

Digital Marketing for Non-Profits and NGOs

2025

Part 1

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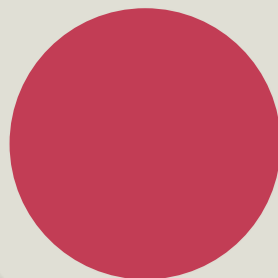


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INTRODUCTION

Prospective donors, clients, volunteers, consultants, funders, stakeholders, and partners are all out there, online and plugged in, ripe for the picking – but will they ever run into your message?

More than 5.3 billion people exist online. To drive the point home: that's nearly 65% of the global population. Understandably, the digital landscape seeks to cater to this audience, overflowing with advertisements for products, services that masquerade as content, and an escalating flood of AI material. This makes it increasingly difficult to reach stakeholders. And at the same time, we've never spent more time online than what we do now.

The digital revolution brought with it a new paradigm and system. With so much to see and do online, attention has become the overriding currency. Getting your message in front of your desired audience isn't enough anymore. Rather, the form and character of your content must grab and hold on to every interaction coming its way. There's a reason so much content ends with a call-to-action, after all.

This report is designed for NGOs, nonprofits, educational institutions and community organizations (NPOs) to better understand the shape of the digital marketing landscape and what they can do to compete against all the noise. Pulling from the latest research regarding user habits, digital psychology, and marketing, this report is delivered in two parts. This pdf, Part 1, highlights the most important themes of the digital marketing landscape for nonprofits in 2025. Part 2 details the latest research on the actual branches of digital marketing (social media, email marketing, SEO, and web-exhibitions, landing pages, and awareness pages), and can be found on my website.

“With so much to see and do online, attention has become the overriding currency.”

Major Themes in 2025

ATTENTION ECONOMY

Understanding attention (how it's measured, how we capture it, and why attention is actually the currency that dominates digital spaces) is of utmost importance to NPOs. Especially as recent research suggests that there may be different benefits to NPOs than for-profits in this economy.

The idea of the attention economy isn't new. The concept was first coined in the 1960s by the economist and cognitive psychologist Herbert A. Simon. He contended that informational overload could be an economic problem because your degree of attention affects your decision-making process.



Herbert A. Simon

Simon's theory of bounded rationality stipulates that individuals have a whole host of constraints on their lives, thus preventing them from behaving as fully 'rational' economic actors. One of the constraints Simon highlighted was the natural limits of attention, which prevent individuals from knowing the full scope of their available decisions and thus prevents fully rational decision-making.

Today, the concept of the attention economy has been accelerated by the reality of the digital age and the way that anyone with an internet connection and access to a computing device can create 'content.' Gone are the days when a select handful of editors, producers and hosts dictated the informational landscape. This reality has been an incredible boon for many marginalized individuals and groups, bringing attention to injustices and problems not covered by major news outlets for one reason or another. However, this informational overload has also generated a myriad of problems.

The ability to rapidly create mis- and disinformation coupled with the

propensity for social media platforms to push content, which receives the most interaction (often, the most controversial or provocative), has spurred social unrest, increased political polarization, and fostered an epistemic crisis (Hoffman et al., 2021; Freelon & Wells, 2020; Omoregie & Ryall, 2023).

Adding to the attentional overstock is the rise and use of Artificial Intelligence and Large Language Models that can create content for video, social media, and websites while eliminating hours' worth of labor. It's estimated that AI-created content already accounts for 57% of all text on the internet (Thompson et al., 2024). We should only expect this number to grow as companies and entrepreneurs rush to take advantage of these new shortcuts in marketing and communication. Some have estimated that 90% or nearly all of the content online could be AI-generated by the end of this year (Garfinkle et al., 2023).

So, how do we stand out in a digital world awash with AI-generated slop?

Attention

On its face, attention should be the great equalizer. Individuals can only spend as much attention as time they have and we all have 24 hours in the

day. Therefore, we should all theoretically have an equal opportunity to spend our attention (Strózak & Francuz, 2017). From a realist perspective, people's attention is obviously spent on varying levels of labor, child-care, relationships, hobbies, personal projects and more. And while we all need to sleep, not everyone requires the same amount, furthering the attentional disparity.

