

# Website tips for charities

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## Introduction and about this guide

You need to create a website. At this point you have considered the following options about why the website is needed:

**Overhaul of your current website** – you need to make significant changes to your current website's structure, brand, domain name (web address), content etc.

**A brand new website** – you already have social media pages that are frequently maintained and you are now ready to take on the responsibility of looking after a website that will raise awareness and improve perceptions of your organisation in the eyes of visitors, funders and the wider community.

**Website purpose** – you understand its purpose as one or more of the following – an online brochure, an information hub, an online community, a place to process donations etc.

## Important points to consider

Expanding on the above, it is important to consider who will be responsible for designing and maintaining your website and what will happen if they leave your organisation? Do they have the capacity to manage a website that will require a few hours of work per week? If you are not sure that you have the internal resources available to manage this, then you might be better off sticking to a social media page or making use of existing directory-type websites where you can create a single page listing.

For example, organisations that work across Gateshead can create a free listing on [www.OurGateshead.org](http://www.OurGateshead.org). If you progress down the route of a website then you must make sure that all registrations and Google accounts are created using a generic organisation email address, such as [info@...org.uk](mailto:info@...org.uk), so that access to these always remains within your organisation and you can transfer responsibilities easily in the event that somebody leaves.

There are lots of different elements that will contribute to the success of your new website:

- **Domain name** – a web address (URL) that is easy to read and type.
- **Website structure and usability** – how easily visitors can navigate your site.
- **Website design** – attractive and easy to read (you will already have a clear brand in place to guide the design).
- **Website content and copy** – useful and relevant content that visitors can understand and relate to (that search engines will also favour and reward).
- **Website SEO** – how easily your website is found by search engines and therefore visitors.

In this brief guide we will go through a few of the *technical* aspects of websites, the processes and options you can choose from when creating a new website, and some of the pros and cons of each. The advice is drawn from our own experience, is not an

exhaustive list and *does not* include advice about designing an effective structure, producing engaging content for your website or advice relating to any other online platforms like apps or Software as a Service (SaaS).

## 1. Before you begin

*Website fundamentals: creating a name, address and 'home' for your website*

### Finding a suitable host or 'home in which to store your website

A hosting service stores all the files belonging to your website on the internet. Hosting typically costs around \$10 - \$100 per year and it is a good idea to check the reviews of different providers for their reliability, customer service and security. Your hosting provider can also offer a security 'SSL' certificate for your website – see what this means in the section about site structure below.

Most hosting providers offer a service to register a domain name (web address) for your new website. You don't have to register your domain name with the hosting provider but it does keep things simpler.

### URL, DNS, and IP addresses – what's it all about?

Every device that connects to a computer network has a unique identification number called an IP (Internet Protocol) address. DNS stands for Domain Name System and this connects IP addresses with domain names (website addresses or URLs – Uniform Resource Locators), a bit like a directory. Domain names were created because they are more memorable than numerical IP

addresses but you can still type a specific IP address into a browser to find a website. The DNS 'directory' is not stored in one place. With hundreds of millions of domain names to store it would be very large indeed! Instead, the information is spread across numerous servers and sometimes saved on your computer, router or internet service provider servers when you visit a site multiple times. This is called caching.

### Purchasing a domain name

Domain names are purchased via a Domain Registrar service. Popular sites include Domain.com, 123Reg.com and GoDaddy.com. If your chosen domain name is not currently in use or highly desirable, you can expect to pay around \$10 - \$15 per year to register with a Domain Registrar.

It is best to purchase a domain name yourself or make absolutely certain that you have complete ownership of the domain name if you allow someone else to purchase it on your behalf. The details must be registered under a generic organisation email address such as info@...org.uk so that access always remains with your organisation. It is easy to see why this is important when you consider whoever has access to the email account and login details for your domain registration can point your domain name to any website.

It is also important to note that when you purchase a domain name your contact details will be automatically added to the Whois register. Unless you make your details private then you may receive sales calls.

If your Domain Registrar is different to your Hosting Provider then you will need to log into your Domain Registrar and update the DNS. This just tells them that the domain / URL you are using is now being used by someone else.

As mentioned, it is more straightforward to use a combined domain name and hosting service and if you have opted for this route then you can skip this step.

### A note about site structure, hierarchy and security

Before you build your website it is a good idea to learn basics of website URLs, how they are constructed and how search engines, like Google, crawl and index content.

URLs are divided into sections:

Protocol://**hostname**/**path**/**filename**

For example, <https://example.co.uk/About/OurImpact.htm>

'HTTP' stands for Hyper Text Transfer Protocol. This is the protocol used by the World Wide Web that defines how messages are formatted and transmitted. HTTPS is simply a secure HTTP whereby communications are encrypted by TLS (Transport Layer Security) or SSL (Secure Sockets Layer). Google is still the most popular search engine and they recommend that **all websites should now be HTTPS secure** so it is a good idea to purchase an 'SSL certificate' from your hosting provider.

