

Transcript – Episode 102 – [Top Three Nonprofit Website Fails with Jesse Lane](#)

Dolph Goldenburg: Welcome to the Successful Nonprofits™ Podcast. I'm your host Dolph Goldenburg. Today, we are talking website design: the good, the bad, and the just plain ugly. There are so many elements to website development. There's the visual, do you like to look at it? Of course, is it search engine optimized (SEO)? Do you have the best keywords in there? Are there relevant calls to action for the people you're trying to target? And does it engage your viewers? Does it pull you in to explore more, but at the same time allow you to easily get where you want to go? Hopefully, your organization says, "Yes, our website is a thing of beauty. It's easy to navigate, and we get incredible organic search results." And if that's the case, fantastic, but on the off chance that your website could use some improvement, I have just the guest for you today. Jesse Lane, who is the Chief Marketing Officer at Pure Charity, will join us to discuss top nonprofit website fails and quick fixes. Now, Jesse admits that he has kind of learned this as he's gone along, and his first website redesign took almost a year to launch, cost too much, and in the end, was not something that he or the organization loved, but as I said, he has learned the art and science of Web Development as he goes along. Today, he successfully helps nonprofits launch websites in a few months while also soliciting client engagement during the entire process.

Hey Jesse, welcome to the podcast.

Jesse Lane: So glad to be here.

Dolph Goldenburg: Share with me, what does a year-long website build look like?

Jesse Lane: Yeah, well, it's a little painful to look back and think about it. One of the biggest issues was that we started out just trying to really dream so big and think of everything we could possibly do. The process of requirements gathering took so long that the organization had pretty much shifted and changed its needs before we even finished understanding the discovery process. We spent a lot of time doing that, and then we tried to bite it all off in one big bite and accomplish it all in one fell swoop versus what I would recommend, which is a more iterative approach. It took a long time because we spent so much time trying to get everybody involved and get a dream big and do something way too complicated. Then our developer teams that we partnered with just underestimated what it would require. There were just a lot of mistakes along the way. It was a little painful.

Dolph Goldenburg: Was this a big organization or medium-sized one? How big was it?

Jesse Lane: I would say it was medium to large nonprofit. I think around \$30 million annually at the time.

Dolph Goldenburg: How many people on the organization side were involved in building this website?

Jesse Lane: Yeah. Yeah, it's painful. Well, there was a small team of about five or six kind of leading the way, but I kind of leading the project, and I got literally, you know, 30 or 40 people involved from all different departments who felt like they wanted to give input, and I'm not sure that that was the worst mistake because I did want them to have some ownership and input and share their voice. I think at some point there was just way too many cooks in the kitchen trying to please everybody, which was impossible.

Dolph Goldenburg: I recall my very first job out of college, which I think I started in 1993 or 94. A couple of years into it - and it was a smaller organization - had about a five or \$6,000,000 budget, and a couple of years into it they decided again, this is the nineties, wait, we need a website and yeah, this is back in, you know, the Geo cities days. I knew nothing about web design, but I was one of the few members of staff who had actually been on the Internet so they're like, "We need to pull Dolph into these meetings." And I do recall there being a lot of people in the room who maybe did not really understand either what we needed from our website or how websites are actually designed to work. Do you think that's common?

Jesse Lane: Yeah. Oh absolutely. I think everybody surfs the web these days, so everybody thinks they know what a good website is, and if you try and do all those things, you're really going to do nothing well. I think the lack of focus is actually one of the biggest issues we find in the nonprofit space, and that's what we did. It was like, if everybody gets what they want, then you've got a website that tries to accomplish and do a million things and doesn't really do anything very well.

Dolph Goldenburg: Talk to me about focus. If they're just two or three things that smaller organizations - those with budgets under a million or under \$2 million - should be focusing on, what should they be?

Jesse Lane: I think you have to say, what are we trying to accomplish on our website? What's the one thing we want people to do when they come to the site? If you really know that and you understand that as well as you understand your audience and you know why they're there, what they are trying to accomplish, what their goals, challenges and needs are... then if you really understand that, then just have a really simple, focused site that's really asking them to do that one thing and making it super clear they should know what you're trying to get them to do. It really shouldn't be 10 things or even four or five things. It should be probably just one thing that you're trying to get them to do at any given time on your website. So, for a lot of nonprofits, that's donate. Sometimes, it's something else, maybe it's trying to get them to sign up for your email list and stay in the loop or something like that. I think you have to decide what that is, but the big thing is it can only really be one thing because you can't get people to do three or four things all at once.

