ghunter@uleth.ca

Abstract

Community-based organisations (CBOs) are a widely diverse group of organisations that exist to benefit their membership or promote a wider cause. CBOs are increasingly using websites to assist in carrying out their functions. This paper examines the practices of 35 CBOs from Australia, New Zealand and the UK from the viewpoint of how they use offline and online strategies for website promotion. CBOs employed a mix of offline and online promotion strategies – which appeared to relate to the operations of different types of CBOs. There was a level of sophistication that was not expected by the authors. Another interesting result that emerged from the study was that there was a degree of uncertainty as to how social networking websites fit into the web presence of CBOs.

Keywords: community-based organisations; websites; promotion; study; qualitative

Promoting the websites of Community-Based Organisations

Introduction

Community-based organisations (CBOs) are a diverse group that need to build relationships with different stakeholders, such as volunteers and potential donors. CBOs are turning to the Internet to assist in raising funds and recruiting volunteers and members. As part of this strategy, many CBOs are setting up their own website. Through a study of 35 CBOs, this paper examines the strategies that CBOs adopt when promoting their websites.

Background

There is no one term that can be employed to describe Community Based Organisations (CBOs). In examining studies of the sector across different regions, Denison and Johanson (2007) suggest that the terminology used to describe such organisations varies – with terms such as voluntary organisations, non-profit organisations, non-government organisations (NGOs), community organisations and charities being employed. CBOs are a widely diverse group. This diversity exists in their origins, finances, activities, the people they serve and the means they use to achieve goals. They range across environmental groups, playgroups, child care, charities, sporting associations, church groups, service clubs and so forth. CBOs rely on engaging people for the benefit of their membership or to promote a wider cause and typically need to build relationships with different groups – such as volunteers, supporters, donors and the media. The majority of community organisations are small, are community-based, have limited resources and often rely on volunteer labour to carry out their operations (Spencer 2002; Kenix 2007).

Spencer (2002) identified that the Internet was potentially useful to CBOs for fundraising, attracting and managing volunteers, providing information, as a tool for advocacy and to assist to build communities and enhance relationships by engaging website users. Kent, Taylor and White (2003) suggested that a strength of the Internet was that it could help individuals to realise that they share interests with others. There have been few studies that examine the level of use of websites by CBOs in detail. In 2003, the Centre for Community Networking Research (CCNR) in Australia conducted a nationwide survey of 923 CBOs (Centre for Community Networking Research 2003). The survey showed that the vast majority (97%) of respondents had computers and over 60% of respondents actually had a website, which was a significantly higher rate than other similar studies in the late 1990s. Website adoption rates ranged between 50-75% for most categories of CBOs. Just under half of the smaller CBOs published websites, compared with over three quarters of larger CBOs (Centre for Community Networking Research 2003).

Website promotion

Goatman and Lewis (2007) examined the adoption and use of websites by charities in the United Kingdom. They observed that little attention had been paid to the use of the Internet for marketing purposes by charities (note that in the UK most CBOs are registered as charities). They identified the primary purposes for having websites as being to raise awareness of the charity; raise awareness of its mission; provide relevant information or services; provide contact details and to generate new supporters. The authors concluded from the results that charities generally considered their websites to be moderately successful across a range of purposes. The study also suggested that larger sized charities considered their websites to be more *successful* than did their smaller counterparts (Goatman and Lewis 2007).

Most CBOs are small organisations, and this paper is directed towards those CBOs. A CBO differs from a small business in that it does not necessarily promote its website to customers, but to other parties as mentioned earlier (such as volunteers, supporters, donors and the media). In suggesting how small businesses should link their website promotion with their general marketing strategy, Burgess, Sellitto and Karanasios (2009) suggest that they consider:

- Online strategy
 - Select appropriate domain names (or website addresses, as per www.domainname.com).
 - Think about where the organisation ranks on search engines
 - Look to partner with third party websites (such as portals) that have a greater reach than the organisation
 - Consider the use of banner or other advertisements that might direct web users to the organisation's website.
- Use traditional media
 - Combine the online and offline strategy by placing the website address on printed media such as letterheads, brochures, packaging and on print advertising.
 - Run 'cross promotions' by advertising via traditional media and referring potential customers to the website to enter competitions, and so forth.
- Targeted promotion
 - Think of using direct marketing approaches – such as e-newsletters.
- Evaluation of website promotion strategies
 - Ensure that whatever approaches are adopted that a method of evaluating their success is put in place before it is implemented.

Although there are some studies examining the role that websites play in the marketing mix of CBOs, there is little known about the promotion of CBO websites themselves. In this study the authors examine the website promotion practices of CBOs to establish if they follow the recommendations of Burgess et al (2009), in particular those that relate to the use of online and traditional media. Space precludes an assessment of the authors' *targeted promotion* and *evaluation of website strategies* suggestions (to be addressed in a forthcoming paper).

