

Navigating the digital shift: Charity marketing in 2025

What are the real challenges facing the UK charity sector today? And what support do leaders actually need to amplify their mission and drive impact? To find out, we partnered with *Third Sector* to survey 100 charity decision-makers from organisations of all sizes, asking them to share their biggest challenges and most pressing needs.

The results paint a clear and consistent picture; charities are being asked to do more with less. All of which means grappling with limited budgets and a lack of in-house capacity, while struggling to effectively measure the impact of their work. Charities are moving beyond merely having a social media presence toward more **strategic engagement online**, emphasising **brand awareness and storytelling** over one-off fundraising posts. Indeed, establishing a trusted community through authentic narratives is now seen as an essential foundation for sustained support, rather than focusing solely on immediate donation appeals. This survey provides a valuable snapshot of the sector's digital marketing priorities and challenges, helping non-profits benchmark their efforts and identify opportunities for growth.

Another striking trend is an **increased focus on ethical platform use and brand safety**. Platform decisions are no longer driven just by user numbers or reach; they're increasingly influenced by whether a channel aligns with a charity's values and provides a safe environment for its brand. For example, nearly 3 in 10 have withdrawn from at least one social media platform in the past year. The departures have been **overwhelmingly from X** (formerly Twitter), reflecting concerns that the platform's environment and ownership changes have undermined its value for non-profits. In other words, charities are actively evaluating where they engage, and many are willing to pull back when a platform no longer feels secure or ethical for their brand. This sector-wide "X-odus" underscores how critical brand safety and ethical alignment have become in digital strategy. Charities

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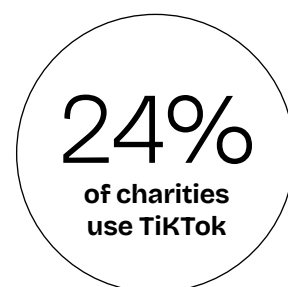
At the same time, **internal capacity and skills gaps** are emerging as the biggest hurdles to digital success. While limited budgets are a perennial issue, the survey indicates the most significant barrier is **strategic capacity**, meaning the people and expertise to plan and execute effective digital campaigns. Many organisations struggle with a **lack of in-house digital expertise**, the difficulties of reaching new audiences online, and the challenges in measuring the impact of their digital efforts. In fact, these strategic challenges far outweigh simple resource constraints. This reflects a wider sector trend, with the *2025 Charity Digital Skills Report*¹ finding that 69% of charities cite organisational finances as a primary barrier to digital progress. Bridging this skills gap is crucial; charities recognise that future success will depend on **investing in digital skills development and capacity building** within their teams. By strengthening internal know-how and adopting better tools for audience insight and data, non-profits can build robust strategies that connect their compelling stories with measurable outcomes.

This paper dives deeper into these survey findings - from social media trends and content strategies to AI adoption - and offers practical takeaways to help charities navigate the evolving digital landscape.

Trends in social media use in the third sector

1 Diversifying platforms

Charities today are active across a wide range of social media platforms as they seek to engage different demographics. The survey confirms that **Facebook remains the most-used social platform** for content marketing, but many charities are expanding onto LinkedIn and Instagram in a bid to diversify their reach. This diversification makes strategic sense: LinkedIn can connect charities with corporate partners and professional audiences, while Instagram appeals to visually-driven storytelling and younger supporters. In contrast, **TikTok usage remains low** among surveyed charities. Only a small fraction have ventured onto TikTok so far, indicating a potential growth area for organisations that have the capacity to create short-form video content. Given that nearly 80% of Gen Z donors discover new causes via social media channels², platforms such as TikTok or YouTube present an opportunity to engage the next generation of supporters. Charities that can invest in creating



relevant, compelling content on these specific channels may gain an edge in reaching younger audiences. However, any such expansion should be weighed against available resources - as smaller teams might find it challenging to maintain yet another platform.

2 Engagement over fundraising

Importantly, charities are not just asking “Which platforms do we use?” but also “Why are we using them?”. The survey reveals that **building brand awareness and community engagement is the primary use of social media for charities**, ranking higher than direct fundraising appeals. In practice, this means non-profit marketers are focusing on storytelling, education, and conversation on social channels, nurturing an informed and loyal follower base, rather than constantly pushing donation requests in their feeds. When charities do make fundraising calls to action on social media, they tend to perform better if the audience already feels connected to the cause through consistent storytelling and authentic content. Some 29% of online donors say social media is the tool most likely to inspire them to give, closely followed by email⁶.

