

# Understanding Digital Presence: A Practical Guide for Nonprofit Leaders

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## 1. Executive Summary

At Raíz Digital, we see technology through the lens of digital infrastructure. We know that the word digital infrastructure can sound daunting, even corporate. But infrastructure is simply the foundation that allows any organization to function. Roads, water systems, electricity — we don't think twice about them because they just work. Digital infrastructure is no different. It is the foundation that allows your organization to function, connect, and grow in an increasingly digital world.

We see digital infrastructure as an ecosystem comprised of four pillars: digital presence, communications and outreach, operations and workflows, and data and analytics. And don't be overwhelmed by the labels — these are not as foreign a concept as you may think. You most likely already have all of these functions happening in your organization. They just may not be digital, and you may not see them through a technological lens, yet!

This paper focuses on the first pillar: digital presence. The most visible pillar, and typically where organizations begin their journey. In it, we reframe what digital presence actually means, because it is far more than a website. We walk through the components that make up a functional digital presence, touch on some technical aspects, and present a practical path forward, regardless of where you are starting from.

**The technical case first:** While these concepts apply to any organization, this paper focuses specifically on nonprofits. Your digital presence is a group of interconnected components. It includes your website, yes — but also your domain and hosting configuration, your professional email address, your Google Business Profile, your search visibility (how and whether Google finds you), your presence on nonprofit directories like Candid and Charity Navigator, your social media profiles, and how all of these components communicate with each other and with the outside world.

When any part of that system is broken, missing, or neglected, the whole system underperforms. A beautiful website that Google can't find is invisible. A findable website with a Gmail contact address signals an organization that hasn't invested in itself. A strong website with a three-year-old Candid profile raises questions for foundation program officers. Each piece reinforces — or undermines — the others.

This is also why "getting a website" is not the finish line. Building a digital presence is a starting point. Managing it, keeping it current, and ensuring all the pieces work together is what actually moves the needle. *Ensuring that your digital presence is easy to manage and maintain is as critical as having all the components in place*

**The business case:** When your digital presence is working it directly amplifies your mission. You are findable, credible, and consistent across all the places people look. Donors give with more confidence. Foundation program officers see an organization that takes itself seriously. Volunteers find you and sign up. Community members access the services they need. Partners and institutions treat you as a credible peer.

When it isn't working, the damage is largely invisible. Donors don't call to tell you your website cost you a gift. Foundations don't explain why a strong application felt less compelling than it should have. Volunteers simply find another organization to support. You never know what you lost.

The purpose of this paper is to give nonprofit leaders the foundation to understand both sides: the interconnected components that make a digital presence function, and the real-world business and mission consequences when it does or doesn't. We understand that what may seem as taking resources from your mission is difficult. But hopefully, after understanding a bit more of the technology, you will see that putting resources in digital presence (and infrastructure) is not taking resources away from your mission, but building a stronger digital foundation to help you amplify your mission.

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## 2. The Stakes — What's Actually at Risk

You understand the business stakes better than we do. What a missed grant means, what it costs when a volunteer never shows up, what it means when someone who needed your services couldn't find you — you live those realities every day. This paper is not here to make that case.

What we can offer is the technical picture: how a digital presence actually works as a system, what the components are, how they connect, and what breaks when any piece is neglected. That is the territory this paper covers.

One thing worth naming plainly: the damage from a weak digital presence is mostly invisible. There is no notification that says a donor visited your website and left without giving. No email from a foundation explaining why a strong application felt less compelling. The harm is silent — and that silence can make it feel like digital presence doesn't matter that much. It does. The consequences are real. They're just quiet.

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## 3. What "Digital Presence" Actually Means

### It's Not Just a Website

When most people hear "digital presence," they think: website. And yes, a website is essential. But a complete, functional digital presence is actually a system of interconnected components, and understanding all of them is what separates organizations that are truly findable and credible from those that check the box but still fall short.

Think of it like a physical office. Yes, you need a building. But you also need a sign out front, a listing in the business directory, a professional phone number, a clean and organized interior, and people who know where you are. Remove any of those elements and your ability to connect with the public degrades. Digital presence works the same way.

Here is what that system actually looks like.

## 1. Your Website

Your website is your home base. It is the one digital property you fully own and control. Unlike social media platforms, which can change their rules, algorithms, or even shut down, your website belongs to you.

A website does several critical things simultaneously:

- It establishes that you exist and are a real organization
- It communicates your mission, programs, and impact
- It gives people a way to donate, volunteer, or access services
- It builds trust through professional design, clear information, and current content
- It is the destination your other digital channels point people toward

We'll go deeper on the technical side of websites in Section 3, but the key point here is that your website is the foundation of everything else.