Dolph Goldenburg: So, for most of your nonprofit clients, is it donate or is it something else?

Jesse Lane: I would say it is to donate. Typically, we want people to be able to donate as soon as they get on their website. I think sophisticated web strategy allows people to have a different focus on each page, right? So, maybe on your homepage, the focus is a little different because

maybe people are coming there just to learn, and they need to, and you're trying to grab that information and get them engaged, add them to your email list so you can stay in touch. But if they go to a landing page for a campaign, a fundraising campaign for instance, then, obviously, the one thing you want them to do is donate at that point and maybe they're ready to do that when someone on the homepage might not be. I think it's okay to have different views of the site. Different kinds of entry points have different calls to action, but at any given moment, a user should really have one primary focused called action.

Dolph Goldenburg: Do you find that nonprofits are also creating websites that provide information or support for their clients?

Jesse Lane: Yeah, I mean sometimes. When you say clients, do you mean donors or potential donors?

Dolph Goldenburg: The people served. For example, if it's a homeless shelter, homeless people.

Jesse Lane: Gotcha.

Dolph Goldenburg: Yeah, yeah. It's a family service agency. Families that might need therapy assistance or something like that.

Jesse Lane: So, some nonprofits that I work with, that's the primary purpose of their website, not donors. So that takes a whole different look. That's what is complicated about a nonprofit is when you really need to build a website for both audiences. This is the one where landing pages that are focused can really come and play, you know, people can build a landing page dedicated to their donors that allow the messaging to be focused for them, and maybe their home page is reserved for the clients as you mentioned. Yeah, you see that a lot, but it's just every nonprofit is different.

Dolph Goldenburg: It's one of the ways that I think nonprofits sometimes have a difficult time building a website. For most for-profit businesses, the client is also the person that's giving you the money. For most nonprofit organizations, the client is someone who might be getting a service, and then someone else is giving you the money to provide the service.

Jesse Lane: Yeah and that's why it's such a unique situation with each nonprofit because in a lot of cases, someone may come to the website to receive services, but they don't necessarily need to be sold on that. They just need a 'hey click here to go into the path, fill out the form' or you know, go through the process. That can be a more secondary call to action. It should be easy to find, but it doesn't have to be front and center. In those cases, I would say the donor or potential donor advocate should be your primary focus, and those who are receiving support should be able to easily find what they're looking for. Don't necessarily waste a ton of real estate on that. Then in some cases, your whole website is trying to convince someone who needs the services to step forward and really received those. That's why it's different for each organization. It really is.

Dolph Goldenburg: What are some of the biggest nonprofit website fails, and how can organizations fix them without too much pain and suffering and money?

Jesse Lane: I've got three that I thought about as I prepared for this conversation. Number **one**, they're just full of friction, and I can unpack what I mean by that. Number **two** is they are org centric, so they're really kind of revolving around the organization. Then **three**, they're simply uninspiring, just uninspiring. Unfortunately, we find that a lot and so I can unpack each of those. The first one full of friction. It's kind of what we've already started talking about. Just unfocused. You know, there's so many, for instance, links and calls to action. When you pull up the site, you're pulled in a lot of different directions, and you are kind of overwhelmed and confused on what is it exactly that I need to do or click on because maybe the language isn't clear or there's just so much competing for their attention, and on the website these days you've got to be able to grab someone's attention and focus really fast because you're not going to have it for long.

People come and go on websites in just a matter of seconds. If you have so many things for them to look at, there's a good chance they're just going to close out or skim your website and then bounce off of the site. They can't simply find a way to donate. I mean it's sad sometimes because nonprofit websites that I'm sitting with, I can't find the donate button, at least not very quickly. It's buried under some tab, or they use some word to try and motivate someone. But it isn't clear if they're trying to be catchy or clever versus just being clear. So, that can be an issue.

Dolph Goldenburg: I got to jump in here. It seems to me that an unfocused website might be hard to fix. I know you promised quick fixes, like how do you fix that?

