

Whose Web Site is It Anyway?

By: *Jeanne L. Allert*
Ellipsis Partners

When you approach the publishing of a newsletter or magazine, you design the publication based largely on what information you want to provide to the readership. When your organization plans its annual meeting or convention, the information, education, and entertainment is driven largely by what kind of experience you want for your attendees. Similarly, you may have some definite ideas about what you want a website to do for your organization: promote your brand/image; generate non-dues revenue; increase charitable donations; provide learning opportunities; recruit new members or volunteers; or maybe deepen your member affinity. The products you create for your membership are often defined by the purpose you have in mind and what you believe would be valued by your target audience.

Any good website is based on a centralizing premise, some unifying goal or intention that guides the content, functionality, aesthetics, and experience of the site. While the web can appear as diverse as all of the people on it, the purpose of any site can be distilled into one of the following motives: to KNOW, to HAVE, to DO, to FEEL. Use these site motives and examples to help your organization gain clarity about the intent of your site.

1. To KNOW - to seek information. Sites like www.thomas.loc.gov for legislative



updates, www.cnn.com for late-breaking news or www.weather.com for forecasts anywhere in the world, are clearly sites that you would visit to avail yourself of the information contained therein. You're not looking for a relationship with the site; you want to go in, get what you need, and get out. These sites are content-rich and often adhere to established editorial and publishing guidelines. The intent of the site is to provide information.

2. To HAVE - to secure products or services. With ecommerce components and online transaction capabilities, many sites offer the ability to acquire goods or services. You might go to www.amazon.com for books and music or www.llbean.com for clothing, www.expedia.com to secure your next airline ticket or www.speakers.com to book your next conference speaker. These are sites with a primary purpose for retailing direct to the online consumer.

3. To DO - to perform or complete some desired task. Perhaps you need to perform a search, look up a word, or research a purchase. You can get your tax forms and submit your return at www.irs.ustreas.gov/hot/taxfax.html. A search engine site is where you go to perform a specific task (that usually is in response to some other goal). Perhaps your organization is looking into eLearning, offering a web site that would provide educational

Whose Web Site is It Anyway?

By: *Jeanne L. Allert*
Ellipsis Partners

opportunities to your members. These sites allow the online visitor to perform a task or meet an objective, often in a self-service way.

4. To FEEL - to connect or kindle an affinity; to seek support or kinship. Sites that have clearly set for affinity and support as the centralizing premise include www.parentsoup.com or www.cancer.org or daily prayer sites. These sites look to aggregate people of similar interest or experience and provide a vehicle for networking, communicating and supporting the members of that community.

As you contemplate your web initiative, consider how prevalent each of these motivations will be from the perspective of (1) the organization and (2) the online visitor. You may find that what your organizational intent is for the site differs from that of your visitors. You may aspire to a site that generates revenue for the organization. Your online viewers may be looking to you as a source of timely and relevant (and free) industry information.

Just as it is likely that your organization may have different aspirations for the site from the visitors, it is also likely that your organization will not have just one of these motives, but several, in varying degrees. For example, an organization may be providing basic information and maintaining more of a “brochure-level” site to the general public, but may also have a members-only section of the site that offers affinity and activities exclusively for that population.

Use this model as a catalyst for discussion within your organization in an effort to reach consensus about the centralizing premise of your web initiative. Too often, web sites that evolve without a clear purpose end up more like the proverbial elephant that was discovered by blind men. You may get several different interpretations of what the beast is, none of them being accurate. A clear intention will better help you plan for the site’s functionality, evolution, and resources.