- The hostname (domain name) and protocol are not case sensitive; however, Google differentiates between **www** and **non-www**, **http** and **https** websites and you will need to choose how you would like the address to be displayed. E.g. <https://example.org.uk> or <https://www.example.org.uk>. If somebody types in your website address with or without a **www** first they will still reach your site; this decision simply affects how the address is displayed.
- The path and file name all point to content from your server and are case sensitive.

- A forward-slash / after the hostname is optional and directs to the same content but a forward-slash used in the file name or path alters the URL.

For example, <https://example.org.uk/> is the same as <https://example.org.uk>. However, a forward-slash in a *path* is treated as a different URL:

1. <https://example.org.uk/About> is different to
2. <https://example.org.uk/About/> which is also different to
3. <https://example.org.uk/about/> (remembering that file names and paths are case sensitive)

You have probably realised by now that there are a number of characters within a URL that instruct search engines in one way or another and you should avoid using these in your file path name. Letters **A-Z**, **a-z**, numbers **0-9** and characters **- \_ \*** are all OK to use. A space in a URL will become **+** or **%20** and a **+** symbol will become **%2B** – you may have noticed this when trying to share a link and you accidentally copy a space at the end of the URL text and it puts **%20** at the end of the link, causing it to become inactive. **Always take extra care when creating and sharing URLs.**

When you create new file path names, try to think about how visitors (and search engine bots) will use them to find the information they are looking for. Choose sensible file path names that explain exactly what the page is for (e.g. News, About, Contact etc.) and try to create file paths that organise pages in a logical way.

## 2. Building a website

*Domain name and a hosting service sorted.  
You are now ready to construct your website*

There are a few options at this stage:

### **Build your own with a website builder**

Gone are the days when you needed to be a coding wizard to build a website yourself. Today there are a number of online 'website builder' platforms that offer a user friendly interface whilst cleverly taking care of all the code behind the scenes for you.

The three most popular website builders at the moment are [Squarespace](#), [Wix](#) and [Weebly](#).

Website builders offer a quick, easy and affordable way to create a website but you still need to be confident in understanding the structure of an effective website and how to make it user friendly. If you plan to build a simple portfolio style website with just a few pages and a contact form, then this approach is great. If you require a more complex site then you can still build it yourself using a website builder but be sure you have created something that is clear and easy to navigate.

Website builders offer a huge choice of templates and the designs of these can be customised yet still slightly restricted to the user so that you always retain a professional appearance. This is useful but you also need to be careful that your organisation's brand still shines through; you may wish to research ideas online or employ the services of a designer. Often, the website building platform will provide video tutorials and blogs about creating an effective website so be sure to take advantage of these.

### **A note about Content Management Systems (CMS) and updating your site**

If you choose to hire a web developer to build your website then they will build it with a Content Management System or CMS. The CMS is a user-friendly interface that allows non-coders, like us, to make changes to the *content and appearance* of the website. This is important because you will need to regularly update the information on your website in order to make it useful and attractive to visitors. Depending on the CMS, you may or may not be able to make changes to the *core structure and functionality* of the website.

**A Content Management System can either be open-source or closed-source.** A closed-source CMS is a unique platform sold by the developer, or from a third-party proprietary CMS. An open-source CMS is free to access by anyone in the online community. Examples of open-source Content Management Systems include Wordpress, Drupal and Joomla; a good developer will be able to suggest which is more appropriate for your needs.

A closed-source CMS is a bespoke and more expensive option but if you choose an open-source system then you must ensure that you implement regular software updates to reduce the risk of a security breach. Many developers offer these updates in a monthly support package.

Open-source CMS's are the most popular because:

- Queries can be shared and solved in the online community.
- People who have used them before are familiar with how they work.
- They are easy for beginners to use to update content on the website.
- If you are reasonably skilled in IT, they

can save money when you want to make changes to the functionality (rather than just content) of your current site – adding new features (e.g. a news feed or contact form) or altering the core structure in any way. In this instance, an elementary understanding of html is useful and there are numerous places you can swot up on the basics online.

If you don't feel confident making changes to your website functionality yourself then developers that use either an open-source or closed-source CMS can do this for you but bear in mind the charges that may be incurred depending on what has been agreed in your contract / support agreement.

### Hiring a web developer

**If you are less confident in your ability to design an effective website using a website builder or if you are looking to create large website with complex functionality then it is best to employ the services of a web developer.** Finding a trusted web developer with whom you can form a lasting professional relationship is the most important step in building your new website. You can either choose to work with a freelance developer or a web design company.