Jesse Lane: Yeah, well I think one of the easiest shortcut fixes... just do the hard work of cutting down links and buttons. If you have 10, try and get it down to four or three. I just did this on a nonprofit website. I sat with them, logged into WordPress, and I said, "Look, you've got too many things on your header and the above the fold on your homepage. In the next five minutes, let's just force ourselves to cut this down." We were able to do that. We were able to simplify their header from eight kinds of links to something like four. Some things we just stuck out in the footer because think of the footer as kind of your catch-all, you know, it's the junk drawer of your website. So, there are things that need to be findable, but they don't need to be front and center; stick them in the footer. We did that, and it didn't take long at all.

Dolph Goldenburg: First of all, when you reduce things that are in your header, does that decrease visitor engagement - and for folks listening that may not fully understand what that means - do they visit fewer pages? Do they stay on the website for a shorter period of time, etc.?"

Jesse Lane: No, I mean it's the opposite. With less links, people are more likely to click because I think we have this tendency when we're on a site to want to really explore it. We want to kind of feel like we've explored all sides of it. We want to see it all, and if we see 50 links where we kind of give up hope and we're just actually click off, we're like, "We're never going to be able to see all this." That's another issue is there's too much text, and they just feel like, "Well, I can't read

all this, so I'm just not even going to try," versus if there are only three things in the head or you're like, "Okay, I can kind of wrap my mind around this," and even some really large complex organizations have been able to do this. It's possible. I think you just need to be able to really do the hard work and have the discipline to say what is priority in this moment for the user and then take everything else off. It is hard, but it's doable.

Dolph Goldenburg: Nice. So really slim down the website and focus on what's a priority.

Hey Jesse, we're going to take a short break. When we come back, we're gonna talk about your number two fail and hopefully your number two fix, which is how to make your website less organization-centric.

I am really enjoying this with Jesse in part because I am not an expert on building websites, and quite frankly, I started to work on a whole new look for the Successful Nonprofits™ website, so admittedly a little selfish, but I'm getting some stuff out of this as well. While I don't know a lot about building websites, I do know a lot about strategic planning. I know that without a strategic plan and organization is at risk of wasting precious time and resources in any number of situations that call for a clear vision and direction. Let's be real. To be at our best, we need to operate with a clear vision and direction every day. So, does your organization need to plan it? So, check out www.successfulnonprofits.com where we've got a lot of information about strategic planning. You can download it for free. Of course, you can also see what my own approach is, but you know you can download our information about strategic planning for free.

Welcome back to our conversation with Jesse Lane about website design for nonprofits. So, Jesse, talk to me about these org centric websites.

Jesse Lane: Now, we're getting a little bit higher level, so stick with me here. I think what we find often in this is really often you see that orgs build websites and write their copy and design everything. It was a very eccentric minds mindset. So, they're thinking about, "Hey, I want to share who we are, what we do, what we've accomplished about us, our team, our board." It's all about them, right? You might be thinking, "Well, what's wrong with that? This is our website. Isn't that what they're coming to learn?" I think ultimately that's pretty normal and standard, but it isn't necessarily most effective in this space. You are making yourself the hero of the story in that case, and you don't realize that everybody wants to be the hero themselves.

When you're making your organization the hero, even in the nonprofit space, the donor, the audience, whoever it is that you're building your website for... they're always looking to be the hero themselves, whether they realize it or not. Help them see themselves in that place, not you in that place, and help them see your organization as a partner that can help them achieve their goals and really do what they're trying to accomplish. Maybe that is because they're a client needing a transformation in their life. Maybe it's because they're a potential donor wanting to have an impact. What happened [inaudible] be the hero. You can help them get there. You can be the mentor that guide the coach that gets them there. Position yourself that way, not where it's all about you. I think that's what I mean by eccentric. We see that all the time. We also see

just insider language and jargon that people might not even understand, words that you're so comfortable using because you do every day, but your audience may have no idea what you're talking about when you use those words. Acronyms are pretty bad too. Those are the types of things that I'm referring to an estate org centric.

Dolph Goldenburg: I would also think about the less or eccentric your website, probably the better your SEO/search engine optimization is because I would imagine that when a donor or prospective client types of question into Google. Google brings those websites that best answer those questions, which are their questions, not the organization's.

Jesse Lane: Yeah, that's a great point. That's exactly right.