## 2. Professional Email

This one is consistently underestimated. There is a meaningful credibility difference between receiving a grant inquiry response from [execdir@portlandfamilyservices.org](mailto:execdir@portlandfamilyservices.org) and receiving one from [portlandfamilyservices@gmail.com](mailto:portlandfamilyservices@gmail.com).

Professional email, an address that ends in your organization's domain, signals that you are established, have invested in your infrastructure, and take your organizational identity seriously. We'll dig into why this matters technically in Section 3.

## 3. Google Business Profile

Google Business Profile (formerly Google My Business) is the free listing that appears on the right side of the page when someone searches for your organization by name. It shows your address, phone number, hours, website, photos, and reviews.

Claiming and optimizing this listing costs nothing. Not having it, or having an unclaimed one with wrong information, is a silent credibility problem. It also affects whether you show up in local searches — something like "nonprofits helping families in Portland," which is how many community members and volunteers find organizations.

## 4. Search Visibility (SEO)

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) sounds technical, and there is a technical side to it. But at its core it is simply: does Google know who you are, what you do, and where you are, well enough to show you in relevant search results?

If someone searches "job training programs northeast Portland," do you show up? If someone searches your organization's exact name, does your website come up first, or does some outdated Yelp listing or a broken Facebook page appear instead?

SEO is not magic, and it is not about gaming algorithms. It is about making sure your website gives Google the clear, accurate information it needs to recommend you to relevant searchers. Section 3 covers the practical basics.

## 5. Social Media

Social media deserves a nuanced treatment because it is simultaneously valuable and often misused by nonprofits. The key insight is this: social media is not your home base — your website is. Social media is a channel for reaching people and pointing them toward your home base.

Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and similar platforms are useful for community building, storytelling, event promotion, and keeping your current supporters engaged. They also contribute to your searchability: a well-maintained social presence appears in search results and adds to the overall impression you make.

The mistake many organizations make is treating social media as a substitute for a real website. It is not. Platforms change. Algorithms bury your content. You don't own the data or the relationship. Social media is a channel, not a foundation.

## **6. Online Directories and Transparency Platforms**

GuideStar (now Candid), Charity Navigator, and similar platforms serve a specific and important audience: institutional donors and foundations. Having a current, complete profile on these platforms is a due diligence checkpoint.

Beyond these platforms, there are smaller but significant directories: VolunteerMatch, Idealist, NetworkForGood, and various local nonprofit directories. Being listed in relevant directories expands your discoverability.

## **7. How They Work Together**

The reason to think about these as a system rather than individual checkboxes is that they reinforce each other. One of these components alone, can't push your organization to the next level, all of them working together will.

Your Google Business Profile links to your website. Your website contains content that improves your SEO. Your social media profiles link to your website and create additional search results when someone searches your name. Your GuideStar profile adds legitimacy that donors find when they research you. Volunteers who find your Google listing visit your website. Program participants who see your Instagram post follow a link to your website to find your address.

A weakness in any part of the system creates friction. Strong components working together create something that genuinely serves your mission.

## **8. Maintaining Your Digital Presence — The Ongoing Challenge**

Maintenance is one of the most challenging aspects of a successful digital presence. You do the work, get all the components in place, see results — and think: done. But the reality is that this is where the real work begins. The last and most critical step is having a plan to maintain it. Without that plan, you won't be able to keep pace with changes in your organization, the communities you serve, or the technology itself.

Maintenance requires commitment: someone responsible for monitoring it, and someone willing to learn how to update it. This can feel like a big undertaking, and it can become costly if no one internal takes ownership. The good news: knowing this upfront allows you to build maintainability in from the start. When evaluating any tool or platform, make ease of use and ease of updating a requirement — not an afterthought.

This cannot be overstated. Having a plan to maintain your digital presence is as critical as having done the work to have all your digital presence components. The main part of this plan is to understand what needs to be done to maintain your digital presence and assign ownership. We will go over this in more detail in section 5: A path forward.

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## 4. The Technical Reality — One Layer Deeper

### Why This Section Matters

One of the most frustrating experiences for nonprofit leaders is trying to make informed decisions about technology without really understanding what's being discussed. You're asked to approve a web project, or a vendor quotes you something for "hosting," and you're not even sure what "hosting" is.

This section is here to close that gap. Not to make you a web developer, but to give you enough of a foundation to ask good questions, spot problems, and make confident decisions. Think of it like understanding how car insurance works without being a mechanic.

