

# 99 Nonprofits™

## What the Biggest Nonprofit Websites (Still) Need to Do in Email Marketing and Online Fundraising... and How Your Nonprofit Can Do Even Better

Part 1 of a free report by Lisa Sargent

*Reprint notice: I directly quote Seth Godin's reprint notice in the original, viral version of [Unleashing the Ideavirus](#), when I say "You have permission to post this, email this, print this and pass it along for free to anyone you like, as long as you make no changes or edits to its contents or digital format. In fact, I'd love it if you'd make lots and lots of copies. The right to bind this and sell it as a book, however, is strictly reserved."*

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### **If You'd Like To Be Notified When Part 2 Is Released, Please Read:**

All subscribers to my monthly e-newsletter, *The Loyalty Letter*, will be notified when Part 2 of 99 Nonprofits is released. You can subscribe at <http://www.lisasargent.com/e-news.htm>. (If you want to be notified but you don't want the e-news, email me directly at [lisa@lisasargent.com](mailto:lisa@lisasargent.com), and write 99 Nonprofits Part 2 in the subject line.)

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## I. Why Your Nonprofit's Next Big Fundraising Opportunity Is (Still) Online

### Background: The jaw-dropping statistics that started it all

It all started when I requested the 2008 Executive Summary of Convio's *Online Marketing Benchmark Index™ Study*<sup>1</sup>.

That's where I read about the year-over-year jump in online revenue for Associations and Visitation organizations: 99% and 83%, respectively. And that the average online gift among nonprofits in their study was up to \$61, from \$56.

The report held other impressive statistics, too. Such as:

- **The percentage of new Web site visitors who “convert”** — that is, they share at least their email address — is only 1.1% to 6.45% (meaning, of course, that more than 9 in 10 new visitors to your site *don't* register)
- **Email files are growing three times as fast as Web site traffic:** so, driving traffic to your site from other channels works, including social media and direct mail
- **The median email file in Convio's survey was 20,385 names** — and average year-over-year email file growth grew 32%

*Data Source: [The Convio Online Marketing Nonprofit Benchmark Index™ Study, Executive Summary, 2008. Sign-up required.](#)*

Coincidentally, the same week that I requested the report, Convio CEO Gene Austin confirmed — in an update to an Agitator post — that his clients not only reached the half a billion dollars in online donations he predicted they would raise, they topped it: raising, as it turned out, **more than three quarters of a billion dollars (\$777,000,000)**.<sup>2</sup> **Online.**

That's when I asked the question that led to the research you're about to read:

**If just 1 in 10 new nonprofit website visitors officially “raise their hands” and register — and online fundraising has *already* hit nearly one billion dollars...**

**And if nonprofits could capture even half of those other 90 visitors by “getting email marketing right”...**

**How much money would they raise *then*?**

The quest for that answer led to this report.

<sup>1</sup> The Convio Online Marketing Nonprofit Benchmark Index™ Study, Executive Summary, 2008. Sign-up required, <http://my.convio.com/?elqPURLPage=101>.

<sup>2</sup> “Did You Say A Half-Billion?!” The Agitator, June 5, 2008. <http://www.theagitator.net/dont-miss-these-posts/did-you-say-a-half-billion/>.

## **99 nonprofits (and counting): The research, the road ahead, and a personal request**

My original “grand plan” was to visit the websites of 99 big nonprofit organizations so I could sign up for (and track) their email newsletters and e-appeals, and assemble an “email marketing best practices” checklist.

Additionally, I assumed that because they have the financial resources, the biggest nonprofits — **those spending more than \$1 million on fundraising annually** — would likely be doing more with their email newsletters and online marketing.

I was wrong.

In order to even *find* 99 nonprofit e-newsletters to subscribe to, I had to visit more than 200 nonprofit websites. And by the time I’d signed up for e-newsletter #20, my list of bulleted notes was 17 pages and growing, along with my supreme frustration at the entire sign-up process.

