



**COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR
SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN**

CASE STUDY

COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR SOUTHEAST MICHIGAN

Helping one of Detroit's philanthropic institutions gain control of their digital space



THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Our state's philanthropic landscape wouldn't be the same without the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan (CFSEM). For nearly forty years, CFSEM has been a leading force behind the development of sustainable charitable endowments in their service area, which includes Wayne, Oakland, Macomb, Monroe, Washtenaw, St. Clair, and Livingston counties. Throughout this region, they have enacted initiatives to protect the environment, fight the opioid crisis, support social and racial justice, promote the arts, and more.

As their influence has expanded, their digital presence has had to evolve with them. Over the years, their website has shifted from a source of passive information to a leading communication platform. In the process, both their content and their content architecture needs have grown in tandem. To manage the load, they needed a digital marketing partner experienced in both user-focused web development and audience-based brand communication.



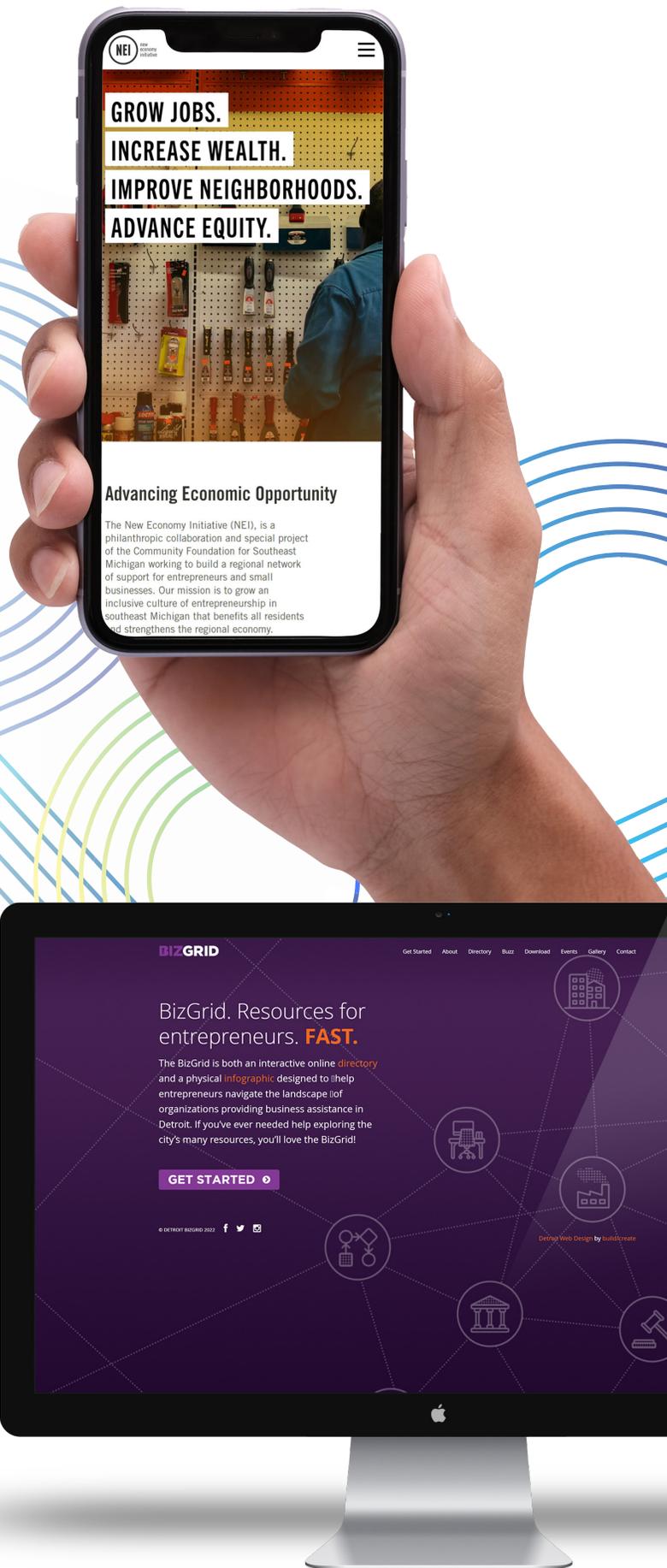
NEI AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF A PARTNERSHIP

We first came in contact with the Community Foundation a decade ago, through one of their programs: the New Economy Initiative (NEI). NEI was created to help build a more diverse culture of entrepreneurship in Detroit and the surrounding areas. Although they were a special initiative of CFSEM, they had content and communication needs of their own that made having a separate website necessary.