### Domain Name vs. Hosting vs. Website Builder

These three terms get bundled together in a way that confuses people. They are actually three separate things, and understanding the difference matters.

**Domain name** is your address on the internet. It's the "portlandfamilyservices.org" part. You register (rent) a domain name through a registrar, such as GoDaddy, Namecheap, or Google Domains. It typically costs between \$10 and \$20 per year.

Critical point: your organization should own and control its own domain. If a web developer or vendor registers it for you in their account, you are dependent on them to keep it active. Nonprofits lose their domain names every year because the person who registered it left, the vendor changed, or nobody remembered to renew it.

**Web hosting** is where your website's files actually live — the servers that deliver your website to people's browsers when they type your address. Hosting is separate from the domain. You can think of the domain as your street address and hosting as the building where your stuff actually is. Hosting typically costs between \$50 and \$300 per year depending on the type and scale.

**Website builder or CMS (Content Management System)** is the software that lets you create and edit your website without writing code. WordPress is the most widely used CMS in the world, powering roughly 40% of all websites. Squarespace, Wix, and Webflow are popular alternatives that bundle hosting and the builder together. Each has tradeoffs: all-in-one builders are easier to manage but give you less control; WordPress gives you more flexibility but requires a bit more technical understanding.

Why does this distinction matter? Because a common nonprofit problem is having everything bundled with a single vendor — and then losing all control when that vendor relationship ends. Knowing that your domain, hosting, and website software are three separate things lets you ask the right questions and keep the right assets in your name.

### SSL Certificate — The Padlock in Your Browser

You've probably noticed that some websites show a padlock icon next to the URL in your browser, while others show a warning like "Not Secure." That padlock indicates an SSL certificate is in place.

SSL (Secure Sockets Layer) encrypts the connection between someone's browser and your website. It protects information that people enter on your site: forms, donation information, contact details. Without it, that data is potentially visible to third parties.

Here's what matters for nonprofits: Google actively penalizes websites without SSL by marking them as "Not Secure" in the browser bar and ranking them lower in search results. Donors and funders who see a "Not Secure" warning on a donation page will often leave. It is a significant trust signal.

The good news: SSL certificates are free through a service called Let's Encrypt, and most reputable hosting providers install them automatically. If your website doesn't have one, this is a quick fix — and a critical one.

## **What Mobile-First Means and Why It Matters**

"Mobile-first" means your website is designed to work well on a phone before it's designed for a desktop. This is now the standard — not a nice-to-have.

More than 60% of all web traffic comes from mobile devices. For communities that are younger, lower-income, or less likely to own a desktop computer — which describes many of the communities nonprofits serve — that number is even higher. If your website looks broken on a phone, loads slowly on mobile data, or requires pinching and zooming to navigate, you are failing a significant portion of your audience.

Google made mobile-friendliness an explicit ranking factor in 2015, and in 2019 switched to "mobile-first indexing," meaning Google primarily uses the mobile version of your site to determine search rankings. A site that looks great on a desktop but is broken on phones ranks poorly, even for desktop searches.

How do you check this? Google offers a free Mobile-Friendly Test tool (search "Google mobile-friendly test") where you can enter your URL and get an immediate assessment.

## **SEO at a Practical Level**

SEO — Search Engine Optimization — is one of those terms that generates a lot of hype and confusion. Vendors charge thousands for "SEO services" and it can feel like a black box. Let's demystify it.

At its most basic, SEO is about helping Google understand what your website is about so it can show your site to people searching for relevant topics.

Google uses software called "crawlers" or "spiders" to read your website and index its contents. Based on what it finds, it decides when to show your site in search results, and how prominently.

**Page titles and meta descriptions** are pieces of text that describe each page of your site to Google, and they show up in search results. The page title is the blue clickable link. The meta description is the short text below it. Writing clear, descriptive page titles (like "Youth Employment Programs in Portland | Portland Family Services" rather than just "Home") is one of the most basic and impactful SEO improvements you can make.

**Headers and content** matter too. If your organization does job training for young adults in North Portland, you should have those words clearly on your website — in headers, in paragraphs, in page titles. Google matches search queries to content. If the words people search for aren't on your site, Google can't connect them to you.

**Google Search Console** is a free tool from Google that shows you exactly how your site is performing in search — what queries people use to find you, which pages appear in results, and whether Google has found any technical problems with your site. Every nonprofit should have it set up and someone on staff should check it periodically. It is free.

**Backlinks**, which are other websites linking to yours, also tell Google your site is credible. Being listed in directories, featured in press, linked by partner organizations, or mentioned by local media all contribute positively.

