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# BUILDING COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS

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## Should You Have A Web Site?

The following article was written at the request of the Editor and represents a thoughtful and useful approach to understanding what web sites are all about.

The author designed the web site for the Philanthropic Ventures Foundation which can be found at [www.venturesfoundation.org](http://www.venturesfoundation.org).

### Introduction

Many non-profit organizations have yet to catch up with Internet technology. This article is to help people determine how a web site can benefit their organization, and what is involved in creating a site.

### Benefits of a Web Site

The first and foremost advantage of the Internet is that it enables users to make information available to a global audience, 24 hours a day. It also allows the use of multimedia: a combination of text, sound and images.

Examples of how an Internet site can be used:

- Promote your organization's grantmaking programs by providing interactive descriptions.
- Stay in touch with donors and grantees by means of periodic electronic newsletters.
- Publish a list of Frequently Asked Questions that are now being addressed via telephone and/or postal service. This frees up valuable staff time.
- Provide donors with password-protected access to financial information specific to their programs, available at any time.
- Save money on printing and postage by making your organization's bulletins and announcements available electronically.

### Establishing a web site

Constructing a web site is similar to building and furnishing a new house: both require a location; careful planning of design, function, content and budget; and, of course, a capable builder. This article will also touch on marketing and maintenance.

## **Location**

Once the decision is made to develop an Internet presence, start thinking about a domain name, such as *ourfoundation.org*. Domain names are being registered at a rapid clip, so put this task at the top of your list. Availability of domain names can be checked by pointing your browser to [www.networksolutions.com](http://www.networksolutions.com). Many Internet Service Providers allow a domain name to be “parked” at nominal cost; this facilitates the registration process, while not mandating that the domain name is put to immediate use.

## **Careful Planning**

### Design

Advocate a clean, clear design, in line with any identity and logo you may already have. The home page should be attractive and indicative of what visitors can expect to find on successive pages. Pay particular attention to:

- *Animation*: Think twice before inserting blinking text and moving objects. They may appear fun and novel at first, but they make viewing tiresome.
- *Audience*: Who will be visiting your site? Their age? Education? Bandwidth? Likes and dislikes?
- *File size*: Large color photographs or complex graphic files may seem like a nice idea, but visitors will lose interest rapidly if images take too long to load. Keep files to the smallest size possible.
- *Graphics*: Consider using your organization’s existing logo, font and colors on the new web site. This will help promote name recognition.
  - *Layout*: Reading text on paper is a different experience than reading from a screen. Break up long paragraphs into short ones, even if doing so is in disagreement with conventional grammar and style guides.
  - *Navigation*: Can visitors easily find what they are looking for? Are buttons and pages clearly labeled? Do not be tempted to suddenly rename links to major areas of your site. Visitors will bookmark interesting pages, and unplanned changes in the site’s link structure can cause major headaches.

### Function

Start by developing a clear picture of what your motivations are for establishing the site. Ask yourself why people will want to visit your site, and what they should be able to accomplish while there. Make sure your answers share common ground. The resulting answers will have a significant effect on the final product.

### Content

Thinking about what functions the new site will serve will give you some ideas about what materials you want to publish. Besides determining *what* you want to publish, do you know in what *format*? For example, the text of a printed brochure can be made available as a Microsoft® Word for Windows file; however, this would be useless to someone with an Apple® Macintosh®. Alternatively, you could either recreate the brochure in web page format, or scan the document and convert the file to Adobe Portable Document Format. PDF enables files to be used across different platforms.

Other types of web site content are legal considerations. Privacy, for example, continues to be a very sensitive topic. In response, many sites now include a statement that clearly explains what is done with information

collected from visitors, and how they can contact the site's administrator if they have questions. Copyright and Third Party Links are two other topics you may wish to consider. Addressing these issues at the onset can avoid uncomfortable situations down the road.