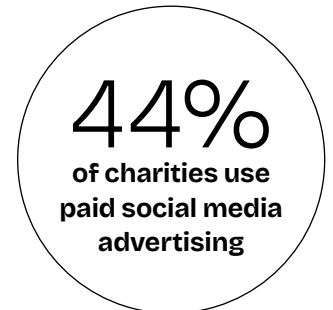
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3 Measuring success

When it comes to measuring the success of social media efforts, most charities are still **relying on engagement metrics**, such as likes, shares, comments, and follower growth as their key indicators. These metrics are straightforward to track and do indicate audience interaction. Indeed, a spike in shares or comments can signal that a message is resonating with people. However, the survey commentary notes a potential downside of this approach: a heavy focus on clicks and likes may indicate **difficulty in linking social media activity to concrete financial or mission outcomes**. In other words, getting 100 shares on a campaign post is encouraging, but how does that translate to donations raised, petition signatures, or volunteers recruited? Many organisations still struggle with this attribution. It remains a challenge to connect online engagement to real-world impact, especially given the complex supporter journeys. To address this, forward-thinking charities are starting to complement engagement metrics with deeper analytics - for example, tracking conversions from social posts, using unique links or discount codes, and monitoring long-term behaviours of social followers. Over time, improving how impact is measured will help charities refine their content strategy and prove the ROI of investing in social media.

4 Paid advertising and reach

Another area without clear consensus is the use of paid social media advertising. The survey found the sector split roughly down the middle: about half of charities invest in paid ads on social platforms, while the other half do not. There appears to be no single best practice on this front; decisions to run paid social campaigns often depend on an organisation's budget, campaign goals, and success with organic content. For some charities, boosting a Facebook post or running a targeted Instagram ad can significantly expand reach and drive specific actions, especially when organic reach is limited by platform algorithms. For others, tight budgets and a focus on organic community growth lead them to avoid paid ads. The even split in adoption suggests that charities are still feeling out when paid social is worth the investment. This makes creating genuine, organic connection through content even more important.



5 Ethical use and trust

A final trend in social media use is a growing awareness of **the pitfalls of social media, including its risks and ethical challenges**. As noted earlier, a sizable number of charities have withdrawn from platforms such as X due to concerns over toxic content, misinformation, or misalignment with their values. Beyond the nonprofit sector, even major media outlets (for example, The Guardian) announced they would stop posting on X/Twitter, citing the rise in bots and hate speech as factors³. This reflects a broader sector-wide caution: organizations are no longer taking the value of social media for granted, especially if the platform's environment could damage public trust. Additionally, **public trust in social media is wavering**. According to a 2024 donor survey, almost half of the public mistrust information on charities in traditional media⁴. For charity marketers, this is a crucial insight - while social media is a powerful tool to reach and engage, it must be used in tandem with other channels and with a strategy to build credibility. Tactics like sharing stories that link back to the charity's website, using social proof (e.g. testimonials, endorsements), and maintaining a consistent, transparent voice can help mitigate mistrust. It also means charities should keep evaluating which platforms deserve their investment, be that through time or budget. If a particular network becomes an echo chamber for negativity or misinformation, the charity may stand to gain more by reallocating effort to spaces where they can better control the narrative (such as email newsletters, community forums, or newer platforms with more supportive communities). In summary, social media remains a cornerstone of charity marketing, but it is being approached more thoughtfully in 2025 - with an eye on diverse platforms, long-term relationship-building, meaningful metrics, and the integrity of the platform itself.

Strategic Priorities: Storytelling and Communications Strategy

One of the clearest signals from the survey is that charities are **prioritising storytelling and strategic communications** as we move towards 2026. When asked where they are focusing efforts to amplify their message and engage audiences, respondents' top answers were **storytelling, content creation, and improving their communications strategy**. This forward-looking emphasis makes sense - in a digital world saturated with information, it's the organisations with compelling narratives and a strong brand voice that stand out and rally supporters. Survey results indicate an understanding that having a compelling narrative and a well-defined comms plan is **essential for effective audience engagement**. In practice, this might mean charities are investing in case studies, impact stories, videos, and other narrative content that illustrates their mission in human terms. It also means taking a more planned approach to communications - setting clear themes for campaigns, aligning messaging across channels, and ensuring everyone from the CEO to volunteers can articulate the organisation's story consistently.

Beyond boosting fundraising metrics, great storytelling also strengthens a charity's brand and credibility. In an era of misinformation and skepticism, audiences are more likely to trust and support organisations that communicate openly and authentically about their mission, including both successes and challenges. When supporters see consistent, genuine stories - whether through social media posts, blogs, annual reports, or live events - they develop a richer understanding of the charity's impact and are more likely to become advocates themselves.

