



Project for Strengthening Organizations Assisting Refugees

Tip Sheet for Website Development

Objective

As organizations that serve refugees, we have a general idea of what we want our websites to communicate. The hard part, it seems, is figuring out how to effectively convey our organizations' key messages using the technology that's available to us and how to best "market" our organizations so that our webpages stand out from others to diverse public audiences. Your website's organization – the balance between text, images, and graphics and the content that you chose to provide – is the #1 factor in determining whether or not users will return to your site.

This resource is designed to help the board members, staff, and volunteers of refugee service providers in thinking about how to design their websites and what to include on them. It will address the importance of websites for nonprofits and provide tips on effective website design.

Introduction

According to the Pew Internet American Life Project Survey, in May 1998, 37% of adults were "online." Contrast that with December 2006, when well over 70% of adults were using the internet. In short, the internet has become increasingly important to Americans as a research tool and as a diversion.

Technology also has the capacity to transform the way our organizations function. Increasingly, Americans are using the internet to make decisions about which non-profits to support with financial resources, time, and in-kind donations. A website, when well-designed, is a low-cost tool that you can use to inform clients, donors, and media about your services, advocate to policymakers, raise money, and build relationships.

Why Invest in a Website?

Consider the following when deciding whether or not to develop a website for your organization and how much time and effort to put into your website design:

- ✓ Members of your ethnic community may come to rely on you to tell them about your accomplishments, new initiatives, and changes in local policies and programs that could affect them.
- ✓ If any of your clients are familiar with the internet, they may review your website to decide where to access services or refer their friends.
- ✓ Foundation program officers, corporate donors, rotary clubs, and other grant makers will likely often review applicants' websites before making funding decisions.
- ✓ Individual donors will often visit your website (and those of other organizations) before deciding where to allocate their funds.
- ✓ Potential volunteers and interns will often review your website before deciding whether to apply to donate their time to your organization.
- ✓ The media may give your organization more attention if they can easily access current news about your programs and the clients you are serving, as well as your events, through your website.

- ✓ Partners, clients and service providers can easily be directed to your website when looking for information, saving you and your staff time.

Your website is a channel through which you can market your organization, secure new resources, and manage donor relationships. Your website is also your organization's means of building community in your community, around the U.S. and even the world. Photo galleries, discussion forums, and blogs on your website give people in your community opportunities to engage in your work, which builds the support that leads to long term sustainability.

Website Design

What does it mean to have a "great website?" You have a great website if your visitors:

- ✓ Enjoy visiting your website
- ✓ Return to your site and recommend it to others
- ✓ Can find the information that they want quickly and easily
- ✓ Become more interested in your organization, as a result of spending time on your site.

To enhance the users' website experience and to accomplish these goals, your website should be:

- ✓ Quick to load and easily accessible
- ✓ Easy to find
- ✓ Simple and uncluttered
- ✓ Consistent with the way that you describe your work in your other communications (brochures, proposals, press releases, etc.)
- ✓ Informative and useful to the viewers
- ✓ Accurate and easy to navigate

Things to Think About (When Designing a Website):

1. **Who** are you? Use your website to define your organization, its mission, services or programs, and recent accomplishments. If you have an annual report, put a digital, or PDF, version of the report on your site.
2. **What** is the purpose of your site? What message do you want to convey? What do you want to gain from having a site? For example, if you want to raise cash donations, consider registering with GuideStar, CharityChannel, or another reputable organization that can accept online donations on your organization's behalf. If you want to gain an advocacy presence, provide tools that will allow visitors to take action. If you want computers, textbooks, or other specific donations in-kind, spell out your needs, and provide contact information, so that visitors can easily get items to you. If you want volunteers, provide volunteer descriptions, an application form, and information on how to fax, email, or mail the required materials to you.
3. **Where** are you located? Where can refugees go to receive your services? Where can members of the public mail a check or volunteer application?
4. **When** are you open? When do you hold or sponsor events? When are you open for "drop-ins?"
5. **Why** should viewers continue to use your site, use your services, or trust what you say?

6. **How** will viewers use the information you provide? Will they use your services? How – this isn't a complete sentence?

The Do's and Don'ts of Website Design

DO...