We also need to differentiate between the attention we willingly give and the attention that we spend based on

environmental interruptions. The American Psychiatric Association defines attention as "a state in which cognitive resources are focused on certain aspects of the environment rather than on others and the central nervous system is in a state of readiness to respond to stimuli." They also are careful to note that not all attention is

spent equally: "attention can also be captured (i.e., directed involuntarily) by qualities of stimuli in the environment, such as intensity, movement, repetition, contrast, and novelty."

It's difficult to adequately measure attention. Because it's a fleeting and personal behavior, it doesn't emit a substance or transfer as log data into a spreadsheet. And yet online analytics have become one way in which we attempt to quantify this unquantifiable

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attention. Click-through-rate, visits, likes, shares, and comments all indicate that some attention was spent—but they don't do a great job of actually describing what level of attention was spent. A like or website visit indicates at least a passing level of attention, while a comment perhaps presumes a bit more effort may have been spent attentionally. This measure of attention has been described as “calcified attention” (Heitmeyer, 2024).

struggles and real solutions to an online audience in search of authenticity (Hund, 2023; Fritz et al., 2017).

Understanding that the online space is actually a market for attention is the first step to creating an effective online communications and marketing strategy for NPOs. Building content that is both captivating and human is part of the next step that can combat attention fatigue. Capturing real people doing real work is something which cannot be engineered by AI – and NPOs are uniquely positioned to bring the stories of real people with real

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A state in which cognitive resources are focused on certain aspects of the environment rather than on others and the central nervous system is in a state of readiness to respond to stimuli

The American Psychiatric Association definition of attention.

DIGITAL OWNERSHIP

Since Elon Musk's purchase of X (then Twitter), the social media landscape has become more fractured and ideologically segmented. Meta (Facebook and Instagram's parent company) parred back their fact checking and content moderation teams. Tik-Tok's status in the United States is still fluid after Congress and President Biden put a conditional ban on the platform, only to see President Trump ignore the ban and allow Tik-Tok to remain in operation. Smaller competitors to X have gained traction, including Bluesky, Mastodon and the Meta-owned Threads.

All this tumult has made it clear that organizations need to build and maintain an online presence that isn't dependent on any singular external platform.

Maintaining a useful and robust website is the easiest way for organizations to own their digital presence. This is why it's important to think of your website as the nucleus of your online presence in 2025. The outlook of the social media landscape is uncertain, and while the platforms still offer superior means of outreach and brandbuilding, they should not be trusted to act as a stable guarantor of your organization's mission.

Unlike an account on a social media site, your url and website can be wholly owned and therefore protected from the turbulence in the online messaging marketplace. Building and maintaining a social media presence is still important in digital outreach and community building but organizations will need to be more strategic in deciding where to spend limited resources as the platforms splinter and shift. Spending more energy on building a website which can appeal to all your stakeholders is a necessity in 2025.

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The obvious drawback to focusing on building and maintaining a strong website is the higher technical barrier to entry. While the social media platforms are built so that anyone can signup and post, regardless of technical skills, operating a website requires some level of technical fluency.

Thankfully, there are a plethora of options for organizations with limited access to technical expertise. Over the last decade, many options for low- or no-code website builders have sprung up on the market.

The industry leader is Wordpress, which allows users to select or buy pre-built templates and customize them for their own branding. Wordpress also hosts an extensive library of plugins to allow for greater

Pros:

- **Market leader**
- **Extensive plugin architecture**
- **Extensive templates make for easy web development**

Cons:

- **Limited customization**
- **Unable to easily implement custom code**
- **Not easily exportable out of Wordpress' infrastructure**

Pros:

- **Visual builder with a drag-and-drop style**
- **Extensive apps and integrations**
- **Easy SEO options**

Cons:

- **Greater customization than Wordpress but**
- **Limited native implementation of custom code**
- **Limited ability to build large, complex websites**

Pros:

- **Visual builder with CSS fields**
- **Easy implementation of custom code**
- **Strong digital security with native hosting**
- **Easily exportable to other hosts**

Cons:

- **Slightly more expensive than competitors**

functionality. Pushing Wordpress' grip on the market are more customizable options like Webflow and Wix, which both provide users with 'visual builders' where users can construct their own website without having to dive into CSS or Javascript.