Content strategy itself is now a focal point alongside storytelling. Charities are recognising that it's not enough to have a few great stories; you need a plan for getting those stories in front of the right people at the right time. This means thinking about which channels to use (social media, email newsletters, press releases, blog posts, events, etc.), how to repurpose content across platforms, and how to maintain a steady drumbeat of communication without overwhelming your audience. Many organisations are formalising their content calendars and aligning them with campaign cycles and fundraising moments. The survey's highlight of communications strategy as a priority suggests that charities are seeking greater coherence in

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their outreach. Rather than sporadic posts or reactive communications, they want proactive plans that amplify their message consistently.

In summary, **storytelling and strategic communications** have emerged as top priorities because they address a fundamental challenge in the nonprofit world - the need to connect with audiences on a deeper level in order to inspire action. By sharpening their narratives and communications strategies, charities can cut through the noise of the digital age, foster stronger relationships with supporters, and ultimately drive more impact for their causes. As we move towards 2026, expect to see charities doubling down on narrative-driven campaigns, richer multimedia content, and communications that feel more personal and transparent. This is how non-profits will not only reach people, but move them.

Challenges: Capacity, Skills and Digital Upskilling

Even as charities push forward with new digital initiatives, they face **significant challenges in making their ambitions a reality**. The survey shines a spotlight on the internal hurdles charities must overcome – chief among them being **limited strategic capacity and in-house expertise**. While tight budgets are a familiar struggle for all non-profits, respondents indicated that lack of money isn't the only thing holding them back. More often, it's the **lack of skilled people and time** to plan and execute digital campaigns that stands in the way of success. According to the survey, the **top challenges** in communicating impact and rallying support include difficulties in reaching new audiences and a shortage of in-house digital marketing expertise. The **struggle to measure impact effectively** is another related challenge noted in the survey. Non-profits often collect lots of data (from email opens to social media stats to website visits), but making sense of it and extracting actionable insights requires a certain analytical skill set that might be missing on the team.

These issues aren't unique to a few organisations; they reflect a **sector-wide skills gap**. The latest Charity Digital Skills Report found that 50% of UK charities cite a lack of digital skills and expertise as a major barrier, and 34% say a lack of training or upskilling opportunities is preventing progress⁵. When asked how to overcome their challenges,

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45% of charities in our survey said that lack of in-house expertise or capacity was a barrier to communicating their impact
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respondents pointed to solutions like **investing in digital skills training, capacity building, and tools that provide better audience insights.**

In fact, bridging the capacity gap is seen as the key to future success: by equipping their teams with the right skills and bringing in additional support, charities can execute the sophisticated strategies that they aspire to implement.

The Cautious Adoption of AI in Charity Marketing

Of all the technological milestones in recent years, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is arguably the one generating both excitement and anxiety in equal measure. For charities, AI promises tools that could automate tasks, personalise outreach, and uncover insights in big data - effectively **doing more with less**, which is very appealing in a resource-strapped environment. However, our survey results show that the **adoption of AI in charity marketing and fundraising is still at an early stage**, and many organisations are seemingly taking a **cautious, wait-and-see approach**. When asked if they use AI in their marketing or fundraising work, only about one-third of charities said yes, while the majority (around 68%) have **not yet integrated AI into their workflows**. This means most charities are either experimenting in very limited ways or not using AI at all. There's a sense that while people are curious about AI's potential, there are barriers such as cost, skills, or uncertainty about ROI that make non-profits hesitant to dive in fully.

For those charities that have **begun using AI**, their usage is **mostly narrow and task-focused**. This suggests that charities currently view AI primarily as a practical efficiency tool, helping to save time on writing or creative tasks, rather than as a transformative technology for complex strategic functions.

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Only 22% of charity organisations are using AI to help automate tasks or inform their ongoing strategy plans, suggesting more education in this area could be beneficial
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Key Takeaways and Recommendations

For senior charity leaders looking to strengthen their organisation's digital marketing, the survey findings and wider trends suggest several clear strategies. Below are some key takeaways to help **build strategic capacity, enhance storytelling, and leverage digital channels more effectively** in your charity's marketing efforts:

★ Invest in digital skills and strategic capacity

Address the talent and skills gap by prioritising digital upskilling for your team. This could include training existing staff in areas like social media strategy, data analytics, or content creation, as well as hiring specialists or bringing in external partners for support. Building in-house expertise and dedicating staff time to digital will greatly improve your strategic capacity. Many challenges (from reaching new audiences to measuring impact) can be overcome by having knowledgeable people and enough headspace to plan. Consider capacity-building initiatives such as digital skills workshops, mentorship programs, or collaborating with agencies for knowledge transfer. By investing in your team's capabilities, you empower your charity to execute campaigns in-house and adapt to new trends confidently. This foundational step will enable all the other recommendations to take root.