Our initial success on the NEI project led to two more site designs. The first, NEIdeas, awarded cash prizes to businesses with innovative development strategies. Over the course of five years, from 2014–2018, they awarded \$2.16M to one-hundred and forty-four businesses in Detroit, Hamtramck, and Highland Park. During that time, we supported their web presence, and turned their website into an archive of the project once the initiative was finished.

The second, BizGrid, was a tool for connecting Detroit entrepreneurs with local professionals who could help them grow their businesses from thoughts on paper to flourishing organizations. To achieve this, we built a guided wizard that would make navigating this directory of resources more accessible.

When the time came for CFSEM to select a team to redesign their main website, the relationship we had built through our work with NEI and BizGrid proved to be decisive.





“build/create has always excelled at meeting our needs. In 2016, they helped us re-launch our website following a much-needed refresh of our brand. Build Create’s customer service was exceptional throughout the process, and their final product was exactly what we had hoped it would be.”

MATT LEWIS

Senior Communications Officer, NEI

When CFSEM hired us to redesign their website, the version that existed at the time had a format similar to a news organization, with recent articles about special initiatives taking pride of place on the home page. While this did serve to highlight CFSEM's activity, it also created messaging problems.

Because of the range of initiatives, many of them with their own branding (such as NEI), CFSEM's own brand and message were lost in the shuffle. The arrangement of articles could also lead to clashes in tone and imagery, with positive stories about the environment or funding for the arts appearing alongside more sobering articles about criminal justice reform or the opioid crisis.

These pain points gave us three specific design priorities for the new site.

1. FIRST-GLANCE COMMUNICATION.

CFSEM's has an ambitious mission: to empower the charitably minded to create lasting change in the region of Southeast Michigan. Our job was to create a site design that could communicate that message on the first impression.

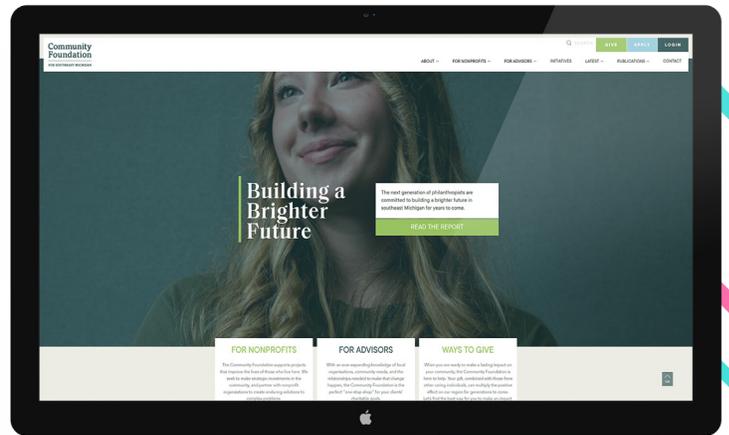
To achieve this, we simplified the home page to focus on one headline, one hero image, and one primary call-to-action. The result eliminated brand ambiguity, while the extra design space gave visitors more breathing room to find their intended pathway.

2. AUDIENCE PATHWAYS

CFSEM's communication challenges don't end with their own brand messaging. They also have multiple audiences, including donors, nonprofit partners, financial advisors, and the general public, all of whom have different information needs.

In response, we used the space below the hero image to speak directly to those audiences and guide them toward the portion of the site that could most directly serve their interests.

Even though we knew CFSEM had a range of audiences, we also recognized that donors formed their primary messaging group. Accordingly, we created another pathway directed specifically toward those interested in charitable giving.



3. CONTENT MANAGEMENT.

One of the driving forces behind CFSEM’s new site design was the need for more control over their storytelling. Over the years, the Community Foundation had developed new publications beyond their general news and blog sections. With their redesign, they wanted to create content spaces specifically for philanthropic advice, as well as ones that focused on their different areas of service.

We created a more robust blog structure that offered more organization options for their storytelling. Beyond the content areas themselves, we also made better use of their blog categories and created a “Related Stories” section that would promote articles relevant to whatever article the user had just read.

INTEGRATING A BRIGHTER COLOR PALETTE WITH A PROFESSIONAL DESIGN.