- ✓ Plan your design before you begin and be sure to have a clear design and layout. Your website content should be organized according to your audience's needs, and its navigation should be intuitive for your users.
- ✓ Design for simplicity! Avoid image backgrounds, heavy animation, and music. These are distracting to users and difficult for some computers to load.
- ✓ Make sure that the text on your website is relevant, easily understandable, and to the point.
- ✓ Delete links and information that is not directly relevant to messaging strategy.
- ✓ Keep the format of your pages consistent throughout your website.
- ✓ Put as few clicks between your visitor and your information as possible. The more you force your visitors to click around your site, the more likely that they'll abandon it.
- ✓ Include a way to get back to the home page on **every page** to make it easier for visitors to start over. If you're including a clickable logo on the top of every page, make sure to also include text that says something like "Home Page."
- ✓ Include a menu on the left or the top of each page so that users do not have to return to the homepage to go somewhere else.
- ✓ Make sure the text is large enough to read. 12 or 13 px Arial and 11 or 12 px Verdana work well.
- ✓ Underline and/or make links blue so users know it is a link and avoid underlining or coloring words that are not links. (This point is unclear to me.)
- ✓ Describe what's available on the websites that you link to, so that the user can decide whether the site is relevant to them.
- ✓ Include action photos of the clients you are serving and your programs Remember, photos are worth a thousand words. Also, adding a brief story to describe the photo makes it an even more powerful marketing tool by personalizing the work you do.
- ✓ Link to your partners' websites – and ask them to link to you!
- ✓ Consider using your website to recognize your donors. (**Caveat** – always ask your donors if you can recognize them publicly, before you list them on your website, annual report, or any other resource.)
- ✓ Keep an updated online calendar; it will encourage visitors to return to your website.
- ✓ Ask others for feedback, before you launch your website.

DON'T

- ✓ Decorate your webpage with graphics and sounds.
- ✓ Provide too many links; it will make your site more difficult to surf.
- ✓ Design a page that will take more than 10 seconds to load. As a general rule, your webpage should be less than 60 kilobytes.

- ✓ Use flash intros; most people click “skip intro” anyway.
- ✓ Flag pages as “under construction;” if your page is not ready yet then do not put it up. You should also disable links that point to your pages until they are ready. However, if you have information that is ready to be seen, post a “last updated” date and be sure to remain current with the content.
- ✓ Overuse *italics* or **bold** lettering. Italics and bold are good to use for one-word emphasis but lose impact and make text difficult to read if used too often.
- ✓ Use too many colors on your website. Chose a few colors, and use them consistently throughout your webpages.
- ✓ Ask visitors to download software in order to view your site; this will push visitors to turn away and look for a more accessible site.

Website Development Resources

These resources might be helpful if you do not yet have a web site and are interested in learning about hosting and setting up a website:

- Web Site Hosting Info
 - www.findmyhosting.com; www.thewhir.com; www.tophosts.com
- Creating a Web Site
 - www.2createawebsite.com
- Enhancing web site articles
 - <http://www.wikihow.com/Category:Creating-and-Enhancing-a-Website>

For more resources on website development and design for nonprofits, go to the following links:

- Idealist: www.idealist.org – If your organization has a small budget, visit the volunteer section of Idealist.org to search for volunteers willing to develop your website free of cost
- TechSoup: <http://www.techsoup.org/learningcenter/internet/page6016.cfm>
- A technology resource for nonprofits
- Nonprofit Technology Network (NTEN): <http://www.nten.org> – A community of nonprofit professionals that share resources and information with members regarding effectively using information technology
- This article explains the difference between website “hits” and actual “visitors”:
<http://1800volunteer.blogspot.com/2007/09/what-are-website-hits-anyway.html>. Knowing your true numbers is essential to developing your strategies and being able to explore various tools to outreach and involve people in your organization.

Definitions

Blog

A blog or weblog is a journal (or newsletter) that is frequently updated and intended for general public consumption. Blogs generally represent the personality of the author or the Web site.

IT & ICT

Information technology and information communication technology refer to the use of electronic computers and computer software. According to the Information Technology Association of America

(ITAA), IT is "the study, design, development, implementation, support or management of computer-based information systems, particularly software applications and computer hardware."

Kilobyte

Refers to file size in computer files. In computer literature it is usually abbreviated to KB or K. See below for calculating the measurement between different file sizes.

