

Mission-Driven Web Sites

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*The basic question is, "Should our Web site contain content focused only at members, the public, or both?"
The basic answer is, "Maybe."*

Serving the public on your Web site can sometimes be like microwaving that frozen coffeecake when your neighbors drop by unexpectedly to chat. You didn't plan for them, but there they sit in your living room, asking you questions anyway. As an organization, you have more options: Kick them out ("password, please"), gesture to a comfy chair ("help yourself to anything"), or put on the coffee but close off the kitchen (a bit of both). Here's what folks around you are doing.

What happens when you build a great Web site intended for your members and then learn that large chunks of visitors are Web tourists seeking information they think you have? Do you give it to them? Sell it to them? Rethink your market altogether? Or do you create two sites: one for members, one for the public? Your options vary wildly. The better question is, "What serves your mission?"

For some organizations, this is not an issue; their mission is clear, and their audience is either so defined or so all-encompassing that such debate is minimal. When you visit the American Peptide Society Web site (www.americanpeptidesociety.org; La Costa, California), for instance, it's quite clear that it is not for the average consumer. And yet its Web site is remarkably open; even discussion forums don't require a login. The organization understands that its audience is self-limiting, so its leaders don't have to force visitors through a technological endurance course of passwords and firewalls to access content.

Similarly, the Washington, DC-based National Mining Association's Web site reflects the organization's choice to resist possible content of public interest, such as various mining techniques, rock identification, or the where-to-pan-for-gold directory. Instead, it directs content to industry professionals and the media, with only a simple link to a map of public mine tours.

On the flipside, organizations such as the Heart Rhythm Society (www.hrsonline.org; Washington, DC) have a mission that not only promotes and supports a profession or trade but also speaks directly to the public for the greater good of everyone. "It is part of our mission and strategic goals to raise awareness and increase education within individuals who have heart disorders," says Jacy Hanson, HRS vice president of professional and patient education. That kind of clarity shows in the design and construction, as well as in the two editorial tracks, of HRS's site. A recent market assessment of the group's Web efforts showed that HRS-affiliated doctors actually look to the association to create information products that they can pass along to their patients. Imagine it: Your customers find value in your association when you create Web-based products for them to serve their customers.

The American Bar Association, Chicago, treats its information somewhat the same way. ABA's online presence (www.abanet.org) is managed by an internal group that oversees style, usability, and branding issues. Content, however, is generally left to myriad ABA entities ranging from sections to task forces. All of those subgroups work on their own Web sites and decide what to post while still following broad structural standards set by ABA. The organization, which receives millions of Web visitors each month, redesigned its homepage eight months ago to be more user friendly and is working on the rest of the site.

"We recognize that our audience is lawyers and the public," says a staffer, but adds that only a small portion of the site--namely, directories, meeting minutes, bylaws, and the like--is for members only. Indeed, the public resources section is well stocked with background sheets on various legal topics, explanations of how the legal system works, a lawyer locator, and more. Like the HRS site, much of the material is easily downloadable, so lawyers can use the materials for their own client education.

This concept of serving your members by serving their customers also can mean creating and maintaining wholly separate Web sites. The National Automobile Dealers Association (www.nada.org; McLean, Virginia) site is intended for its members: the dealers themselves. But since 2000, public research into online usage has documented that more people use the Web for prepurchase information about automobiles than they do for almost all other consumer products. Considering NADA's longstanding brand of top-notch consumer

guides, the creation of www.nadaguides.com was a natural offshoot, an obvious way that the association could help members serve customers.

Another strong separation of member-versus-public Web content can be seen in www.realtor.org versus www.realtor.com. The former serves the membership of the National Association of REALTORS, Chicago, while the latter is a consumer-education site about real estate buying and selling. By offering targeted content, interactive tools, and a comprehensive database of real estate opportunities with an easy-to-use interface, the NAR helps members generate more business. These are associations whose leaders understand that investing in public-oriented Web content adds value to their membership, both indirectly and directly.

