

*Digital Strategies for Charities:
Trust through the Disclosure and Dissemination of Digital Information*

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The number of charities in the UK has increased steadily over time, with over 168,000 charities currently registered in the UK (Charity Commission for England and Wales, 2019). This growth has gone hand in hand with the growth of the web. Many charities have harnessed the web to communicate their work and gather donations for their cause (Turner, 2010). However, despite these benefits, the web has also created challenges for these organisations. In particular, the vast amount of information that is readily available online has created savvy donors who are more discerning about where they donate their money. Growing scrutiny in social media has also raised scepticism as to the integrity of charities (Sargeant et al., 2006). Consequently, digital strategy has become a critical factor when considering customer trust, engagement and donations, especially for smaller charities with limited resources trying to operate in a competitive market.

Trust has proven to be an influential factor in building the customer base and increasing customer engagement (Saleem et al., 2017). For charities, the trust the customers have in their operation is key to their success if not their survival (Vázquez et al., 2002). It has, therefore, become crucial for charities to understand the impact the web has on customer trust and to evolve a suitable digital strategy accordingly.

Existing studies have investigated the impact of a charity's digital presence on customer trust. The studies have analysed how charities can attract and sustain donations through a range of web-based means including a personal website for the organisation, social media and crowdfunding platforms (Raman, 2016). However, these studies have focused on non-UK based non-profit organisations. Research focusing on UK based charities, particularly those that differentiate between non-profit and non-government organisations, have been limited.

In this study, we investigated the impact of a digital strategy on customer trust for a charity based in the UK. We considered digital strategy in terms of digital disclosure,

digital dissemination and the synergy between them. We distributed a set of three questionnaires to three groups of seven subject matter experts. Each group also received a prototype visualising different levels of digital disclosure and dissemination for the case-study charity. The expectations, perceptions and priorities of each group concerning customer trust were collected and analysed.

Our findings show that there are three main elements of disclosure that influence customer trust, namely, identity, impact and accountability. The disclosing of information that helps identify a charity such as its legal status and postal address help build the initial trust. In the case of non-governmental organisations who may not be registered, the charity's registration status is also influential. Sharing of past and present activity and its impact develops further trust while releasing financial data for public scrutiny adds to a charity's credibility. Similarly, the elements of dissemination that affect trust include the brand image, security and usability. Customers place greater trust in charities that have a website that is secure, suitably branded and easy to use. A strong presence on trusted platforms such as Facebook and YouTube helps foster customer confidence as it allows charities to interact with customers transparently. Additionally, our findings suggest that the synergy between disclosure and dissemination also influences customer trust.

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