DO PEOPLE TRUST YOUR ONLINE IDENTITY?

Trust–it takes time to build, but only a moment to lose. What does it take to make sure your online identity is credible and authentic?

by Brian Cute

The Internet works best when Internet users trust the online resources and the content they interact with, as well as the human on the other end. Data shows that the average Internet user takes only 10 seconds to decide whether they want to stay on a website and learn more or move on. How an NGO presents its identity and establishes trust in the first interaction with an Internet user is critical. Validated online identities like .ngo and .ong will become increasingly common as Internet users want certainty when they ask "Who are you?" on the Internet.

CREATE A RELATIONSHIP –
IT'S NOT THE TECHNOLOGY, SILLY!

The first question in any relationship is "Who are you?" How that question is answered can have a lasting impact. It can be the first step toward a long-term relationship or can create an impression that closes the door to any relationship at all. This basic question occurs every day in both the offline and online worlds. On the Internet, NGOs must be able to answer this fundamental human question effectively if they want to establish relationships with potential supporters and become more sustainable. To answer the "Who are you?" question, NGOs must create an effective and trusted online identity.

The Internet has created new ways for humans to connect and communicate, and it continues to transform the world at breathtaking speed. Observe people in public places staring into mobile devices in their hands. Observe your children spending hours on social media platforms and gaming with friends. While the Internet has created entirely new forms of interaction between humans and machines, the fact is that most often the technology is simply facilitating a human-to-human interaction and the fundamentals of human interaction remain largely unchanged. Who are you? Where do you come from? What do you do? Can I trust you? All of these questions apply with equal force to offline and online human interactions. The only difference is that Internet offers new tools to answer these important, age-old human questions. When choosing an online identity, keep the human on the other end top of mind.

CONSIDER THE INTERNET USER'S PERCEPTIONS

How an NGO projects and manages its online identity is critical, and yet it is only half of the story. What is equally important is how Internet users react to different platforms in different ways. Public Interest Registry conducted surveys in 2011, 2013, and 2015 to gauge consumer sentiment about the trust online (summary).

While these results do not suggest that the social media platforms are untrustworthy, they do reflect that Internet users still view websites as being the most trustworthy online resource. Social media increasingly inspires online users to donate to a cause, and surveys including the 2014 Millennial Impact Report and mGive 2015 Text Donation Study continue to reflect a preference by online donors to give through an organization's website. The Internet user's perspective about online tools and platforms an NGO chooses will affect how they view the NGO and whether they want to engage and donate.
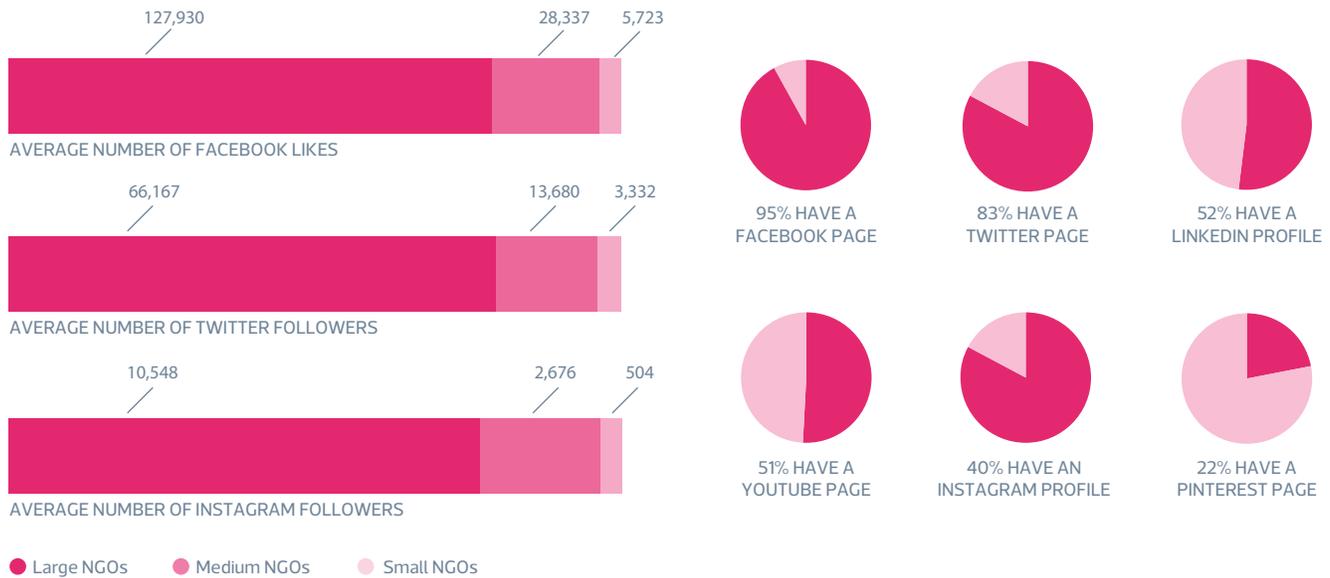
USE ONLINE IDENTITY TO PROJECT TRUST