While these website options (among others) still share the potential drawback that social media platforms also have – namely that the website platform can decide to change their structure or system at any time – a user of one of these website platforms nevertheless has the overall advantage that they can own their final site. They can export the code for their site if they decide to quit working with one of the website builders' platforms. That's more power and control than

what a user has over their social media platform.

You could think of your website as a bustling and attractive downtown with shops, museums, and attractions for everyone. Social media and other forms of outreach are like the roads, bridges and vehicles that you downtown, and because your website is yours to shape, that means those folks coming in on a bike to visit the local museum can be directed to a different space than the busy executive taking a taxi to the office. This flexibility allows organizations to accommodate all of their major stakeholders in a way that other outlets simply cannot.

VISUAL INTRIGUE

and Attention Science

Standing out in the attention economy requires thinking seriously about how to capture potential stakeholders' attention online. This is made complicated by the fact that online users are increasingly distracted from what they are doing, even in the moment that they are doing it (Chan, Chen, and Leung 2023)! For organizations that are trying to spread a positive message, deliver on their mission and attract potential funders, it's necessary to think about capturing attention at its most basic level: the visual level.

It's estimated that more than 2 billion images are uploaded online every day (Sutarwala, 2024).

“More than 2 billion images are uploaded online every day”

It's therefore useful to look at the latest research in visual communication and how that can affect an organization's digital marketing strategy. The most obvious aspects of visual communication include color, font, spacing, shapes and scales. But it can also include the use of emojis in text, images or moving gifs, and designed banners and advertisements with imagery and text combined.

Of particular importance to both NPOs and for-profit is getting users to click on call-to-action (CTA) buttons. And if you can believe it, research has proven that the very shape of your button matters here. For example, CTA buttons with rounded shapes have a higher click-through

Button CTAs



Donate



Donate

CTA buttons with rounded edges have a higher click-through rate for positively framed messages like calls to volunteer or donate.

Imagery



Superimposing text over imagery is an effective means of communication so long as the text doesn't obscure the subject of the image.



rate for positive messages than square-edged buttons (Biswas, Abell & Chacko, 2024). Correspondingly, this study also found that negative or avoidance-framed choices received higher click-through with squared buttons. Other research has discovered that a user's state-of-mind or self-perception can greatly influence their behavior towards button shape. Angular buttons appeal more to users who perceive themselves to be busy or important, including users experiencing loneliness (Sun et al., 2024; Chen et al., 2021; Jiang et al., 2016). Meanwhile, a sense of nostalgia predisposes users towards rounded designs (Gong et al., 2023). This would suggest that organizations can generate greater conversion by using rounded buttons for calls to donate, volunteer, or sign-up for a newsletter. However, some experimentation could be useful in designing pages specifically for higher-contributing donors who may be more likely to view themselves as busy or important.

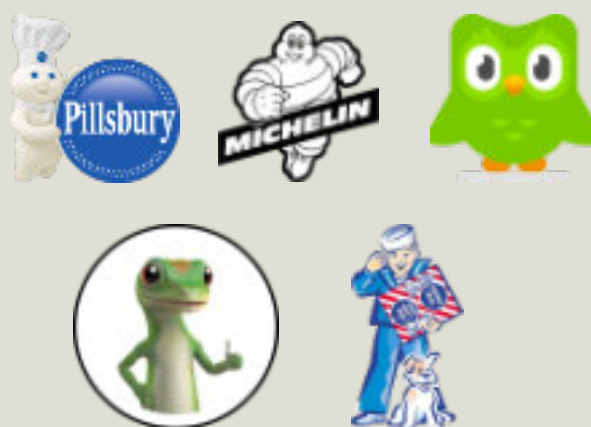
Insofar as branding goes, the shape and style of an organization's logo can affect a potential stakeholder's perception of that organization. NPOs should consider their target stakeholders in developing logos. Symmetrical logos lend credibility to an organization and its products (Wu, 2025). Although curiously, individuals with a conservative worldview tend to view asymmetrical logos to be more trustworthy (Northy & Chan, 2020).

