

SERMAIS.ORG – A PLATFORM FOR DOING GOOD ONLINE

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Resumen:

Sermiais.org es una organización no lucrativa que conecta a organizaciones de apoyo social y las personas que desean donar bienes, principalmente en el distrito de Coimbra. Para realizar sus actividades, Sermiais.org desarrolló una plataforma en línea para el intercambio de bienes entre obras de beneficencia. Dirigido a un público compuesto por las personas que trabajan en todas las organizaciones de apoyo social en el distrito de Coimbra y los ciudadanos, esta plataforma presenta la oportunidad de fomentar la colaboración y comunicación entre todas las organizaciones, de acelerar el intercambio de bienes y de involucrar a la comunidad. Junto con la plataforma en línea, Sermiais.org tiene una página en Facebook que les permite compartir eventos y noticias sobre sus actividades y a comprometerse a sus seguidores.

Abstract:

Sermiais.org is a non-profit organization that connects social support organizations with each other and with people who want to donate goods, mainly in the district of Coimbra. In order to carry out its activities, Sermiais.org developed an online platform for the exchange of goods between charities. Aimed at a target audience comprised of the people working in all the social support organizations working in the district of Coimbra and citizens of all ages and backgrounds, this platform presents the opportunity to foster collaboration and communication between all organizations, to speed up the exchange of goods and, ultimately, to involve the community. Along with the online platform, Sermiais.org has a Facebook page which allows Sermiais.org to share news and events about its activities and to engage their followers.

1. Introduction

Sermiais.org is a non-profit organization working closely with social support organizations in the district of Coimbra. It was created by a group of friends who thought they could make a difference in the lives of those who need. Some of these people had already been working with charities and they knew how these organizations struggle to accomplish their mission. First, the lack of resources, especially material goods, is a major problem when there are individuals and families dealing with unemployment, extreme poverty and social exclusion. Secondly, the poor communication and collaboration between all charities results in isolation and makes it impossible to know if an organization has a good that could be used by another charity. And finally, the inability to engage effectively with the community leads to a loss of opportunities that could lead to an increase of donations.

The idea was to use the Internet to build some sort of platform that could help organizations get easily in touch with each other and collaborate in the exchange of goods and, at the same time, to involve the community and increase donations. So, on July 4th, 2007, the Sermiais.org platform was launched. This day was chosen in honor of Queen Saint Isabel for her charity work and also because she is the patron saint of the city of Coimbra. Later, on September 28th, 2008, the organization was formally established as “Associação PortalSolidário”.

This non-profit's main activity is to link charities working with poor families in need of goods such as furniture, appliances or clothing to those who have these goods and want to donate. In 2014, the Sermiais.org platform was renewed (David, de Abreu, & Trigo, 2014). This new platform includes two main features, Give and Ask, which allow everybody to donate and let social support organizations ask for the goods they need. It was designed to be simple and easy to use by everybody and includes information about the organization. It also includes a block to display the most recent requests and donations.

Figure 1. Homepage of the Sermiais.org platform



Source: [http://sermais.org], as available on 21-11-2014.

Besides the online platform, Sermiais.org also has a social media presence. The non-profit has a page on Facebook which is used to get closer to their constituents, namely, by following other organizations, sharing photos and events and posting news. Also, the Sermiais.org Facebook page is set up to work together with the platform. When a user registers a new donation or request, it will be automatically published on Facebook the page.

2. Case Development

As Dolnicar & Lazarevski (2009) explain, non-profits can adjust marketing tools and strategies to accommodate their unique characteristics. So, they can use marketing segmentation to focus on the identification of the most relevant constituents and they can create a strong brand image to position themselves in that market. In addition, they should establish an effective communication plan to promote their activities and to engage their public through the chosen channel (Dolnicar & Lazarevski, 2009).

Ingenhoff & Koelling (Ingenhoff & Koelling, 2009) state that the relationship building potential of the Internet can help non-profit organizations to fulfil their mission. Similarly, Mano (2014) says that the Internet is an important communication platform and that social media has an important role in engaging the community and increasing donations.

Sermais.org's mission is to help social support organizations perform their activities more effectively, connecting them to the people who want to donate goods. So, in order to accomplish this, they decided to take advantage of the Internet and build an online platform to exchange goods between social support organizations. The development of this platform was considered to be very interesting and innovative as no technological solution was available at the time that could address the exchange of goods between social support organizations.

Before Sermais.org started to develop their digital marketing strategy, they conducted a SWOT analysis. The strengths associated with the development of the platform include having an up to date inventory of existing goods and knowing the needs of each organization. These strengths led to the identification of the opportunities which are to foster collaboration and communication between the charities working with the project, to speed up the exchange of goods and to engage the community. As for the weaknesses, the analysis showed the shortage of tech savvy personnel or volunteers to manage the platform. The threats recognized are the unwillingness of charities to share information and the resistance to the use and acceptance of the new digital tool.

According to Ryan & Jones (2009), when an organization wants to build a website there are five steps that should be considered. The organization must carefully develop a plan which includes the organization's objectives, the competitors, its target audience and the kind of content to show, which can be as a very important part of the organization's digital marketing strategy. Then, the organization should choose the design of the site, specifically, the colours to use, the images and videos to show and the display of the information. In the development step, things should be carried out according to the plan and the design previously defined. After everything is done it should be tested to ensure every link and piece of content work properly. Finally, the website should be put online so that the public can access and use it (Ryan & Jones, 2009).

Ryan & Jones (2009) also stress the importance of Search Engine Optimization (SEO) because, as they explain, search engines provide the opportunity for websites and their content to be found exactly when people are looking for them. So, the platform must be optimized to include keywords relevant to the activity of the organization and the cause it advocates.