In the end, I did achieve the sign-up goal of 99 nonprofit email newsletters. (At least I think I’ve signed up for 99: not all have written back!) To date, I’ve visited 300+ websites... and my nonprofit email “swipe file” contains, as of this writing, 1,736 nonprofit e-newsletters, e-appeals and other e-communications.

That said, due to the scope of this research, my complete report on the state of nonprofit websites and email marketing will be released in two (as of now) parts:

**Part 1: Nonprofit websites and the sign-up process** — that’s the report you’re reading now. Here you’ll read about the key findings and suggested fixes for some of the real-world problems I encountered when visiting nonprofit websites and trying to subscribe to e-newsletters.

**Part 2: The nonprofit e-communication stream, post-sign-up** — slated for late 2009/early 2010, this report will include real-world findings from, and recommended fixes for, the nonprofit emails and e-appeals that are sent to donors & prospects.

And last but not least, after you’ve finished this report, if you apply any of the tips, please let me know about the results you’re getting.

I’d love to hear from you: [lisa@lisasargent.com](mailto:lisa@lisasargent.com) ( To receive Part 2 see title page of report.)



P.S. A caveat: thanks in large part to this research my own website is still evolving. So if you [visit](#), the answer is yes: I know it’s not perfect. And bear with me... I opted to share this research with you first.

## SECTION II: Can You Trust the Data? Research Methods

### Step 1 of 3:

I divided nonprofit organizations into 9 categories, or “verticals,” loosely based on the verticals used in both the Convio report and on Charity Navigator:

1. Animals and the Environment (22 organizations selected)
2. Disaster/International Relief (13 selected)
3. Disease & Health (10)
4. Human & Social Services (10)
5. Visitation/Museums/Zoos/Arts (11)
6. Education (10)
7. Public Benefit (11)
8. Advocacy & Civil Rights (6)
9. Religion & Religious Issues (6)

*Note: Public Benefit became kind of a catch-all category. Presently it includes foundations (including medical), literacy, and public policy organizations.*

### Step 2 of 3:

Using Charity Navigator,<sup>3</sup> and specifically their Advanced Search feature, I narrowed the field to large nonprofits across each of the nine categories listed above, based on the following criteria:

- **Rank:** the organization had to have achieved either 3 or 4 stars (This because I wanted nonprofits that demonstrated good stewardship of funds; most selected were 4-star nonprofits.)
- **Size:** total expenses for the organization — program, administrative and fundraising — had to be \$13.5 million or higher for the latest fiscal year reported on Charity Navigator (typically late 2006 or mid-2007).
- **Fundraising Expenses:** the organization had to spend \$1 million or more on fundraising for the fiscal year reported on Charity Navigator
- **Public Support:** only organizations that receive more than \$500,000 in public support are rated on Charity Navigator, so each nonprofit in my report claims this by default

*Note about sample size: As of February 2009, Charity Navigator listed 997 nonprofits with \$13.5 million or more in expenses and a 3- or 4-star ranking, so 99 nonprofits represents approximately 10% of the total field.*

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<sup>3</sup> Defining itself as “America's premier independent charity evaluator, Charity Navigator works to advance a more efficient and responsive philanthropic marketplace by evaluating the financial health of over 5,300 of America's largest charities.” The service is free, the site is here: <http://www.charitynavigator.org/>.

### Step 3 of 3:

From the list in Step 2, I arbitrarily picked between 5 and 25 organizations in each of the nine verticals. I then visited each website, and tracked the following:

- Email newsletter offered? (I assumed that being huge organizations, all would have an e-news. They didn't, so I tracked it.)
- Sign-up box or button on homepage
- Position of box or button
- Sign-up information required, at box and via redirect
- Presence of sign-ups on lower level pages (I visited two or three for each site.)
- Upon completion of sign-up, was I redirected to thank you/confirmation page?

You'll find the research results on the following page.