Gigabyte (GB)	Megabyte (MB)	Kilobyte (KB)	Byte
1	1,000	1,000,000	1,000,000,000

References

The following sites were used in developing this resource:

<http://www.imediaconnection.com>

http://www.magicgraphix.com/webdevelopment/content_organizing.htm

http://www.usa.gov/webcontent/managing_content/organizing/audience_viewpoint.shtml

http://www.smallbusinessbible.org/dos_donts_websitedesign.html

<http://websitehelpers.com/design>

http://www.secretsites.com/do_dont_part1.jsp

Rethink Your Organization's Web Site

Ways to ensure your site offers value to its visitors

Author: Ryan Walker January 30, 2006 www.techsoup.org

Many organizations carefully deliberate before launching a new campaign, product, or program, but will add new features to their Web sites -- or allow old features to persist -- indiscriminately, without a clear idea of how, or if, those features provide a valuable service to their target audience.

Because they see Web content as harmless and impermanent, these organizations make changes to their site as if doing so had no impact on the site's overall success. Yet posting something online doesn't necessarily mean that you've added value to your organization's Web site, or furthered its goals. On the contrary, content and features that don't provide value will detract from your efforts by:

- Burying valuable services from your audiences;
- Wasting time and resources that could be spent on valuable services; and
- Diminishing visitors' confidence in your ability to understand what they value, thereby lessening their opinion of your organization and encouraging them to seek information or services elsewhere.

Getting into the Service Mindset

Anything you offer on your Web site, be it static content or an interactive feature, can and should be considered a service, and therefore held to the same standards you apply to any other service your organization offers.

In other words, everything on your site, down to the phone number listed on your "About Us" page, is a service to your visitors. Examples of services offered by most Web sites include:

- Providing contact information for the organization or for individual staff members;
- Supplying information about the organization and its work or areas of expertise.

Other services a nonprofit or NGO site might provide include:

- Publishing a directory of experts in the field;
- Aggregating current news from multiple sources;
- Providing a means for visitors to interact with one another or publish content;
- Supplying an archive of news and information from various sources;
- Helping site visitors comparatively shop for products and services.

Once you get into the habit of thinking of every feature on your site as a service, you'll want to ensure that every page of your Web site offers real value to both your readers and your organization.

Evaluating Your Web Site's Services

If you've designed campaigns and programs, you already have many of the skills you need to evaluate your Web site. You've spent time thinking about how to maximize the effectiveness of your offline campaigns and programs, and you've assessed their value to your organization. You can apply this same type of critical thinking -- along with some common sense and research -- to your Web offerings.

The keys are:

1. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that because you're not a techie you can't make good decisions about your site.

2. Don't think that you've added value to your site simply because you've managed to get something online. You wouldn't apply that kind of thinking to organizing a conference call or developing a campaign, so don't let yourself off easy with your online efforts.

On the other hand, there is at least one very important difference between the Web and your other services, and that is that the exit barrier for Web services is generally much lower. If your audience doesn't find what they're looking for on your Web site, they'll quickly search for something better elsewhere, particularly when it comes to content. But even with interactive services that require setting up an account, users can easily lose interest if they sense that they can find something better elsewhere. Because it's possible to try out most online services quickly -- and often at little or no cost -- loyalty may be less of a factor than with "real world" service providers like banks, auto repair shops, or couriers.

Thus, before adding a new feature to your site, search for comparable services on the Internet to make sure that what you plan to provide is unique, that it serves a real need, and that your organization is qualified to meet this need. You must truly understand how each of your services will contribute to, and differentiate, your site in order to ensure that implementing them will be worth your while.

Some Additional Tips

Think of user scenarios. This is good advice for evaluating everything you do on your site, from providing a contact number to implementing more ambitious interactive Web applications. Imagine scenarios where someone might use your services. What are they doing when it occurs to them to go to your Web site? How do they first find it? What do they do when they get there? Think of as many scenarios as you can, involving as many different types of users as you can, and you will start to get ideas about how to make your site more helpful to your users.

Consider doing less and doing it better. Are you trying to do too much with your site? Do you envy the large, labyrinthine Web sites of rival organizations? Consider the possibility that certain parts of your rival's site might not be getting that much use, and that you may be more effective by focusing on a small set of services that you can provide better than anyone else. Ask yourself: Is your site trying to do so much that you no longer know if your target audience is benefiting from the services you provide? If so, perhaps you should scale back.