Dolph Goldenburg: I don't know about you, but I think probably where I see organizations really kind of going off the rails and being or eccentric is on their blogs. Is that your experience?

Jesse Lane: Yeah, I mean I see that everywhere, honestly. I mean yes, on the blog that happens. I feel like it's on the homepage of most sites, too. So, I mean it's throughout. Yeah, I see people writing blogs, you know, I think I'd be curious to see what you're seeing out there, but in where they want to constantly be trying to defend why they're worth the finances, why they're worth the investment of time. So, people, nonprofits are trying to make a case constantly, which I think there's a place and time for that, but you're going to lose people because people aren't necessarily interested to engage with that type of content because it's all about you. Imagine that relationship that you might have if one person is so self-centered, so focused on themselves, centric, if they're going to be not necessarily a great person to be in a relationship with right there. They're always talking about themselves or thinking about themselves. So, think of it that way, and position yourself trying to have a two-way conversation with your audience and be in a relationship that is mutually beneficial and not just all about you. So, if you position yourself that way, it makes it a lot easier to write the words on your side and kind of rethink how you orient your site.

Dolph Goldenburg: I mean, often what I think I see in terms of blog says first of all, organizations maybe do six or eight blog posts a year, which if you're going to really try to have an active blog, you probably need to do more than that. Then the other thing is it almost looks like they just took their press release and turn it into a blog post. So, "Oh, so and so is our new director of client services," and maybe you want to announce that on the press and maybe you want to do a quick photo and you know, a couple sentences on your blog, but most people come to your website aren't going to really care that "X" is now your director of client services.

Jesse Lane: Oh yeah. No, I completely agree. That's, that's pretty org centric.

Dolph Goldenburg: Let's talk about that final fail that nonprofits will often have on their website

Jesse Lane: Fail number **three** is just being uninspiring, and a lot of times that's also just out of date. A part of that is a lot of nonprofits fall into the trap of being so abstract in their copywriting

that it's hard to understand. They're talking about words like *transformation* or *impact* or *change*, and that's great, but if you leave it at that and you don't get any more specific than people could spend five minutes on her side and still not know what in the world you do, that's a problem... or how in the world they get involved or how they, how they can engage. My advice always is to get concrete. You should be able to take a picture of it and look at that picture, and if you can't do that, then it's not very concrete.

So, the words you use and how you describe what you do... if you're talking about real people and real things, then it gets concrete. If you're talking about these abstract, vague terms and ideas, people are gonna have a hard time getting them super motivated by that alone. It's uninspiring because it's also that oftentimes just don't have enough visuals and way too much text, and in this day and age people just aren't going to read it all. Maybe the photography is out of date or the stories or blog posts or out of date. Like you said, they get on, they see a blog, and they click on it, and the last post is from nine months ago or a year ago. And it's like, "Oh, okay, what is this? What's the message that this is sending?"

That's not to say every nonprofit has to have a blog and keep it up to date. If you have a blog with old posts, then hide it somewhere, don't make it the front and center on the home page so that everybody sees that you're out of date on that. Another thing we see all the time is too many facts and data points and stats and not enough stories. It's just sad because I feel like nonprofits just love the data - which I'm not saying all data is bad, don't hear me say that - but there's been studies to prove that people will give more because of emotions and are driven by those emotions more than data. In fact, it's different areas of our brain, and the analysis part of our brain actually makes us less generous than the emotive side. You got to have the stories. You got to have the emotional pools, of course in an ethical and true authentic way, but just a bunch of facts isn't going to be very sticky. People will not leave your website learning those. Yep.

Dolph Goldenburg: It's funny when you were saying uninspiring relate that that was immediately where my brain went was as humans, we are drawn to stories and now profit should have dozens if not hundreds of great stories every year, whether those are client stories of the people served or what a great way to cultivate donors. It might not even be the donor that, you know, that gave you a million bucks; it might be the donor who's contributed \$5 a month for the last five years, and you profile this person, and you really talk about the importance of their gift. I think those are the kinds of stories that get forwarded that people read that ended up on social media.

Jesse Lane: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. I mean there's a lot of ways to tell a good story, and I think you got to get better at that. Tell stories as often as possible in all kinds of different ways. Don't lean too heavily on just those data points.