But brand extension and membership growth aren't necessarily uppermost on the minds of every association debating online content. Some associations almost downplay their role as membership organizations--at least on the Web. A quick scan of the American Society of Plastic Surgeons site (www.plasticsurgery.org; Arlington Heights, Illinois) reveals a heavy reliance on the Web as a consumer-information channel. Most of the site's content is dedicated to its members' market, not necessarily to members themselves. This positioning of Web efforts clearly seems to be a conscious decision by the association's leaders, with members likely more interested in the value of educating consumers, promoting a positive image of the profession, and generating client referrals than in a site stuffed with internal organization news and services.

Who Are You, And Why Are You Here?

Some organizations, once they open themselves up via the Web, have discovered that they have much more public appeal than they had imagined. Trade and professional societies alike are now just a part of the vast resource options available to the information-seeking public (and many associations are learning that the public is not shy about asking for more).

The American Occupational Therapy Association (www.aota.org; Bethesda, Maryland), after a few years of tracking Web statistics and content consumption, realized that students curious about or pursuing studies in occupational therapy comprised a significant percentage of its online audience. Recognizing that students of today are potential members of tomorrow,

AOTA created specific sections and content on its site to cater to their needs.

Likewise, the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers (www.aham.org; Washington, DC)--a trade association of member companies--was receiving an ever-growing number of direct inquiries from consumers about specific member products. Leadership and staff asked themselves, "Do we position ourselves to respond to this need or not?" The organization decided that an Internet-savvy public anxious to research appliance investments was bound to keep bumping into its site, so it chose to redirect traffic related to specific product inquiries to the Web sites of its members, thus helping them boost sales while simultaneously serving consumers.

The Toy Industry Association (www.toy-tia.org; New York City) took a similar tactic, using its homepage primarily for membership-oriented news while also offering consumer visitors an easy-to-spot button that takes them to a "parents section." Topics there include toy safety and selection, links to parenting organizations, a list of classic toys still on the market, and a frequently-asked-questions page that addresses common inquiries, such as how to find a toy no longer on the market. In this case, the organization committed most of its online presence to its members and industry while still addressing the most common issues that might attract consumers to its site.

In all of these instances, the organizations recognized that nonmembers will visit their sites regardless of whether they are written for the public, so the associations began offering some level of content directed at them while not deviating from their core missions.

Come On In, Y'all

Perhaps the most common approach among associations that serve several major audiences is to try to accommodate them all on the same Web site. With care, this strategy can succeed. If you look at sites such as the American Dental Association (www.ada.org; Chicago) or the National Association of Independent Schools (www.nais.org; Washington, DC), the associations have a well-defined membership target, but they also have allocated significant resources for public-content development and management. ADA's site has a wide range of consumer information, tools, and even games about dental health and practices. NAIS offers a

locate-a-school function and extensive information about financial aid for parents.

What's compelling about the all-for-one model is that it exposes visitors to a breadth of resources and lets them travel as deeply into the content as they wish (or that you allow). This offers the association an opportunity to tout the wealth of its resources to an audience that otherwise might be unaware of all it has to offer.

The American Veterinary Medicine Association (www.avma.org; Schaumburg, Illinois), for instance, started its Web efforts with a members-only mentality. Then it tried the subscription model and has now concluded that the Internet is a powerful outreach tool it wants to further exploit. The average person might assume that veterinary medicine is of exclusive interest to veterinarians, livestock breeders, and pet owners. But with the pet-rescue efforts surrounding Hurricane Katrina and the outbreaks of mad cow disease and avian flu, AVMA's issues are truly public health issues. Therefore, the organization has started chipping away at its own "member-wall" mentality by working toward a much more expansive view of public information.

As AVMA Online Managing Editor Dr. Althea Jones explains, "The way to best serve our members is to get our information out into the world. ... Two tangibles that tell us we're on the right track are, one, we're finding more traffic is going deeper on our site instead of just bouncing off the homepage, and, two, feedback from program managers says their constituents are finding what they need."

So what's the right approach to member-versus-public content on your association site? Options are still emerging, but organizations should carve their own definitions of what's right according to their mission, resources, and audiences.

Concurrently, there should be an ongoing effort to learn from what your Web audiences tell you about your site. With clarity of purpose and good business data, you will be in a better position to "change the doormat" as new information accumulates.

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