You do not need to pay for expensive SEO packages to get the basics right. Accurate and up-to-date content, clean page titles, mobile-friendliness, and fast load times will get most nonprofits very far.

## **Professional Email — Why It Matters More Than You Think**

Professional email, an address at your own domain like [info@portlandfamilyservices.org](mailto:info@portlandfamilyservices.org), costs somewhere between \$0 and \$72 per year depending on what service you use. Google Workspace (formerly G Suite) for Nonprofits is free for qualifying 501(c)(3) organizations and gives you a full Gmail interface with your own domain address.

So why do so many nonprofits still use [portlandfamilyservices@gmail.com](mailto:portlandfamilyservices@gmail.com) or [execdir2003@yahoo.com](mailto:execdir2003@yahoo.com)? Usually because no one ever set it up, or because it felt like an unnecessary expense.

Here is why it matters:

When you send a grant application or a donor stewardship email from a Gmail address, you are signaling, unintentionally, that your organization does not have basic infrastructure in place. Professional funders, especially foundations with formal vetting processes, notice. It is not necessarily disqualifying, but it adds up as part of an overall impression of organizational maturity.

More practically, a professional email creates continuity. When the executive director changes, [execdir@portlandfamilyservices.org](mailto:execdir@portlandfamilyservices.org) stays with the organization. [sarah.johnson84@gmail.com](mailto:sarah.johnson84@gmail.com) doesn't.

Google Workspace for Nonprofits is worth investigating if you haven't already. It eliminates the cost barrier entirely.

## Google Business Profile and Local Search

When someone searches "food pantry Portland" or "ESL classes northeast Portland," Google's algorithm gives priority to results that are local, have strong profiles, and have been verified as legitimate. Google Business Profile is the tool that tells Google who you are, where you are, what you do, and that you're a real organization — not just text on a webpage.

Claiming your profile takes about 20 minutes. Keeping it updated (current hours, phone number, address, photos) is a small ongoing task. The return is appearing in "local pack" results, the map-based listings that appear at the top of location-based searches. This is a high-visibility, high-value placement that is completely free to claim.

If you have never claimed your Google Business Profile, search your organization name on Google right now. If a panel appears on the right side of the screen, look for a link that says "Own this business?" — that means it is unclaimed and anyone could, theoretically, edit incorrect information onto it.

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## 5. A Path Forward

### Starting From Where You Are

If you've read this paper and felt a growing sense of "we're behind on this," know that you're in good company. Most nonprofits are. The organizations that have strong digital presences didn't get there all at once. They improved incrementally, often with limited resources, over time.

The goal of this section is not to give you a comprehensive to-do list that overwhelms you — it's to give you a framework for thinking about where to start and how to make progress without losing your mind.

### Principle 1: Get the Foundation Right Before Building on Top

Trying to improve your social media strategy when your website is broken is like repainting the walls while the roof is leaking. The order of operations matters.

The foundation of your digital presence is:

1. A functioning, mobile-friendly website with an SSL certificate
2. Professional email at your domain
3. An accurate, claimed Google Business Profile

If any of these are not in place, they should be the first priority. Everything else — SEO strategy, social media optimization, GuideStar profiles — builds on this foundation. Without it, the additional work won't produce the results you're looking for.

## **Principle 2: Assign Ownership**

One of the most common reasons digital presence degrades is that no one owns it. It lives in the space between the executive director, the communications volunteer, and the IT-savvy board member — which means it belongs to no one.

Assign specific ownership for specific tasks:

- Who is responsible for keeping the website content current?
- Who manages the Google Business Profile?
- Who posts on social media, and how often?
- Who monitors Google Analytics?

These don't have to be paid staff members. They can be committed volunteers. But someone needs to know it's their job.

## **Principle 3: Do Audits, Not Just Fixes**

A common pattern is to notice a specific problem — "our donate page is broken" — fix it, and move on. This is reactive and doesn't build toward a healthy, sustained digital presence.

A better practice is a periodic audit: a systematic review of all components of your digital presence. Twice a year, someone goes through a checklist:

- Is the website content current?
- Are all links working?
- Is the SSL certificate active and current?
- Is the Google Business Profile up to date?
- Is the GuideStar profile current?
- Is Google Analytics installed and tracking?
- Are social media profiles active and accurate?

This doesn't take long once you've built the habit. And it prevents the slow decay that leads to the "website that was built and forgotten" problem.

## **Principle 4: Start With Who's Searching for You**

If resources are limited — and they almost always are — prioritize based on your primary goals. Different organizations have different starting points:

**If your primary need is donor development:** Focus first on the website and GuideStar/Candid profile. Donors vet organizations through these channels most heavily.