Dolph Goldenburg: And then the other thing that we've already talked about uninteresting... one of my pet peeves on nonprofit websites is stock photography that I've seen everywhere that I've seen on billboards and online ads, etc. Yeah, it's cheap, and it's easy, but you know be ethical, get media releases, and get real people on your website for crying out loud.

Jesse Lane: Yeah, I love that. I mean, that's a passion of mine, too. When I was at that organization, I was telling you about earlier, that's one of the things we moved to and I was like, "Hey guys, in the next, in a year from now, I want to only use photography of people that are real people. We know their names, and we know their stories." Everybody was like, how are we going to do that? It's going to cost so much money. It did require an upfront investment to go get that photography, but years later they're still using those photos and those names. They're still great because a good photographer can capture hundreds of great images for you, and you can use those in multiple places, and that's okay if people see the same picture, if it's a real person and connected with your organization, not a stock photo that they saw in multiple organizations, right?

Dolph Goldenburg: Someone who's in a stock photo is not going to put it on Facebook or Twitter when their photo appears somewhere, but if you're using a real donor or real board member, real client's image and their story, guess what? They're going to post that on social media and really get the word out about your organization. It makes people ambassadors and evangelists for you.

Jesse Lane: Yup, that's right. Totally agree.

So, Jesse, I want to make sure that we have time for an Off-the-Map question, and I think I've got a good one for you. Can you share a time at work when you were given a set of rules or instructions but didn't follow them?

Jesse Lane: Oh man, great question. Let's see. I mean, I feel like this happens a lot, actually. A good story. One of my favorite stories is I was the first day at this first week at this new nonprofit, they asked me to speak on innovation, and I got the nerve to basically break all the rules they gave me which were, you know, use this PowerPoint template and say these things. I just felt like this wasn't super innovative, and so my presentation was on the culture of innovation at this organization. Immediately, I just felt challenged to kind of, um, to, to break some rules, challenged that and I got some pushback. When I made that presentation with not using the same slide deck that everybody else used and having some interesting new ideas in there, I definitely got some raised eyebrows. I started to demonstrate that sometimes to innovate you have to break rules, and I know that makes it sound really good. I made a lot of mistakes, you know, during that time too. But I think breaking rules sometimes is.

Dolph Goldenburg: I love that. Admittedly when I, when I first heard I'm a little bit about that rule breaking period for you, I was like, "It just seems ironic that you would say, okay, we want you to put together a presentation on innovation and you have to use PowerPoint and has to look like this. It has to be ugly and boring. Go to town. Enjoy."

Jesse Lane: Exactly. Yeah, that's kinda what I felt like. It was tough that first week to go already break rules. Uh, but, but I think it paid off.

Dolph Goldenburg: Jesse, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with our listeners today. I want to let folks know that you have made a dedicated landing page for our listeners. It is pure www.purecharity.org/snp. Check it out and request a free website evaluation for your nonprofit. You can also download a report created from the results of pure charity survey on the state of nonprofits today. It is called State of Good 2018 and can be found at www.stateofgood.com. Hey Jesse, thank you so much.

Jesse Lane: Yeah, thank you. This is a lot of fun. I'm glad I could be a part of it.

Dolph Goldenburg: So, what listeners may not know, and I kind of had to throw this out there as I am so incredibly grateful that Jesse made time for us to have this conversation. There were a number of comedy of errors on the way to the recording session. So, the first recording session was immediately following the hurricane, and we could not get good internet access to do the recording session. Then the second time around, we started to record, and we were like six, seven minutes in, and I realized, "Oh yikes, my technology is having an issue and it's not recording." We then had to start back over from scratch. So, super grateful to Jesse for really being persistent so that we could work through the hurricane-related and tactical issues and actually get this conversation recorded.

Now, if you have been testing all of the links on your website as we were saying goodbye to Jesse, you may have missed his contact information, but don't worry. You can always get it at www.successfulnonprofits.com, and I don't know about you all, but the one thing that really struck a chord with me today was Jesse saying, how important focus on your website is really focus on what you're trying to get people to do. Now, I'd love to hear from you what was the most important takeaway you had from today's session. Now, if you have not already, please make sure that you subscribe to this podcast so you do not miss an episode. That's our show for this week. I hope you have gained some insight to help your nonprofit thrive in a competitive environment.

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