## SECTION III: Nonprofit Website and Email Newsletter Sign-Up Data, Key Findings and Top Fixes

### Key Nonprofit Website Finding #1: No E-News.

Nearly **one out of every ten nonprofit websites I visited did not offer an email newsletter sign-up on their homepage** — nor on any other of the other pages that I checked.

Others offered e-news, but assumed near-fanatical levels of good will on the part of their visitors: at one site in particular, it took five clicks from the homepage to reach the e-newsletter sign up.

At another organization, spending nearly \$4 million on fundraising annually, email newsletters are restricted to “alumni only” (and this isn’t a higher ed org, by the way). Woe unto trespassers who try to sneak a peek: a log in is required to view the news.

### Chief “no e-news” offenders? Education.

Of the dozens of sites I visited, from colleges to private secondary schools, I found only two that offered email newsletters on their home page — Amherst College and Baylor University.

Many schools offer e-news-imposters: they simply reformat their print newsletter then upload as a PDF link. (Warning: this may work for your alumni, but it’s no way to attract online donors or engage future students and their parents.)

### Other surprise offenders? No e-news for:

- **Many operas and zoos**, smitten with blogs and RSS news feeds (a mighty strange way to engage and “capture” visitors, more on page 10)
- **A \$100+ million international relief organization** spending more than \$7 million on fundraising expenses, and
- **An \$800+ million social service organization** that spends — are you ready? — close to \$20 million on fundraising, with a CEO earning \$300K annually.

The moral of the story: Don’t be like them. Instead use this tip...

## Recommended Fix #1: Offer an email newsletter. But ONLY if you:

1. Can generate new content for your website and update it regularly (because first, you need news to share)
2. Have staff in-house — or outsourcing options — to produce a quality e-newsletter, and can stick to a regular publishing schedule

## Key Nonprofit Website Finding #2: Buried Sign-Up Boxes.

Among the 99 nonprofit websites I visited that offered sign-up boxes (or buttons) on their home pages, only half got them “above the fold” (meaning you don’t need to scroll down to find it).

The other half buried the boxes below the fold. (Well, technically it’s a bit less than half: two offered e-newsletters but didn’t have a sign-up box on their home pages.)

So now let’s face the cold reality of nonprofit website life: “Above the fold” website real estate is precious as Boardwalk on a Monopoly board... and everyone knows it.

But while your cause marketers and special events people duke it out for that right rail “sweet spot,” you’ll know there’s no contest: your sign-up box beats ‘em both. Why?

Because one of the main goals of your nonprofit website *must be to capture the email addresses of your donors and prospects* (and if it isn’t your goal it should be), without which there can be no email fundraising. And that leads us to...

## Recommended Fix #2: Do not bury your e-news subscription box.

Whether you use a box or a button, make sure it’s clearly visible above the fold in either the right or left rail.

## Key Nonprofit Website Finding #3: “Linearitis.”

Linearitis is my made-up term for nonprofit websites that clearly believe all online visitors follow a straight line to their homepage... meaning, they treat the home page not simply as the main point of entry, but as the *only* point of entry.

Here’s how I know: **the numbers show that about 20% of all the nonprofit websites I tracked do not offer an e-newsletter sign-up on lower-tier pages.**

This is a mistake.

To prove it, all you have to do is review your website traffic logs. You'll soon see that visitors likely "enter" not only via your home page, but via other pages, too. And you want to capture their email addresses before they skip away, which means you should start with...

**Recommended Fix #3: Get sign-up boxes that are consistent in copy and design on every page of your website.** If pressed for time and you need to prioritize, start with the most popular pages first.

#### **Key Finding #4: Requesting too much (or too little) information.**

About one out of every four nonprofits didn't require me to give at least my first name during sign-up. This instantly tells me they won't be personalizing their future email communications with me, as in "Dear Lisa." (Personalizing is a golden rule of persuasive one-to-one communications, which email is.)