The non-profit aims to reach, on the one hand, all the social support organizations working in the district of Coimbra and, on the other hand, all the community of all ages and backgrounds. Given that the platform is to be used mainly by the people working with social support organizations, two Sermais.org's volunteers were interviewed in order to identify the requirements and functionalities of the online platform. The two main functionalities consist of giving and asking for goods and are featured on the front page. People can register goods to donate or give directly to a request published on the platform. Social support organizations can ask for the goods already registered or make requests of goods that don't exist on the platform.

The design of the platform is very clean. It uses the green and white colours of the Sermais.org logo and has the "Give" and "Ask" buttons in a central position on the pages. Also, on the front page there is a slideshow of pictures related to charitable work and a set of promotional videos of Sermais.org's activities. As for the information, it has a block displaying the latest donations, requests and the organizations most recent helped on the front page and there are lists of donated as requested goods that can be accessed by the "ask" and "give" buttons, respectively. There is also information available about the mission, the activities of Sermais.org and the structure and members of the organization.

After it was developed, it was tested and put online. There was an experimental period of roughly a month in which several charities were asked to sign up and to start using the platform. These charities were visited by groups of students linked to the project whose job was to present the platform to the people working in those organizations and to teach them how to use it. The experimental period was also used to promote the new platform using promotional flyers, publishing the news in the local press and word of mouth.

Figure 2. Promotional video for the Sermais.org platform



Source: [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YFarZlBMak>], as available on 25-11-2014.

The non-profit also used its Facebook page to disseminate the news as well as a promotional video that was shared on the social network and shown when the platform was accessed.

Measuring the success of the digital marketing strategy is of paramount importance to know what is being done right and what needs to be changed. Web analytics is employed to control and evaluate how well a website is doing with the public and it uses techniques such as measuring the volume of traffic to the site, analyzing referrals and the performance of the webserver. The metrics used by Sermais.org to assess the platform's performance include the total number of visitors, the number of new and returning visitors, the channels used and the number of visitors that use each channel, and the number of site visits per device.

Sermis.org's Facebook page:

According to Ryan & Jones (2009), social media promotes the communication and interaction of users as they can connect with both people they know in real life and new people and allows the creation and sharing of new and existing content easily with their friends, the discussion of all kinds of subjects and the endorsement of products and services.

Social media serves as a major player in exposing people to social causes since it has made communication between non-profit organizations and their online constituents easier. In her study, Mano (Mano, 2014) found that people using social media are more exposed to information about social causes and are more likely to join in the activities of a non-profit organization and the causes it advocates.

The digital marketing strategy of Sermais.org includes its social media presence. According to a study conducted by Obercom (2014), Facebook is the most popular social network in Portugal, therefore, it was the chosen network to get in touch in the community.

Sermis.org Facebook page currently has about 900 fans. As mentioned above, the organization has defined its target audience to be everybody from civil society as well as social support organizations preferably from the district of Coimbra.

Figure 3. Sermais.org's Facebook page



Source: [<https://www.facebook.com/sermis.org>], as available on 26-11-2014.

The design of the page follows that of the platform. The profile image is the green and white Sermiais.org logo and the cover image has two hands reaching out, embodying the concept of solidarity. These images have already been used on both the platform and the promotional flyers and their use is meant to establish the brand name and image of Sermiais.org.

The content shared on the non-profit page are news and events related to their activities and the activities of charities working in the district of Coimbra. These contents are scheduled for publishing three times a day: in the morning, early afternoon and at night. Besides the scheduled posts, the online platform also posts to Sermiais.org's page whenever a new donation or request is registered.

Connecting with other organizations and knowing what they are doing is very important, so the non-profit "Liked" several pages associated with social support, solidarity, women and children's rights, higher education and the press, both nationally and locally.

To promote the page, Sermiais.org sent a few emails to some of the collaborating social support organizations asking them to share Sermiais.org's page on their own page and to encourage their followers to follow Sermiais.org too. The non-profit also directly asked their followers to share the page with their friends.

The metrics chosen to measure the success of the strategy are the number of total "likes" on the page as well as the new "likes" every week. Also important is the reach of publications among the fans and the level of interaction with the contents.

3. Questions for discussion and conclusions

Question 1. Which is the mission and main goals of Sermiais.org?

Sermiais.org's mission is to help social support organizations perform their activities more effectively, connecting them to the people who want to donate goods. The main goal is to reach all the social support organizations working in the district of Coimbra and, all the community of all ages and backgrounds.

Question 2. Which are the main factors affecting Sermiais.org business (environment, business, customers and competitors)?

The very strong environment issues to be addressed are the lack of resources, especially material goods, being this a heavy problem for individuals and families dealing with unemployment, extreme poverty and social exclusion. Moreover, talking about customers and competitors (almost not a hint), the poor communication and collaboration between all charities results in isolation and makes it impossible to know if an organization has a good that could be used by another charity. Also the business arena is without constraints.

Question 3. Which digital marketing strategies are in use by Sermiais.org and how do they contribute to Sermiais.org business goal? Do they contribute for the enhancement of the Sermiais.org Brand?

The organization develops a plan which includes the organization's objectives, the competitors, its target audience and the kind of content to show, which are part of the organization's digital marketing strategy.

Moreover part of this strategy includes web analytics in order to control and evaluate how well this website is doing with the public and it uses techniques such as the total number of visitors, the number of new and returning visitors, the channels used and the number of visitors that use each channel, and the number of site visits per device.

Question 4. Do you think donors will be more engaged with this new platform?

This is the desired result as this platform will enable charities to communicate and collaborate better regarding the exchange and deliverance of goods to the most needed. Moreover, this platform will also allow direct communication between organizations and so also this new device is expected to be of a great value.

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