As the nonprofit operator of .org since 2002, Public Interest Registry understands the importance of online identity and trust. The .org domain is known by many around the world as the Internet address for nonprofit organizations. It is an address that is trusted by many users to be a reliable source of information online. Many do not know that .org is, in fact, an "open" Internet address, meaning that anyone can register a .org. For-profit organizations and individuals can all use .org. For-profit organizations use it to communicate their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities and we also observe individuals using .org to communicate about their personal causes. These uses of .org are consistent with the trust that nonprofit .org users have built over the years. We also know that the Internet continues to innovate, offering new tools to create identity, connect, and communicate.

Figure 1
Online Platforms & Trustworthiness

- Website — 74%
- Facebook Page — 10%
- LinkedIn Profile — 6%
- A Blog — 6%
- Twitter Page — 4%
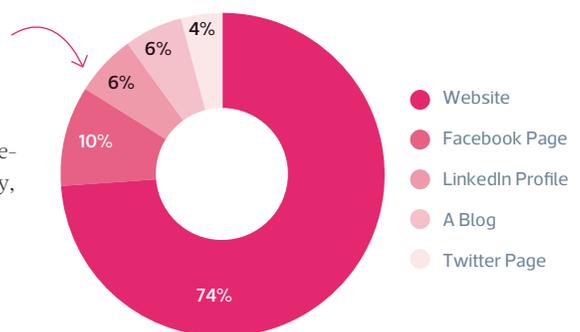
We asked respondents to rank online platforms in order of trustworthiness.

Figure 2
NGOs Using Social Media

127,930   28,337   5,723

AVERAGE NUMBER OF FACEBOOK LIKES

66,167   13,680   3,332

AVERAGE NUMBER OF TWITTER FOLLOWERS

10,548   2,676   504

AVERAGE NUMBER OF INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS

95% HAVE A FACEBOOK PAGE

83% HAVE A TWITTER PAGE

52% HAVE A LINKEDIN PROFILE

51% HAVE A YOUTUBE PAGE

40% HAVE AN INSTAGRAM PROFILE

22% HAVE A PINTEREST PAGE

● Large NGOs   ● Medium NGOs   ● Small NGOs

Findings in the 2016 Global NGO Online Technology Report regarding social media.

To better understand how NGOs are using the Internet and social media, Public Interest Registry, in partnership with Non Profit Tech for Good, released in January 2016 the Global NGO Online Technology Report, a first-of-its-kind survey of 2,780 NGOs from 133 countries across six continents: techreport.ngo/2016.html. Interestingly, 9% of the NGOs responding indicated that they use a .com address. Internet users identify .com with a commercial organization or for-profit company. This user perception can immediately undercut an NGO's effort to establish trust with a potential donor. Two percent indicated that they use a .net address, which does not project a clear identity for an NGO. Whether NGOs chose these addresses because the name they wanted wasn't available or due to ignorance of Internet user perception does not matter. What matters is the first impression made with the potential donor, who spends 10 seconds deciding whether to engage.