★ Embed storytelling in your communications

Make storytelling a cornerstone of your marketing and communications strategy. Develop a clear narrative that connects your activities to your mission and impact, and ensure this narrative is woven through all your channels and campaigns. Collect and share real stories - from beneficiaries whose lives your charity has touched, to volunteers and front-line staff - that illustrate the difference your work makes. Additionally, be transparent and genuine in your communications; authenticity is key to building credibility. Share successes and challenges, and communicate in a tone that reflects your charity's values. Over time, a strong storytelling approach will build a community of supporters who feel emotionally connected to your cause and motivated to act.

★ **Leverage digital channels strategically**

In today's multi-channel world, focus your efforts on the platforms and channels that best reach your target audiences and use each channel with purpose. It's better to have a strong, consistent presence on a few relevant platforms than to spread yourself thin across every new network. Identify where your supporters are most active and tailor your content to fit each context while maintaining a unified overall message. Diversify your channel mix to broaden reach (for instance, social media for awareness, email for deeper engagement, a well-designed website for information and conversion), and ensure that your messaging is consistent across channels.

★ **Align platform choices with ethics and brand safety**

Make platform evaluation a regular part of your digital strategy. The landscape of social media and online platforms changes quickly; what was effective (or safe) a year ago might not be today. Ensure that the platforms you use align with your organisation's values and provide a supportive environment for your message. When adopting new platforms, do so intentionally, perhaps pilot it with a specific campaign and evaluate the results and risks before fully committing. By keeping ethics at the forefront of your digital presence, you reinforce your credibility and show supporters that you put your values first even in your marketing tactics.

★ **Embrace technology and AI thoughtfully**

Stay open to new tools such as Artificial Intelligence that can streamline your work, but approach them with a clear strategy and ethical considerations. AI, in particular, can help small teams produce content more efficiently and analyse data for insights. Experiment gradually with AI in low-stakes areas and provide training and resources for your team to learn how to use these tools effectively. However, use AI as an aid, not a replacement for human judgment and creativity. Be upfront with your audience if appropriate - for instance, if you use a chatbot for customer service, let users know they're interacting with an AI assistant. By being transparent, you maintain trust even as you innovate.

By focusing on these areas – building your team's capacity, sharpening your storytelling, making smart choices about channels and technology, and keeping ethics at the core – your charity can significantly strengthen its digital marketing effectiveness. These strategies will help ensure that your message not only reaches more people, but truly resonates and inspires them to support your cause.

Conclusion

The findings of our survey paint a picture of a sector in transition. **Charities are navigating a digital shift** - moving from ad-hoc social media use to more **strategic, story-led marketing**, from sticking to familiar platforms to making **values-driven choices** about where they engage, and from traditional methods to cautiously exploring **new technologies such as AI**. There is great opportunity in this shift; by embracing digital channels and tools in a smart, mission-aligned way, charities can reach larger and more diverse audiences, engage supporters more deeply, and drive greater impact than ever before. At the same time, the survey is a reminder that realising this potential hinges on addressing internal challenges. Limited budgets will always require doing more with less, but the bigger hurdle now is equipping organisations with the **skills, knowledge, and strategic foresight** to fully leverage what digital has to offer. Charities that invest in their people and planning will be the ones to bridge the gap between aspiration and action.

In essence, successful charity marketing in the coming years will be defined by a few key traits - **strategic clarity, compelling storytelling, ethical engagement**, and **adaptive learning**. Strategic clarity ensures that every tweet, post, or campaign ties back to a larger goal and a coherent narrative. Compelling storytelling wins hearts and minds, turning casual observers into passionate supporters. Ethical engagement builds trust, showing that even as times change, a charity's values are non-negotiable. Adaptive learning keeps an organisation nimble and responsive in a fast-changing landscape.

As your organisation reflects on these insights, you may be considering how to put them into practice. This is where **Wonderly** can help. Wonderly - as the agency behind this research in partnership with Third Sector - specialises in helping non-profits to navigate digital transformation and amplify their stories. We understand the unique constraints and opportunities of the charity sector, and we're passionate about helping causes like yours succeed in the digital space. Whether you're looking to audit your current digital strategy, develop a communications campaign, upskill your team, or simply figure out 'what next' after reading these findings, **drop us a line**.

For a free consultation or to learn more about our services, contact us at hello@wonderly.agency

Sources

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