### Marketing

Imagine the new site to be up and running and for the whole world to see. How will the general public know your virtual abode exists? Unless your budget allows for a substantial ad campaign, there are inexpensive yet effective ways to distribute your site's URL (Uniform Resource Locator):

- Add your site's address to stationary, brochures and other printed matters.
- Include the URL in your outgoing voicemail recording.
- Consider adding a so-called "signature file" to your email messages. This is a text file that can contain any information you want, including your site's address.
- Update your email programs to reflect new email addresses attached to your new domain name.
- Submit the URL to major search engines.
- Conduct a search on the Internet to locate sites that publish your foundation's contact information. Then notify the administrator of your new URL, and suggest the inclusion of a link to your site.
- Fine-tune your META tags, so people using search engines have a better chance of finding you. Learn more about these tags and their functions by pointing your browser to <http://searchenginewatch.internet.com/webmasters/meta.html>.

### Maintenance

When you made the decision to develop an Internet presence, you also made a commitment to another project: maintenance. Many people are under the mistaken impression that once the site is launched, the project is finished. Nothing is further from the truth.

- Decide who will maintain the site. If this will be someone in-house, make sure you communicate this to the design team. Some design software does not permit easy alteration by novices. Remember, too, that additional equipment, software, and training may be required to accomplish updates successfully.
- On a monthly basis, verify that all links are still valid, and check your positions with various search engines.
- Update content in a timely fashion. Keep the site interesting and visitors coming back by refreshing the introductory message, and adding the most current newsletters, bulletins, and calendars of upcoming events.
- Consider sprucing up the site every six months or so to keep it looking new and attractive. It is not necessary to revamp the entire site; simply replacing some graphics and colors will go a long way. You may have noticed how some large corporations re-design their entire site every three months!
- If your ISP (Internet Service Provider) provides traffic analysis data, use it to your advantage. Find out what pages draw the most visitors; what sites refer the most traffic; and so forth.

### Budget

We are entering cloudy waters here due to the many different factors involved. A successful designer located in a metropolitan area is likely to charge more than someone just starting out rurally. Similarly, sophisticated site development including cutting-edge programming and use of focus groups will cost far, far more than an approach without such bells and whistles. Do not be surprised to pay \$30,000 or more for a first class, medium-sized site.

That said, it is possible to get a fine-looking product for one-third that cost, and perhaps even less. The more time you are willing to invest, the lower the cost can be. Here are some tips:

- Do your homework: there are many excellent web pages and books on effective web site design and information technology. Inform and prepare yourself. (see your bookstore's computer section)
- Before contacting a designer, decide what your budget is. Sort through your organization's materials and decide what you want to publish on the Internet *now*, and what can wait until later.
- Surf the Internet and let the designer know what sites you like and which ones you do not.
- Ask the design firm if it offers discounts to non-profit institutions.
- Find out if you can help with production chores. For example, rather than sending over a stack of documents that may have to be re-typed, do the typing yourself and mail a disk.

If you are on a very tight budget, this may be the best tip yet: visit the generous and admirable folks at [www.charityfocus.org](http://www.charityfocus.org), whose motto is "Helping Others Help Others." Not only does this site contain excellent resources for non-profit organizations, you may even be able to have your site built free of charge! CharityFocus can also be contacted at (888) FOCUS 45, or (408) 247-1830.

### **Finding a capable builder**

Referrals are usually best obtained from friends and colleagues in the industry. In addition, and as already suggested, spend time browsing Internet sites. Note the ones you like and why. Bookmark pages with appealing functionality that you would like to have on your own site. A large number of home pages contain a byline such as "Site Design By" with a link to contact information or the producer's home page. If that is not available, contact the site's administrator. There are also professional organizations such as the Association of Internet Professionals ([www.association.org](http://www.association.org)); HTML Writers Guild ([www.hwg.org](http://www.hwg.org)); and the International Webmasters Association ([www.iwanet.org](http://www.iwanet.org)) that may offer further assistance.

### **Conclusion: A word of encouragement**

There are many more aspects to designing and producing a successful web site than can be described here. If you feel overwhelmed, do not despair. Site design and information architecture include creative processes that can be a lot of fun for you and your staff, and may offer new ideas and views on how to market your organization and serve clients in a fresh new way.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact the author. Email is preferred: [cornelis@alcmedia.com](mailto:cornelis@alcmedia.com); telephone (510) 864-2948.

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Past copies of *Building Community Foundations*, Bulletin 1 (August 1992) to Bulletin 41 are available as a unit for \$20 to cover the cost of copying and mailing. Send check to:

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## ***Building Community Foundations***

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