Consider doing more. Are there services your organization could offer more effectively or more inexpensively online? Never stop thinking about ways your Web site can do more of the work of your organization. You don't have to act on every idea, but keep track of them. Better yet, solicit input from your audience to spur ideas about ways you might better serve them.

Make it very easy. When you do offer a service, make it easy to use. It can be tempting to just "put it out there" and see whether a service catches on, with the idea that you can improve things shows signs of appealing to your audience. However, you will never know for sure if a Web service can work unless you commit to doing it well and removing all possible hindrances for your users. Consider this: If indeed the service fails, you don't want to wonder whether it could have succeeded if only you had made it a little easier, or inviting, for people to use.

Everything is connected, and small details matter. Everything on your Web site is connected -- in more than just the obvious structural sense. Sometimes, improving one part of your site can lead to greater success in another seemingly unrelated part. Here are just a few examples of small adjustments that can make a real difference:

- Renaming one or two links in your main menu to make them catchier or clearer.
- Redesigning your search results page to encourage people to search again if their first search didn't yield good results.

- Displaying your listserv sign-up form more prominently.
- Simplifying a registration form.
- Making it easier and more inviting for people to contact you to provide feedback about your Web site.

*As much as possible, sweat the small stuff.

Look at your Web traffic. Web traffic reports can be misleading if they are not used carefully, and they are not always a perfect measure of success. Depending on your organization and its mission, you might have more reason to celebrate one or two important listserv sign-ups than a couple thousand page views. Sometimes, a poorly designed site can get more traffic just because it takes more mouse clicks for visitors to find what they're looking for. (Think of the last time you spent an eternity on an especially bad government Web site and how much traffic your frustration generated.) On the other hand, traffic stats can sometimes provide important insight into how to better promote some site features, and might even reveal some successes you were not aware of. The stats might also embolden you to eliminate some features that are not popular with your users.

Do not discount unintended audiences. Are you getting a lot of listserv sign-ups from people with whom you never expected to communicate? That might tell you something about the content you are offering. In any case, remember that those unintended audiences can sometimes lead you to your intended audience. People are complicated and have varied interests: you never know when someone who does not fit the mold of your target audience might in some way take an action -- referring you to a colleague, posting a blog entry about your site -- that might help more of your intended audience find you.

What Now?

It can take some effort, initially, to get into the habit of demanding that your Web site do valuable work for your organization and its audience. If you're not sure where to start, try selecting one part of your Web site -- or even one part of a page -- and take a step to improve it. Solicit input from colleagues, finding out from them if there are ways it might better serve your visitors. (Interns are a great source of input, too: because they're probably leaving in three months, they can be honest).

Meanwhile, consider deleting or downsizing low-value features on your Web site. Is part of your Web site getting very little traffic? Is there a page that no one in your office seems interested in maintaining? If you can't bear to remove it permanently, tell yourself you'll take it offline for a month. Don't leave a note: if people clamor for the missing page, you can always put it back in a month. If no one notices it's gone, forget it was ever there -- and concentrate on improving something else.

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Planning Your Site

Things to think about when planning a new Web site

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What a Web site can do for you:

- ✓ Transmit your message to many more people than older forms of outreach
- ✓ Enroll new members
- ✓ Conduct surveys and transmit valuable data into a database on the server
- ✓ Take donations via credit cards and secure servers
- ✓ Display documents such as directories or proposals
- ✓ Keep current information accessible to the public
- ✓ Display employment opportunities
- ✓ Include valuable resources in one area (i.e., related links)
- ✓ Help you build communication and community among your members, clients, the general public

How Much Overhead is Involved in Creating and Maintaining a Web site?

Remember, it is important to be aware of the full staffing needs of a Web site before you develop one. It is not uncommon to jump in without knowing the hours it takes to sustain a current site. People tend to revisit a site if there is new information on it. If you plan to develop a Web site without planning its maintenance, you will have a site that will soon be out of date. If you have any time-sensitive information, this is critical.