Others required so much information it was creepy. For example, several nonprofits wanted my full date of birth — this even though their website content was in no way controversial. Another large regional humane organization sent me through something like four separate "clicks" worth of sign-up forms. At two others, I abandoned sign-up due to Big-Brother-esque feel.

So let's cut to the chase, then, with...

**Recommended Fix #4: Carefully consider the amount of personal information you'll require for your sign-up.** At the very least, you must get email address (and ask prospect to confirm this at redirect) and a first name so that you can personalize your future communications.

*Note: if you have a good reason to ask for lots of extra info, you can either make it optional or offer an incentive. Although the incentive isn't there any longer, the [Humane Society of Missouri](#) offered a free "pet rescue window cling" to their E-Tails subscribers... I'm guessing this was a test to capture mailing addresses as well.*

#### **Key Finding #5: Too many clicks.**

If I'm forced to click through five separate sign-up and confirmation pages in order to subscribe, as I did at the website of a \$200 million organization spending more than \$12 million on fundraising, it's too many.

And they weren't alone — plenty of other organizations dragged me through four or more redirects, many meaningless. So...

**Key Fix #5: Streamline your sign-up process** in order to respect the goodwill of your online visitors and maximize your conversion percentages. You can conduct your own usability test by asking volunteers to walk through your sign-up process while you monitor: they point out areas where they're confused or ready to give up, and you fix it. (For more on usability tests, see the excellent book: *Don't Make Me Think: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability* by Steve Krug. It's on amazon.com, [here](#).)

## Key Finding #6: Bad manners, murky copy.

When I had completed the e-news subscription process, most nonprofit organizations had the courtesy (and the smarts) to thank me... this by a ratio of about 3:1, in favor of those that thanked.

Sadly, though, this means that fully one third of these organizations — again, let's remember that they spend \$1-million-plus annually on fundraising — didn't thank me for signing up. Clearly, you should. (HSUS has one of the best examples of a donor-friendly thank/redirect. See page 14.)

Other organizations "recycled" their sign-up page copy, including one organization that spends \$2 million annually on fundraising. Every page of the sign-up process — including the thank-you redirect — read exactly the same: "Sign Up for Action Alerts."

Another asked me to confirm whether or not I was in their "system" (I had no idea)... still others never told me if I'd successfully subscribed.

This leads us to...

## Recommended Fix #6: Revisit all redirect pages relating to your e-mail sign-up process to be sure that they:

- **Make sense:** if you want prospect to confirm their email address, say so. If you need to thank them, say that too.
- **Guide prospect through the process:** typical sign-up might go as follows: email address -> subscription/email address confirm page -> thank-you/welcome page
- **Tell them what's coming up:** on the thank-you page, let visitors know if your e-news is weekly, monthly, etc. And if you'll be sending a separate email that requires action, say that too.

In the final section of this report, you'll find a few miscellaneous comments: on blogs, other website dos and don'ts, and four recommended nonprofit websites to visit. But the bottom line is that by now you know there's plenty your nonprofit can start doing to capture more email addresses and raise more money online.

The rest, as they say, is up to you.

And remember, in part 2, I open my “99 nonprofits” email inbox, to analyze what’s being sent.

The report is scheduled for late 2009 or early 2010, so stay tuned!

## Section IV. A few final words

### **On blogs, RSS and social marketing’s siren song (Or, sane reasons why your nonprofit must NOT abandon email marketing in favor of Twitter and friends)**

On page six of this report, I wrote about how higher ed, zoos, operas, and other organizations offer newsfeeds and/or blogs via RSS, but no email newsletters.

For the record, I’m not saying RSS, blogs and all things social are bad.

Just keep in mind that RSS subscribers are anonymous, and we’re talking about email and Internet fundraising here, which means you need those email addresses.

So: your nonprofit must offer options.

If you do rely on a blog, be sure to give prospects the opportunity to receive your blog through their email inbox, and tell them so.<sup>4</sup> But do remember that blogs are content-hungry, so be prepared to deliver stuff that’s regular and relevant.