While many of our site improvements focused the interplay between messaging hierarchy and user experience, the visual design of the site itself played a key role in establishing brand authority. Many brands in the nonprofit space—especially those with the credentials of CFSEM—tend toward a more somber color palette, which can dampen engagement.

CFSEM had recently devoted a lot of energy into developing a new brand look and feel, and it was our job to incorporate that into the new site. While a deep forest green remained their primary brand color, we used a fresher, grassier green for buttons and links, and a goldenrod yellow to add a pop of brightness.

We gave design elements plenty of whitespace padding to avoid crowding and aid in readability, but also used neutrals to subtly break up content areas to help users visually scan the site. The result balanced institutional authority with modern savvy.

AT A GLANCE

PAID MEDIA: **50K** impressions,
4K clicks, 9% CTR.

TRAFFIC: **107K** new visitors
22% increase over last year.

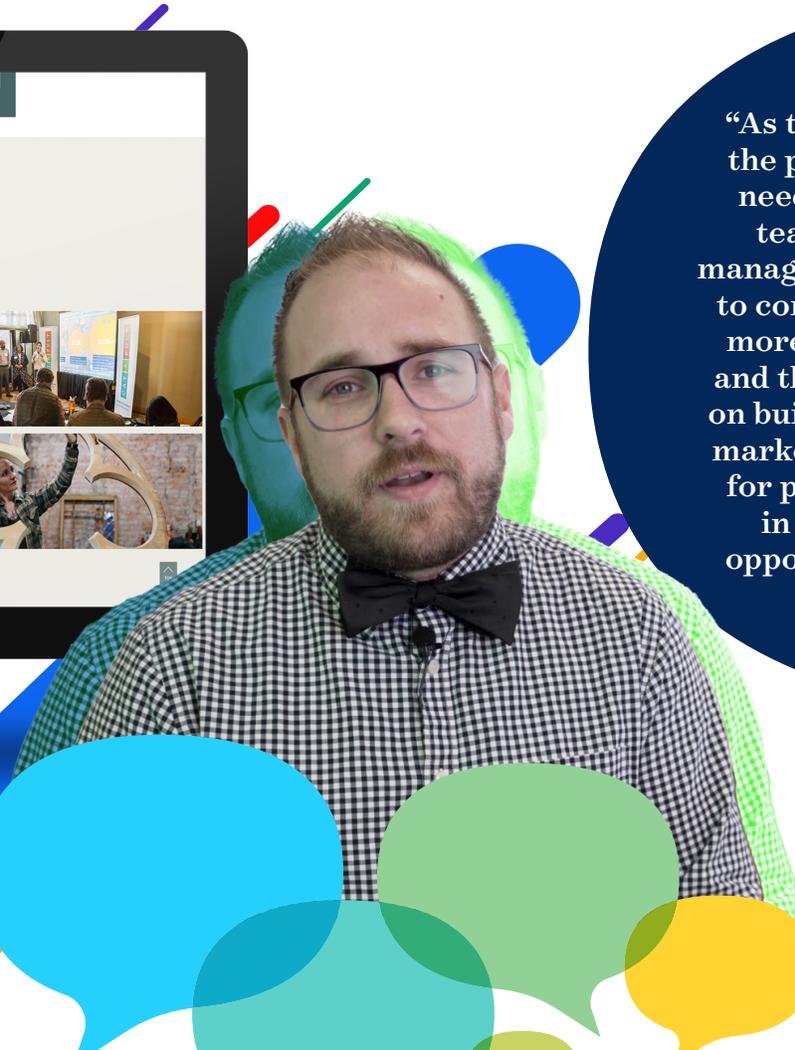
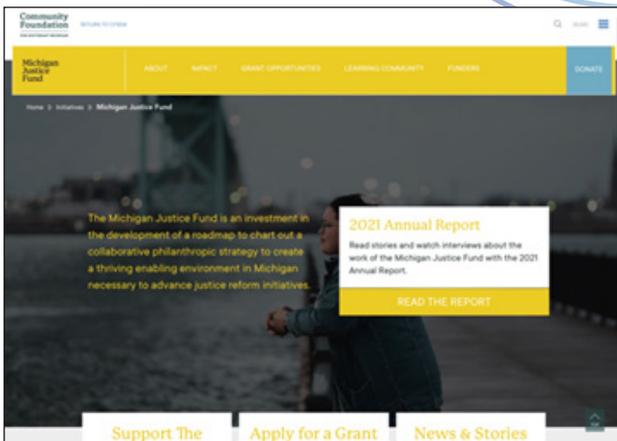
Direct and Organic are largest sources of traffic.