Social media offers a plethora of platforms that NGOs can use to create an identity and develop a network of supporters. Many NGOs establish a Facebook profile, Twitter handle, Instagram brand, or other social media platform to create an online identity and to communicate directly with supporters. Many social media services are free and therefore attractive to NGOs who don't have significant marketing and communications resources.

The fact is many NGOs don't rely on one online platform. Rather, they create an online "digital footprint" that consists of their website and social media identities combined. Many NGOs are just learning how to manage their digital footprint effectively and dynamically to raise awareness, drive traffic, and gain new supporters.

WHEN USING THESE PLATFORMS, NGOS MUST ASK CRITICAL QUESTIONS THAT RELATE TO TRUST:

1. **How much control of my content does this platform allow?**

2. **What does the platform operator do with my data and the data of my supporters?**

3. **What is the reputation of this company with the NGO community, and how can that reflect on my trustworthiness? The answers to these questions will affect the level of trust a donor or supporter develops with the NGO over time.**

61

NGOs need to have a broad digital footprint on the Internet and should use a variety of platforms effectively.

LEVERAGE THE RISE OF VALIDATED ONLINE IDENTITY
From 2012 to 2014, we conducted outreach to NGOs around the world to ask about their challenges when using the Internet. We engaged with over 16,000 NGOs from every region in workshops and heard the following points consistently: "I need to be visible," "I need to be trusted," and "I need to connect with donors." Based on this feedback, Public Interest Registry launched new Internet domain addresses, .ngo and .ong, in 2015 that are exclusively available for NGOs. These Internet addresses are different because they require an NGO to be validated before the domain name goes live. The domains .ngo and .ong offer an instantly recognizable identity along with validation to give potential donors and supporters confidence that they are interacting with a genuine NGO online. In turn, the NGO enjoys unique benefits in an online world that is increasingly complex to navigate.

NGOs are using .ngo and .ong to project trust and identity and are integrating them into their online digital footprint. Muslim Action for Development & Environment in the UK uses www.made.ngo as its primary website. MADE sees its use of .ngo as not only creating trust with donors but also making it part of an online NGO community. Hugs for Homeless Animals, a U.S. 501(c)(3), registered www.hugs.ngo and redirects traffic to its current website, www.h4ha.org. With over 10 million .org names already registered, many memorable names are no longer available. With hugs.org already in use by another organization, a new Internet address like .ngo offers Hugs for the Homeless the opportunity to register a memorable name that closely matches its name and cause. Children Matter More registered www.matter.ngo, a memorable online identity. They also established the @matter_ngo Twitter handle and promoted a campaign event through Twitter to drive traffic to their matter.ngo domain. Matter.ngo forwards traffic to their existing mattermore.org site, where supporters can learn more about the cause and make donations. These are just a few examples of how NGOs are leveraging validated online identity to project trust and promote online fundraising, cause awareness, and advocacy campaigns.

NGOs need to have a broad digital footprint on the Internet and should use a variety of platforms effectively. It is true that many NGOs simply don't have the resources or know-how to effectively manage their online identity and presence. It is also true that it has never been more important to understand online tools and how to use them appropriately to project trust and create relationships with supporters. For NGOs, failing to manage online identity and failing to understand Internet users' perceptions means your credibility can be lost in an instant.

Donors want their money to go to trustworthy NGOs, and want to see their donations have impact. This is particularly important if the user wants to donate money or support to an NGO that they just "met" on the Internet. NGOs need to give careful thought when creating their online first impression, and using a trusted, validated online identity is the important first step.

Brian Cute *is the CEO at Public Interest Registry As CEO, Brian oversees an $80M organization whose employees are devoted to providing people and organizations around the world with an online identity. To help nonprofits and NGOs communicate their stories to donors, Brian travels globally to meet with NGOs to understand how Public Interest Registry can support them in terms of technology infrastructure and online communications strategy.*

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