**If your primary need is community reach (program participants):** Focus first on the website, Google Business Profile, and local directory listings. These are how people searching for services will find you.

**If your primary need is volunteer recruitment:** Focus on the website (especially a clear volunteer section), Idealist or VolunteerMatch listings, and social media presence.

**If your primary need is foundation funding:** Focus on website professionalism, GuideStar/Candid profile quality, and professional email infrastructure.

You don't have to do everything at once. Know who you most need to reach, and build toward them.

## Principle 5: Leverage Free Tools

Many of the most impactful digital presence tools cost nothing — or have special nonprofit pricing that brings the cost very close to nothing. Before spending significant budget on digital infrastructure, make sure you've explored:

- **Google Workspace for Nonprofits** — free professional email, Google Drive, Calendar, and more for qualifying 501(c)(3)s
- **Google Analytics** — free website traffic analytics
- **Google Search Console** — free search performance data and site health monitoring
- **Google Business Profile** — free local listing management
- **Candid/GuideStar profile** — free (though updating to Gold/Platinum requires staff time, not money)
- **Google Ad Grants** — \$10,000/month in free Google Search advertising for qualifying nonprofits
- **Canva for Nonprofits** — free access to premium design tools
- **Let's Encrypt SSL** — free SSL certificates via your hosting provider

These tools represent enormous value for organizations that know they exist and take the time to set them up.

## Principle 6: Separate "Build" from "Maintain"

There are two fundamentally different kinds of digital presence work:

**Build work** is the one-time (or occasional) effort of creating or significantly overhauling a website, setting up infrastructure, or launching a new platform. This often requires outside help (a consultant, a web developer, a skilled volunteer) and a significant time investment.

**Maintain work** is the ongoing effort of keeping things current, accurate, and functional. Preferably this should be done internally by someone who has the basic knowledge, with a consistent cadence. Find resources for training and knowledge. And if this is not available, try to negotiate a reasonable rate for maintenance from a consultant.

Many organizations conflate these two things — they hire someone to build, assume maintenance is also handled, and then discover two years later that nothing has been updated since launch day. Clarifying this distinction, and explicitly planning for both, prevents that pattern.

## A Practical Starting Checklist

This is not exhaustive: it is a triage checklist. Review this list and mark what's in place, what's missing, and what needs attention.

### Foundation

- Our website loads without errors on a mobile phone
- Our website has an SSL certificate (padlock shows in browser)
- All links on our website work
- Our website content has been reviewed and updated within 60 days

- Staff and board listing is current
- Donation functionality works and appears trustworthy
- We own our domain name (it's registered in the organization's name)

### Email and Identity

- All official communications use @ourorganization.org addresses
- We have a general info@ address that's monitored

### Discoverability

- Our Google Business Profile is claimed and current
- Our GuideStar/Candid profile is at Gold level or above
- Google Analytics is installed on our website
- Google Search Console is set up

### Social Media

- We have posted on at least one social platform in the last 30 days
- Inactive accounts have been addressed (deleted or merged)

Work through this list, and you'll have a clear picture of where you stand and where to start.

## One Last Thought

We know we have covered a lot of technical details here, and hopefully we have not overwhelmed you. Our hope is to give you more information so that you understand the full picture and are able to make more thoughtful decisions. To understand that the consequences of having a weak digital presence are largely invisible. And how connecting all the dots as we have described here, and improving the different components, can in fact amplify your mission.

We understand the hesitation — you got into this work to serve people, not to manage technology. We know that what may seem as taking resources from your mission are difficult decisions to make. But your digital presence is not in competition with your mission. It is in service of it. Every donor you lose to a broken website, every volunteer who couldn't figure out how to sign up, every community member who couldn't find your services on a phone — those are mission failures. Not dramatic ones. Quiet ones.

A strong digital presence doesn't require unlimited resources. It requires intention, assigned ownership, and the understanding that showing up well online is part of how you do the work. The communities you serve are worth investing in your digital presence, so that in the end, you give back to them twofold.

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*This white paper was produced by Raíz Digital, a Portland-based digital consultancy serving nonprofits and artists. Raíz Digital was founded by Richard Flores, a 24-year Intel engineer who now applies that technical experience to amplifying the missions of community-focused and mission-driven organizations.*

### **Technology that amplifies your mission.**

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*This is Paper 1 in Raíz Digital's Digital Infrastructure for Nonprofits series. Upcoming papers will cover Communications & Outreach, Operations & Workflows, and Data & Analytics — followed by an anchor paper that ties the full framework together.*

Learn more at [raizdigital.co](https://raizdigital.co)