The Study

The study was conducted between March 2008 and April 2009. It involved the conduct of semi-structured interviews with staff of 35 CBOs in Australia (15), New Zealand (13) and the UK (7). Interviews were conducted in metropolitan and rural areas. In Australia, these were conducted in and around the city of Melbourne; in New Zealand, the interviews were conducted in and around Auckland and Christchurch; in the UK, the interviews were conducted in and around Cardiff and Luton.

The aim was to achieve a spread of CBOs across a range of areas to determine the issues facing CBOs in general rather than a specific type. Originally it was intended that this would be across sporting clubs, youth services organisations, charities, libraries and 'neighbourhood houses' (or community centres). However, as many CBOs in the UK register as charities it was decided to amend that category to be known as 'support' organisations. The interviewees were identified via a Google search, initially by location (eg 'Melbourne' or 'Christchurch') and then by type (eg 'youth services'). As the study targeted the use of websites, only CBOs that actually had websites were selected.

The interviews were generally conducted at the premises of the organisation in question, although some interviews were conducted at a mutual point of agreement. In two instances, interviews were conducted by telephone when a convenient meeting time and/or place could

not be arranged. Five interviews were initially conducted in Auckland, New Zealand in March 2008. After these initial interviews, the researchers refined some of the questions for the remainder of the interviews. The questions were asked under a series of themes – demographics; adoption of the website; building the website; maintaining the website; promoting the website; and measuring the success of the website. Initially, results to short-answer questions were entered into an MS Excel spreadsheet, which allowed quick analysis (using the ‘autofilter’ feature) according to demographic categories and the basic identification of themes. For aspects of this paper, a more detailed identification of individual interviewee responses according to themes occurred via the use of the qualitative research support software package NVivo – which allowed each interview to be imported from its MS Word file. Then, individual interviewee comments were linked to themes (which were set up as ‘tree nodes’ in the software). This assisted in ensuring that all comments made by interviewees in relation to the particular themes were identified.

It was always intended that a sample of CBOs across different countries would be beneficial to compensate for any ‘local’ differences. The selection of Australia (and Melbourne in particular) was from a convenience point of view as this is where two of the authors are located. Interviews in New Zealand and the United Kingdom were carried out as the researchers were already there in some other capacity (such as conference attendance) at different times. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the CBOs that were interviewed. Only metropolitan CBOs were interviewed in the UK, so there is a majority of metropolitan CBOs in the sample.

Table 1: Breakdown of Interviewed CBOs

Country	Location		Type of CBO					Total
	Metro-politan	Rural	Comm centre	Library	Sport	Support	Youth	
New Zealand	7	6	2	2	2	3	4	13
Australia	8	7	4	3	4	2	2	15
United Kingdom	7	-			1	5	1	7
Total	22	13	6	5	7	10	7	35

Results

Interviewees were asked a number of questions about the development and maintenance of their website and who was involved at the various stages of development. Of particular interest in this paper are the series of questions that investigated how they promoted their website using Burgess et al’s (2009) online strategies and traditional media. Although some rich qualitative data emerged from the study, space limitations mean that the discussion of results presented here is limited to a summary of the interviewees’ responses.

Interviewees were asked whether they used a number of different *offline* sources to promote their website – in this instance meaning that their website address (or URL) was listed on the source. Table 2 shows a breakdown of the responses to these questions.

Table 2: Offline Website Promotion by CBO Type

Offline promotion	Comm centre (%)	Library (%)	Sport (%)	Support (%)	Youth (%)	Overall (%)
Letterhead	83	100	71	90	57	80
Business cards	83	80	57	60	71	69
Brochures	67	100	29	80	71	69
Flyers	100	60	57	50	43	60
Booklets	67	40	14	60	57	49
Posters	17	60	29	50	43	40
Yellow Pages (offline)	17	40	-	20	14	17
Other offline	17	67	57	50	-	40

Overall, the organisation's letterhead was the primary means used to advertise the website, with eight out of ten CBOs suggesting that they follow this practice. Other prominent offline avenues for advertising the website were business cards, brochures and flyers. Booklets and Posters were used to a lesser extent. This tended to relate more to the fact that they were not used as much in some CBOs (for example, sporting clubs) rather than any disinclination to use them to advertise the website. A number of CBOs mentioned that they had a policy that the website address would be placed on any printed media they produced.

A number of CBOs suggested other offline means that they used to advertise the website. The most common of these were printed magazines, newspapers and newsletters. Other offline media mentioned were printed directories, signs, stickers, 'fridge' magnets and (in the case of libraries) borrowing cards.

The findings in Table 2 suggest that overall there is a good blend of 'traditional media' (as suggested by Burgess, Sellitto and Karanasios 2009) used by CBOs to promote their websites.