MICRO-SITE ARCHITECTURE

Many nonprofits struggle with brand confusion. As an organization expands its mission scope, new initiatives need their own space to grow and thrive. While creating a new brand for each initiative can help delineate messaging and allow each initiative to establish its own vision and purpose, it can also muddy the relationship between the founding organization and the initiatives it supports.

CFSEM's special initiatives are a case in point. Some initiatives required only a page or two, while others had multiple grant opportunities, a whole team of committee members, and storytelling needs distinct from those of CFSEM. While some initiatives in the past, such as NEI, had warranted their own website, it was clear that this would not be the most practical or user-friendly approach for every initiative. However, even smaller initiatives quickly outgrew what could easily be accommodated by the structure of CFSEM as a parent site.



“As the Community Foundation has grown over the past few years, so have our communication needs and our ability to do new things. As the team was put together with writers, digital managers, and events managers, our opportunities to communicate grew exponentially as well. The more we did, the more people saw we could do, and they wanted more of it. We were able to lean on build/create to build our website and meet our marketing needs. We were no longer just waiting for people to contact us, but could be proactive in telling our story, seeking out new donor opportunities, and establishing the Community Foundation as a leader.”

ASHLEY COLLINS

Digital Marketing Director, CFSEM

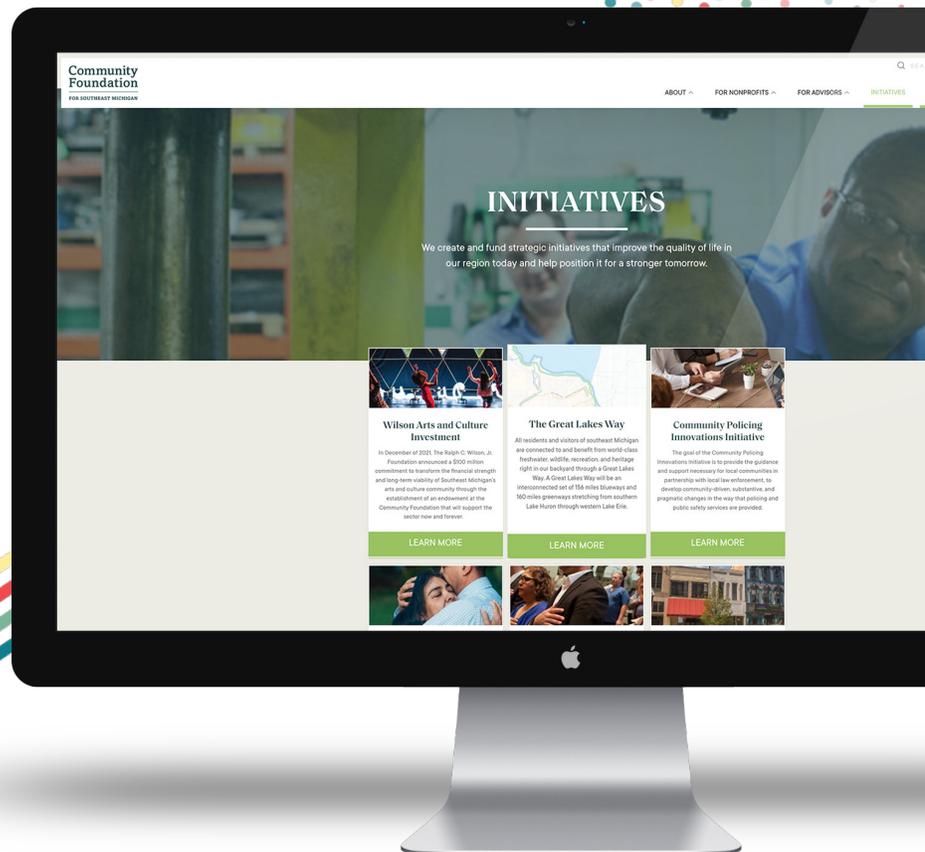
“build/create Studios is an incredible team. Reliable, responsive, creative, and intuitive, build/create carefully assessed our organization and previous website to ensure that our new site was tailored to our immediate needs with an eye for solving future problems. The design and functionality of our new site provide a strong foundation for a more deliberate and structured approach to our external communications strategies.”

MICRO-SITE ARCHITECTURE CONT.