Emojis usage has been shown to increase customer engagement in for-profit settings (Bai et al., 2019; Casado-Molina et al., 2019; Hewage et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2021; McShane et al., 2021). Further, using emojis in email subject lines and CTAs increases the

likelihood of opening and clicking on a CTA (Valenzuela-Galvz, Garrido-Morgado, and & Gonzalez-Benito, 2023). Research into what effects they may specifically have for NPO outreach are limited, however, and so caution and experimentation should be used before diving into emoji overload.

Social media posts using images or videos receive greater interaction (Chan, Chen, & Leung, 2023). The use of text in combination with visual imagery can be an effective way to communicate on those platforms. However, images with text overlay should be careful in using simpler imagery with text pushed to the top or bottom of the image; otherwise, users will tend to ignore them (Farace et al., 2025). Animated brand or spoke-characters have been shown to increase brand memory retention in users (Zhang & Liya, 2023)

Spokes-characters



Famous examples of spokes-characters from Pillsbury, Michelin, Duolingo, Geico, and Crackjack.

Using animations on websites can increase user loyalty to an organization, keep users on a website longer, and motivate them to make purchases (Laroche et al., 2022; Verma & Pant, 2021; Ari, 2025). Likewise, animation has been shown to effectively direct attention to specific details (Bulu, 2012), but it can also increase visual attention paid to all elements, even unanimated ones (Cheung, 2017).

As with all design decisions, your audience and brand identity should factor into what your organization decides to do. The playful aspect of a spoke-character or emojis may make sense for some organizations, while for others they may detract from the organization's legitimacy.

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Animation has been shown to effectively direct attention to specific details, but it can also increase visual attention paid to all elements, even unanimated ones.

Findings from research conducted by Bulu (2012) and Cheung (2017).

FUTURE OUTLOOK

As government funding opportunities become increasingly unstable in 2025, it's important for nonprofit organizations to focus on building a robust and adaptable digital marketing strategy.

This is important because:

1. You can prove how nonprofits make the world a better place by showing people all the good and crucial work that they do (especially with some political currents attempting to de-legitimize and demonize the valuable work nonprofits perform), and
2. A well-built digital marketing strategy can have a financial tangible impact on donations.

So, what should you be on the outlook for?

Obviously, the exponential growth of AI and Large Language Models (LLMs) has become an unavoidable element of the digital landscape. While NPOs shouldn't be handing off content creation solely to an AI or LLM, nonprofits can still benefit from finding spaces to leverage AI technology. Using AI to draft simple emails or social media posts which are then edited for focus and veracity can be a way for an understaffed outreach or comms team to save time. Text produced by an LLM should always be double checked for veracity as all the major platforms still have a problem with confidently stating facts which aren't true (Munn, Magee, & Arora, 2024). Still, LLMs can be a useful way to kickstart a brainstorming session or to create filler material for internal use. AI tools can also be leveraged to better understand what messages resonate with your email audiences to better tailor future campaigns.

Timeline of LLM Development

2018	◆	Google Researchers introduce BERT, shortly after OpenAI privately launches Chat GPT-1.
2019	◆	GPT-2 deemed too strong for public release.
2022	◆	GPT-3 publicly released. Open source models BLOOM and LLaMA made public.
2024	◆	OpenAI launches a "thinking" LLM called o1.
2025	◆	DeepSeek R1, using significantly less energy per query, goes public.

In the face of growing misinformation and disinformation around the goals and missions of nonprofits, it will be vital to build up a communications strategy to cut through the noise. This may be especially daunting as some platforms like X (formerly Twitter) have become especially hostile to mission-oriented organizations and nonprofits. As a result, building a strong and multi-purpose website should be the focus for any organization which has neglected that aspect of their marketing so far.

A long-term goal should be for you to establish networks of partnership with other nonprofits. There is strength in numbers and forward thinking about linking together with organizations with like or similar missions should be a priority. This could be a way to combine resources, either through donation sharing, workforce exchanges, or joint communications

with the rest of civil society. These cooperation networks can share outreach and legitimize smaller NPOs (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Balsiger, 2018; de Lange et al., 2016; Odziemkowska & McDonnell, 2019). They can further show a united front in the face of public and political pressure to silence or neuter public funds for mission-based organizations.



Establish networks of partnership with other nonprofits. There is strength in numbers and forward thinking about linking together with organizations with like or similar missions should be a priority.

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