Interviewees were also asked about the types of online strategies they use to promote their website. These results are shown in Table 3. Almost two-thirds of CBOs stated that they put their web address in their email signature, whilst just over half attempted to select keywords that would help their organisation to rank higher in search engines. Other popular approaches were to be listed on the local council website and/or a regional portal. There are some variations amongst the different types of CBOs as to which approach they use. One of the most interesting of these is youth services CBOs, which are lower in the overall levels of usage of all of the online promotion areas except for one – social networking websites. Given the likely clientele of youth services CBOs, this was not an unexpected result.

Table 3: Online Website Promotion by CBO Type

Online promotion	Comm centre (%)	Library (%)	Sport (%)	Support (%)	Youth (%)	Overall (%)
Email	83	60	86	50	57	66
Keywords/ search engine	50	40	57	80	29	54
Local council website	50	60	71	40	29	49
Regional portal	67	-	57	30	14	34
Social networking	-	20	29	30	43	26
Yellow pages (online)	33	-	-	10	-	9
Other online	33	40	71	50	14	43

In fact, of all the promotion possibilities that were mentioned, social networking websites produced the most discussion from interviewees. The most prominent site used was FaceBook, followed by MySpace and then Bebo. However, a strong theme to emerge from the interviews was that many of these adoptions were experimental, with comments such as "its in it early stages", "its not official" and "it is managed separately from the main site" being quite common. A small number of social networking sites had been set up but "not accessed" after that. One UK support services CBO was quite concerned about how they would draw the line between unofficial chat that occurred on the website and official advice being offered by their counsellors. Two CBOs that did not use social networking websites suggested that they were not suited to their clientele (the elderly). Some other CBOs were thinking about introducing social networking websites as part of their operations. It appears that until the use of social networking becomes more mainstream for the clientele of CBOs, can be integrated into a CBO's web presence and issues such as the control and security of content are resolved that it may remain on the periphery for many CBOs.

There were also some other online strategies used to promote CBO websites. These included being listed on online directories or portals (6 CBOs), having reciprocal links with other CBOs (5), being listed on peak body websites (5) and non-library CBOs being listed on the

local library website (3). Some unique promotion strategies were being listed in the online white pages and one New Zealand CBO had two domain names that lead to their website (.org.nz and .co.nz).

A study of the websites of 45 CBOs in Australia (Burgess and Bingley 2008) found that it did appear that the websites of some metropolitan CBOs, particularly libraries and charities, were somewhat more sophisticated than their rural counterparts. In this study, the proportion of metropolitan CBOs that used both offline and online website promotion were greater than rural CBOs in most instances. This was most evident in the proportion of metropolitan CBOs that used email as a means to promote their websites (81% versus 38% for rural CBOs) and the use of social networking websites (36% versus 8% for rural CBOs). With the latter result, it should be noted that a larger number of support service businesses in the UK used social networking websites and only metropolitan businesses were contacted in that region. It was expected that rural CBOs might make more use of regional portals to promote their websites, but the proportion was again slightly higher for metropolitan CBOs.

When compared with Burgess et al's (2009) recommendations for online promotion, the CBOs seemed reasonably sophisticated, with a number using email and search engines as a means to promote their websites. Some looked to third party websites, such as local council websites and regional portals to list details of their organisations and others relied on reciprocal links.

Although this study has been conducted across three countries, it should be said that they are all *Commonwealth* countries and perhaps more similar in nature than different, so the authors are comfortable in saying that they feel these results would be reflected in similar countries. It may be necessary to conduct similar studies in different countries before generalisations can be made elsewhere. The overall finding is that CBOs do employ a range of strategies, some of them quite sophisticated, to promote their websites. It appears that the strategies they adopt are tailored around the resources they possess and the assets at their means (for instance, sporting clubs tend not to produce brochures, booklets and posters and so do not use those to promote their websites). The main area of uncertainty at the moment is how social networking websites fit into the online mix for CBOs. Some CBOs have embraced them, but the majority that have adopted them are still very cautious in how they use them and typically do not link them with the 'official' web presence. This is an area to watch in the future. When considering Burgess et al's (2009) suggestions for how small businesses should link their website promotion with their general marketing strategy it appears that the CBOs exhibited a reasonably sophisticated mix of online strategies and traditional media.

Conclusion

This study has examined the website promotion practices of 35 CBOs in Australia, New Zealand and the UK. The results showed that the CBOs employed a mix of offline and online promotion strategies – and in many instances the type of promotion employed appeared to relate to the operations of different types of CBOs. This implies a level of sophistication that was not expected by the authors and some degree of consistency with Burgess et al's (2009) suggestions for how small businesses should link their website promotion with their general marketing strategy. In relation to social networking websites, there is obviously a great deal of uncertainty as to how social networking websites fit into the web presence of CBOs. Until issues related to the control and security of social networking content are resolved and its usage becomes more mainstream for the clientele of CBOs, then it is unlikely to receive widespread adoption by CBOs (apart from those that deal with youth groups as their clientele).

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