**What’s more, I still say your nonprofit should also offer an e-newsletter**, or be prepared to miss the chance to engage hundreds... thousands... and maybe tens of thousands of prospects and donors.

Of course, lots of gung-ho social media marketers will call me Old School.

But before you boldly proclaim that email marketing is dead, let’s take a closer look at why you’re smarter to place email in the “alive-and-kicking category.”

**Reason #1: Email remains a central communication channel** for continuing the conversation.

Yes, you may attract folks via Twitter and Facebook and YouTube, but you still need email appeals and email newsletters to grow that relationship.

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<sup>4</sup> Feedblitz is a service that automatically turns your blog into an email newsletter, <http://www.feedblitz.com/>.

Skeptical? Have a look at what Change.org's Heather Mansfield writes, in "Five Things Your Nonprofit Needs to Know About Web 2.0 Donors"<sup>5</sup>:

*I believe, despite much talk lately of email "dying", that in fact the opposite is true. Your nonprofit needs to focus more on your email newsletter than ever before because email may be the only way you can contact and nurture your Web 2.0 donors ... [My emphasis added]*

*Note: My own (recent) experience with nonprofit email newsletters supports Heather's comment: consistent open rates of 20% or better, click-throughs that routinely hover at 5%+.*

## **Reason #2: Email is grayer than ever (Let's spell gray: B-e-q-u-e-s-t).**

Many mainstream users finally feel comfortable online, stretching their transactions beyond paying bills and ordering books from amazon.com. (And this includes folks in their 50s, 60s, 70s and even 80s.)

And as of March 2008, most of us are online, but not on Facebook and MySpace... at least according to another Convio report.

Called "The Wired Wealthy: Using the Internet to Connect with Your Middle and Major Donors"<sup>6</sup>, the report includes survey results of more than 3,443 donors who had given "a cumulative total of \$1,000 or more" through any channel during an 18-month period. Median age? 50.

The results tell the tale:

- 91 out of 100 are not on Facebook
- 86 out of 100 don't use MySpace
- But nearly 70 out of 100 of us – the folks who make the middle and big gifts – read the news online
- What's more, we're online about 14 hours every week.

Contrast that with Netpop's research on your typical social network user. They report her to be a single female between the ages of 18 and 39. One more thing: of all the media used in social networking, guess which topped the charts?

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<sup>5</sup> "Five Things Your Nonprofit Needs to Know About Web 2.0 Donors," by Heather Mansfield. As posted on Change.org's Nonprofits 2.0.  
[http://nonprofits.change.org/blog/view/five\\_things\\_your\\_nonprofit\\_needs\\_to\\_know\\_about\\_web\\_20\\_donors](http://nonprofits.change.org/blog/view/five_things_your_nonprofit_needs_to_know_about_web_20_donors)

<sup>6</sup> "The Wired Wealthy: Using the Internet to Connect with Your Middle and Major Donors," Convio/Sea Change Strategies/Edge Research. March 24, 2008. Available free by request at:  
<http://my.convio.com/?elqPURLPage=104>.

Email.<sup>7</sup>

Before I bid farewell to the either/or social media question, two more experts weigh in:

David Meerman Scott says in his best-selling book, [The New Rules of Marketing & PR](#), that “email newsletters have been around as long as email, but still have tremendous value as a way to deliver a regular series of thought leadership content.”

And veteran fundraiser, donor newsletter craftsman and author [Tom Ahern](#) told me this (read his books and subscribe to his e-newsletter if you haven't):

*I teach the sales lead funnel to all my clients. And collecting subscribers is essential at the wide mouth of the funnel. You throw open every door and window, gathering suspects by the thousands; then you stay in touch, offering them opt-in and opt-out options, keeping them excited, putting opportunities in front of them as you go, building your team of supporters, your base; and ultimately from the bottom of the funnel, a few big gifts emerge.*

Enough said.

