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Bringing the Local Association Online

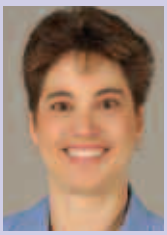
Guiding Principles for Developing a Professional Web Presence: Part One

Editor's Note: This is the first column in a three-part series that focuses on developing a website. The second and third installments will be featured in the June/July 2006 *AMT* and October/November 2006 *AMT*.

Developing a website is a complex and time-intensive effort. It can be difficult to create a lasting and usable tool that will endure the ever-changing nature of the Internet. The best sites are well planned, thoughtfully designed and user-friendly.

There are three important stages of web design: planning, design and implementation. Surprisingly, the first two stages need not be done on a computer—in fact, the "ancient" technologies of pencil and paper will do just fine and eliminate any issues that may arise when starting with the visual template first, rather than content. It is also important to include a variety of individuals from the organization in the planning and design to ensure a balanced and comprehensive approach to the website's development.

Content is the most important part of any successful website, for no matter how visually pleasing or elegant the design, if a visitor can't locate information, the website has not fulfilled its purpose. Knowledge of the association's needs and the potential needs of those visiting its website are the key indicators for determining content. Begin by thinking about individual and collective needs and exploring the reasons behind the website's development. There are several key questions to consider during this stage:



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Why Have a Website?

If the local association spans a large geographic area, the primary goal might be to use the website as a vehicle for communication to connect all members. If numbers are low, it might also serve as a tool for encouraging non-members to participate in association programs. It is important to ask the question "Why are we doing this?"

Our Target Audience?

Presumably, the primary consumer is the local association member, but the entire state membership might also benefit from the site's information. It is important to solicit ideas from potential users about what would best serve their needs and gain an understanding about their Internet accessibility. For example, designing a multimedia rich site for an audience primarily using a dial-up connection can prove frustrating for designers and users alike.

Finally, be sure to consider those who may not yet know about your local association. Spending time brainstorming the types of individuals you want to draw into the group is useful and helps determine elements that may serve to recruit new users and visitors to the site.

Starting the Planning Process

Once you have answered these questions, you are ready to begin the content development part of the design phase. Again, this can be done on plain paper, with index cards or Post-it™ notes or on a white board or chalkboard. As a group, discuss individual elements that need to be represented on the site. Be specific as possible, writing things like: "Spring Calendar," "Directory of Officers," "Announcements" or "Membership News." When a full list of representative items develops, begin establishing affinities among the items. For example, "Spring Calendar," "Mid-February Luncheon" and "Honors Recital," can be grouped together. "Minutes," "Agenda" and "Forms" might be another grouping and so forth. When all the items have been "grouped," begin brainstorming labels or headings for the categories. At this point, developing clear divisions of content is critical. Doing so will make a more user-friendly site and make it easier to maintain over time. Be clear and direct about what the user can find under each heading.

This part of the development cycle is important, and associations are advised to take as much time as needed to ensure all necessary content has been identified and categorized.

The final step in the planning phase is to begin sketching the content's visual organization using a whiteboard or paper and pencil. This provides the "blueprint" for the website's final design. Generate as many different ideas as possible and then let people not directly involved in the planning process give feedback about the initial general design. Once this stage is complete, the actual process of development will begin. ■

Part Two of this series of columns will examine the nuts and bolts of visual design, review web-authoring tools and discuss multimedia use; it will appear in the June/July 2006 *AMT*.