- ✓ Development tasks need to be planned and scheduled
- ✓ Content must be developed, organized and edited
- ✓ Site needs to be marketed
- ✓ A design firm should be employed for initial coding and graphics
- ✓ Content must be updated to keep the site relevant and interesting (this will most likely involve modifying the entire flow and ownership of information in your organization, not just making it the responsibility of the webmaster)
- ✓ HTML-knowledgeable person needs to be on site

*Think in terms of five positions that need to be introduced into your organization when you introduce a website. These five positions can be held by a single person, but an effective website is a lot of work to maintain.

Staffing for a Web site:

1. Content Manager
2. Server Manager
3. Project Manager
4. Marketing Manager
5. Web Design Firm (contracted)

Questions to Ask Yourself and Your Organization:

- ✓ What is our message and whom are we targeting?
- ✓ Is it economically feasible for our organization to have a Web site?
- ✓ How can we get funding for our site?
- ✓ How can we present our point of view more effectively?
- ✓ Will our Web site be a research or a development tool?
- ✓ Can we do it in-house?
- ✓ What will it bring us that we don't already have?
- ✓ How will it improve what we do have?

- ✓ What will be the benefits of online exposure?
- ✓ How will we reassign staff duties to provide for ongoing maintenance and updating?

If You Do Want to Proceed with a Web site:

You should have an idea of what you want and what you don't want. A glittering, flashing site that plays music may be exciting, but distracting, not necessary, and not appropriate for many causes.

If you want to use your Web site as a direct fundraising tool, you will need either secure e-commerce capabilities on your site or an arrangement with a commercial site like [Entango](#) or a nonprofit site like [Helping.org](#) that can provide you with secure donation tracking services. But it may be enough, for now at least, for your site to be more of an interactive cyber brochure.

Your Web site can become not just a face for your organization, but a nexus of activity that can enhance online community collaborations and the mission of your organization. Remember, however, that the more complex the site is, the more difficult it will be to maintain. Try to keep it simple. Follow the 80/20 rule -- 80 percent of content is static, 20 percent is updated on a consistent basis. Think in terms of phases of Web development: a good Web site is a work in progress. Finally, every organization should ensure that there is a tangible return for the time and effort required to establish and maintain a website. For example, adding 300 new members to your organization may be a good reason to sustain your site.

Think Easy, Efficient Exposure

A Web site should ultimately function as an efficient and easy means of exposure. There is no efficiency in having a Web site with out-of-date information or a Web site that load properly. Determine before making the production leap who will be responsible for the maintenance of the site. Once again, we reiterate, Keep It Simple and it shouldn't take over all of your organization's staffing resources. Be realistic about your exposure. Just because your organization's name exists somewhere in the Internet, it doesn't mean the whole world is tuned in. Think thousands, not millions, and you won't be disappointed.

Your Web site might include the following:

- ✓ An Organizational Mission Statement
- ✓ Highlights of events
- ✓ Staff Information
- ✓ Services
- ✓ Volunteer information
- ✓ Achievements
- ✓ Donor Information
- ✓ Bulletin board/news update section
- ✓ Subscription option available
- ✓ Related links

Your Web site must include the following:

- ✓ Information to attract people who share a common interest or need
- ✓ Information to help new users feel connected to the site and to encourage return visits
- ✓ A community-building feature (like an online resource library) that will encourage collaborations between different NPOs
- ✓ A sense of membership to attract support, obtain subscribers and induce loyalty for the future of the organization

Things to Do, Places to Go, People to See:

Before you begin your project you should write down the following things:

1. A statement of the goals to be achieved, the work to be done, the people involved and their roles, the resources available and those to be gathered, etc.
2. A calendar of check-in dates for everyone involved to communicate via face-to-face meetings, and/or email or phone
3. The most convenient method for transferring source materials (a network)
4. A schedule for completing the project

OK, you've got your theoretical reasons mapped out of why you want a Web site, whom you intend to reach, and what you think you will gain from it. You are also aware and equipped with all the necessary staffing needs to put forth an impressive Web site. Now all you have to do is make the site...where do you start? Fear not, TechSoup has some simple guidelines to help you in the web development phase (see the article: "[Site Wise: Laying the Foundation](#)".)

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Contact Project SOAR at soar@theIRC.org or 212.551.3142 IRC partners with the [Nationalities Services Center](#) and [Pan-African Association of Chicago](#) on this project.