#### On other mistakes to avoid, good moves to copy:

- **Avoid faint or very small sign-up box font.** Consider that older donors and prospects are moving online in droves, bringing their older eyes with them: make sure that they can read what they type.
- **Allow prospect to preview** a sample e-news sample during sign-up.
- **If you have an active forum**, but no e-newsletter, consider starting one. One of the nonprofit websites I visited had a forum with 16,000 posts, indicating a hugely active online community... but no e-news.
- **Don't leave me stranded.** Your logo should be “hot” on every page — meaning if I sign up, I should be able to click on your nonprofit logo in the header, and go immediately back to the home page.
- **Do explain your e-pubs if you offer more than one.** A sentence or two will do, so prospect knows which to subscribe to.
- **Don't treat your thank-you redirect as an afterthought.** This is one of your first chances to impress, so this page should not look like your home page with a choppy “welcome” paragraph tossed in.
- **If you ask prospects to enter their email** or other info via a box on the home page, it's a nice touch to “prefill” this for them on the redirect. (But be sure to ask them to double-check it.)
- **Do display your privacy policy**, and make it a quick and easy read. One of the organizations I visited called me “Friend,” then clicked me away to 1,336 words of legalese, a.k.a. their privacy policy. You can do better.

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<sup>7</sup> “Advertising to Social Networkers Tricky,” by Jack Loechner for the Center for Media Research, 2/26/09. [http://www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticle&art\\_aid=100758](http://www.mediapost.com/publications/?fa=Articles.showArticle&art_aid=100758)

## On good websites to visit:

In no particular order, four nonprofit websites that make it easy to subscribe to their email newsletter:

- [The United States Fund for UNICEF](#): very nice use of sample emails along the right rail of the sign-up page. And when I clicked on one, it opened in a pop-up, so it was easy to return to sign-up. Cool bonus: a personalized redirect.
- [Humane Society of the United States \(HSUS\)](#): super-streamlined sign-up. And in my mind, one of the best thank-you redirects around. Cool bonus: these guys know their way around SEO. Thumbs up!
- [World Wildlife Fund](#): although the sign-up box font is a very faint gray, WWF makes terrific use of pertinent pop-up messages.
- [Smithsonian Institution](#): good pre-filled form and use of the word “free.” Also nice on the confirmation redirect that I can see a sample e-news, which pops up so I don’t forget where I was. **One problem**: sign up button is below the fold on my monitor. Still, they get extra kudos for clear copywriting.

## About me, author & copywriter Lisa Sargent (the “third person” bio):

Head of Sargent Communications, Lisa Sargent is a freelance fundraising copywriter and donor communications specialist who helps nonprofits raise more money and keep more donors, both online and offline.

She has helped raise millions for hardworking nonprofits from Utah to Ireland, by writing persuasive, donor-centric fundraising and development communications from email newsletters to direct mail annual appeals to donation thank-you letters. Passionate about sharing her knowledge with others, she publishes [The Loyalty Letter, a free monthly nonprofit e-newsletter on donor communications](#).

Lisa is also the voice behind the popular [online copywriting clinic on donation thank-you letters](#), hosted at SOFII, the Showcase of Fundraising Innovation and Inspiration, and has written for [FundRaising Success magazine](#), [The Agitator](#) and [Mal Warwick’s newsletter](#), among others.

Her website is a work in progress — [www.lisasargent.com](http://www.lisasargent.com) — thanks in part to the research discussed here. To reach Lisa, email her at [lisa@lisasargent.com](mailto:lisa@lisasargent.com), or call +1-860-851-9755.

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All subscribers to my monthly e-newsletter, *The Loyalty Letter*, will be notified when Part 2 of 99 Nonprofits is released. You can subscribe at <http://www.lisasargent.com/e-news.htm>. (If you want to be notified but you don't want the e-news, email me directly at [lisa@lisasargent.com](mailto:lisa@lisasargent.com), and write 99 Nonprofits Part 2 in the subject line.)