

Why NGOs need to embrace digital now

 By [Sandy Peters](#)

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From garnering greater support through transparency to building online credibility with funders, and having a platform to maximise sharing of their authentic stories, NGOs can only benefit from having a sound web presence.



Jeri Curry, president and CEO, Enset (Image source: YouTube)

The [Resource Alliance](#) recently partnered with [Enset](#) and the [Bandwidth Barn](#) to present two free-to-attend events for the NGO sector to explain how the internet and technology can be harnessed effectively to increase the success of non-profits and social enterprises.

We chatted to Jeri Curry, president and CEO of Enset and a panelist at both events, to find out what Enset does, why utilising digital is so vital for the sustainability of NGOs, as well as where they should start. Curry was appointed CEO in 2015 and she focuses on developing strategic partnerships for Enset.

New standard for non-profits

Enset, the exclusive non-profit provider of the .ngo and .ong domains, was established in 2015 by the [Public Interest Registry](#), the organisation that operates the .org domain. While the .com and .org domains are open to all organisations, the .ngo domain was created for specific use by non-profits registered in their country of origin in order to address issues of transparency, accountability and credibility in the sector. Enset anticipates that while .org will remain a domain for the non-profit sector, .ngo and .ong will, in the coming years, determine the new standard for civil society and non-profits. The organisation's focus, says Curry, is on those NGOs who are yet to come online, and helping them understand how digital can enable them to build their capacities to accomplish more.

Greater need for transparency

There is now a greater need than ever before for non-profits to be transparent in their operations as international and local funders require more insight and reassurance as to how their donations are being spent, and the kind of impact they're having in society, explains Curry. "If you're not online, it's hard to show impact in a broad way, so your scale is very small. If you are online, you have a responsibility to be transparent not only about the monies and how those are spent, but about what your organisation stands for, your vision, your mission, your values, are you transparent about who you partner with, are you transparent about who your board is - all those pieces of building credibility." Apart from funders requiring greater

transparency, there is also a growing public scepticism due to unethical behaviour in the space by some bad actors - online validation can go a long way to address this, says Curry.

"Get your digital house in order"

The use of digital tools, however, goes beyond transparency - Curry explains that it's about being relevant in today's digital economy and differentiating your organisation from the wide pool of NGOs. The internet, as an overflowing source of information, has been a bit of a blessing and a curse in the sense that it allows NGOs to be more accessible, but it also becomes a challenge to stand out from the myriad organisations in the online space. It's about "harnessing that digital economy and digital effectiveness", explains Curry, in order to elevate your presence. "If you don't start to embrace some of this technology, your sustainability might be impacted from competition within the sector as well."

"Getting your digital house in order", she says, begins simply with setting up a website and stating your vision, mission, who you serve and how you serve them, as well as a branded email address. Not having a website is akin to not having an office in the past, she says - people question your validity. The next step would be to focus on social media and bridging your accounts to your website, making sure all the "rooms are connected". While perhaps more accessible, Curry cautions against the exclusive use of social media platforms in building your online presence.

Social media only isn't enough

"If you're using a Gmail address and Facebook, and that's your only presence, I think it's easy to not be taken as seriously as someone who might have made even a small investment in a website," she says.

"From a fundraising standpoint, only having a Facebook presence probably isn't enough. Particularly when you're looking at institutional funders. Institutional funders want to be able to see the basics, they want to be able to see some storytelling, your financials, they want to be able to know that you are verifiable, and not just a social entity."

Enset aims to change the perception that building a website is a difficult undertaking. Its most basic offering is an easy-to-edit, responsive two-page website that can be built from a variety of templates, along with a branded email address. At the very least, all that's really required is a logo, pictures, some text, and you have an official web presence, explains Curry.

"In today's world it's very unlikely that a business would not have a website, so why does the [NGO] sector feel that it's not important in today's digital economy, being part of that digital landscape. They have to be there - I think it's not 'if' it's 'when'."

Sustainability puzzle

Curry agrees that there is a definite link between an NGO's sustainability and having a presence online. "Education for us is really important because if you don't have your infrastructure in place, and digital is a piece of that infrastructure, the likelihood of sustainability in the long-term is threatened."

In order to be sustainable, an NGO needs to be able to utilise technology to share and collect information, collate donor lists and be able to reach out to them efficiently and effectively, she explains. "All of these are a piece of a sustainability puzzle that have to be in place."

Telling authentic stories

NGOs have unique strengths that they can maximise in their online presence. One of these strengths lies in their ability to tell compelling, authentic stories. "An NGO can be authentic without trying," says Curry, as opposed to businesses, and their efforts don't have to be professionally finished or cost a fortune. "An NGO can showcase all these great and wonderful things that they've done and use digital to do that, to facilitate that conversation, and invite feedback.

"I think most donors want to see impact, visually it can be shown online with stories told using pictures, words, and videos. There's so many tools used online that can showcase what an NGO does best."

As is the case for the business sector, having an online presence is no longer optional for NGOs. While it may require greater investment in the running of an organisation, the benefits are worth the added effort - from boosting credibility to ensuring sustainability, it's definitely time for the sector to "get their digital house in order".

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