Choose a freelance web developer if you have a clear understanding of your website requirements; are confident that you can continue to update and maintain the website using the *open-source* CMS in the absence of support from your freelance web developer (if they are sick or cease trading); have found a developer that is also a skilled *designer* or have employed the services of a freelance designer to work alongside your developer.

Choose a website design company if you would like an expert to take the lead on

structure, navigation and the design of your new website; provide ongoing support, updates and troubleshooting; offer training to you and your team members about how to update the website content using the open-source or closed-source CMS; and help you to make any structural changes to your website in the future.

These services can vary in cost and level of support; it is always a good idea to get a few quotes for comparison.

### 3. After the build

*You've got your new website up and running, now how easy is it to find?*

#### Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

SEO used involve a lot of 'tricks' that web developers would use to push your website to the top of search engine displays for certain keywords. Google and other search engines are a lot smarter today and the algorithms now reward honest and useful content, and demote any website that tries to trick the search engine. They do, however, still need a little guidance to help them analyse the content of your website.

**A good web developer will walk you through how to make your website more search engine friendly.** This includes things like adding header tags to pages, adding a few relevant keywords to each page, writing a 'meta-description' (description of the page content) for each page, including relevant image titles, updating the sitemap and creating friendly urls within your site (e.g. [example.org.uk/about/12345678](http://example.org.uk/about/12345678) becomes [example.org.uk/about/our-impact](http://example.org.uk/about/our-impact)). [Google Webmasters](#) also covers the basics if you don't have any technical support on hand.

**How much time, effort and resources you need to spend on your SEO depends on your objectives, website size and website performance.** You might want to hire the skills of an expert to assist with certain campaigns or if your website receives a lot of regular content. They will be able to do all of the above as well as apply more complex techniques like enriched searches, keyword research and redirects. [Google Webmasters](#) offers lots of information about best practice and even covers what to ask your SEO expert in an interview!

### **Google AdWords – online advertising**

Depending on the purpose of your website you might also decide to promote it using Google AdWords. AdWords are paid adverts but if you are a registered charity you can apply for a [Google grant](#) to cover the costs. Be mindful that effective AdWords campaigns should direct to specific landing pages on your website and not your website homepage because users will be expecting to find specific information relating to your ad. If you are working with an SEO expert, they will offer guidance on setting up an AdWords campaign. Otherwise Google offers helpful step-by-step advice.

### **Google My Business – your organisation details**

This is a free service offered by Google. [Google My Business](#) displays vital information about your organisation, such as, a location map, contact details, opening hours, reviews, upcoming events and more. A strong profile will make your website more visible, appearing on Google Maps searches so it is worth filling out the details from your organisation's Google account. Beware that some companies try to scam people into paying a regular fee by

suggesting Google My Business is not a free service offered by Google.

### **Linking your social media**

Now that your website is up and running you should link your relevant social media accounts so that people can connect with you easily online. Google and other search engines will take note of the accounts that you link to your website to assess your impact so this is an important step. Adding something like a Twitter feed to your homepage is also a simple way to keep the content on your website regularly updated with new information, something that search engines value and reward.

### **Google Analytics – measuring success**

Google Analytics is a free powerful tool that allows you to monitor how well your website is performing. Google offers [free online training](#) about how to make the most of this tool. It is strongly advised that you should install Google Analytics on your website. You can do this by adding a tracking code after the opening <head tag> on your website. Again, the [Google Analytics tutorials](#) explain how to do this. If you have constructed your website in a website builder then you may need to refer to their relevant tutorial about how to install a tracking code.

If you ask your web developer to set up a Google Analytics account on your behalf you must make sure that you are the owner of the account (and don't just have permission to access a 'view' of the data), otherwise if the developer disappears then so does all your data! In an organisation **it is a good idea to keep the Google Analytics attached to a company email / Google account** rather than a personal one for simplicity and security.

## Summary

We have very briefly covered the fundamental elements of a website:

- how to register a name, address and hosting service;
- understanding the structure of URLs;
- what the different options are for building a website and some considerations about Content Management Systems;
- basic SEO we should all be doing for our websites and advice about where specialist SEO services might be needed;
- different places you can advertise your organisation through Google;
- why you should link your social media accounts;
- how to get free training on setting up and using Google Analytics to monitor the performance of your website.

Recent research has found that a large proportion of charities do not feel confident in their digital skills, which is preventing them from promoting their organisations online,

saving costs and increasing donations. This quick guide is aimed at helping to break down some of the technical barriers and explain the jargon used in website development.

### Useful online resources to explore:

#### SEO

- [Google Webmasters](#)
- [Moz.com](#)

#### Content management systems

- [Wordpress resources](#)
- [Drupal resources](#)
- [Joomla resources](#)

#### Analytics

- [Google Analytics training](#)

#### Learn basic HTML

- [Codecademy.com](#)
- [W3Schools.com](#)
- [Dash.generalassemb.ly](#)

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