Our solution was to create a nesting site architecture that would allow each initiative to have its own microsite, complete with a full navigation menu, while maintaining a stripped down version of CFSEM’s menu, so that it would be easy for users to return to the main site. This created a visual link that reenforced the hierarchy between CFSEM and the initiatives while also giving each initiative room to breathe outside of CFSEM’s main site architecture.

We tested this structure first with the Michigan Opioid Partnership, and deployed it again for the launch of the Michigan Justice Fund. The parent/child architecture also allowed for more flexibility with brand elements, such as color scheme and font choices, which was essential for both these initiatives.

ASHLEY COLLINS
Digital Marketing Director, CFSEM



ONGOING DIGITAL MARKETING

After years of building a relationship centered on website development and brand implementation, CFSEM came to us with a new project. As a nonprofit, they had received a grant from Google to spend on Google Ads, but the expertise required to fully optimize their account was beyond what their in-house capabilities. Knowing that our team had specialists in a multiple digital marketing fields, they reached out to us for assistance. Once the ball got rolling with our digital marketing services, their team just kept finding more ways we could help.

PAID MEDIA

CFSEM's grant from Google was generous, but to make the most of it, we had to optimize the targeting so that we would attract enough attention to both use up the ad budget, and get the most bang for the buck. After optimizing their ad campaigns, we were able to meet their spend goals while also raising their click-through-rate and lowering the cost-per-click.

CONTENT WRITING

For many years, the bulk of CFSEM's content efforts had gone toward print pieces. With the new website in place, their marketing manager identified a strategic opportunity to publish more articles that would establish their brand as a thought leader within the nonprofit industry.

CFSEM had already developed a calendar of content, but did not have the capacity on their team to write and publish the articles. We came alongside them to interview their team and write content for each of their service areas.

SEO

The increase of articles on CFSEM's website, as well as the legacy pages carried over from their previous version, meant that they had a lot of content in need of optimization. We identified key pages in need of improvement, fixed broken links, implemented redirects, and made sure meta descriptions and other on-page SEO data was in place.

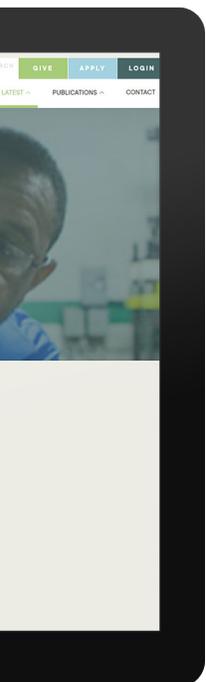
GRAPHIC DESIGN

After completing their rebrand, CFSEM had numerous collateral materials that needed to be updated to meet the new standards. Our team stepped in to handle this work so that it could be turned around quickly, freeing CFSEM's team to focus on their own projects.

AUDIENCE RESEARCH

CFSEM was looking for guidance on how to adopt a more targeted communication strategy for their social media channels. We interviewed their team and developed a document that outlined their core audiences.

Following this research, we conducted a landscape analysis of other community foundations across the country, as well as other major nonprofits. After compiling the results, we presented recommendations suggestions for CFSEM to improve their channels following audience-based recommendations.



SOCIAL MEDIA

In the winter of 2022, CFSEM reached out to us with a new marketing need: social media support for PEDALS, a partner program and a special initiative of the foundation. PEDALS is a social emotional learning curriculum developed for young children that had shown great success in New York and was now being introduced to schools within CFSEM’s service area.

We helped CFSEM create posts for their Facebook group that would allow team members to more share their knowledge with other members of the group. We also worked closely with the PEDALS team to develop their Facebook page

OUTCOMES

The totality of what we’ve been able to achieve in partnership with CFSEM over the years is broader than what can be shown by a single project, or even a series of projects. As a trusted supplier for nearly a decade, we’ve become almost an extension of their organization, able to fulfill any need when it comes to digital marketing deliverables. In fact, our greatest success has been the relationship itself.

We often find that our best work happens when we are able to collaborate with a marketing team that understands their own strengths and allows us to work alongside them, augmenting their capabilities and enhancing their results. CFSEM is just such a client. We look forward to what the future of our partnership has to bring.



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ASHLEY COLLINS
Digital Marketing Director, CFSEM





People, purpose, process.



After 10+ years of digital marketing
experience, we've found our formula for
success.

**Do the services described
in this case study sound
like something your
organization needs?
Contact build/create at
info@buildcreate.com
to learn more about what our
team can achieve for you.**

