



Dane County Historical Society

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Creating a Presence on the World Wide Web

This handout was developed by Debbie Kmetz, Stef Morrill and Mary Clark for the Dane County Historical Society. It grew out of a meeting with the Cross Plains-Berry Historical Society about options available to local historical societies that wish to have a web presence. Thanks to members of the Cross Plains-Berry Historical Society for information about their experiences in this process so far.

One of the best ways to publicize your historical organization to your membership, to your local community, and to the world in general, is to create a presence on the Internet. There are several ways to give your organization a presence on the Internet – or World Wide Web -- including:

- Creating your own complete website consisting of one to many individual pages
- Creating a single web page that is posted on another organization's website
- Providing information about your organization for posting on an already existing website

The various options involve varying degrees of technical expertise, financial resources and time. There are many avenues that you can take even within each of these options. As you begin to make decisions, it is important to understand some of the basic procedures involved in creating a whole website or an individual web page.

Please note that this handout begins with one of the most basic roles that a web page or website might serve – that of providing information about the organization itself. Think of it like an electronic brochure. Future discussions can address such things as creating photo galleries and other postings that involve copyright issues.

Websites and Web Pages

The World Wide Web, or Internet, is a vast electronic network composed of particular websites. Each website on the internet has its own web address called a URL. For instance, the web address for Dane County Historical Society is <http://www.danenet.org/dchs>.

A website may be composed of a single page, several pages, or even many thousands of pages. An individual web page is what appears on your computer screen at any given time.

Web pages often contain links to other web pages. Some of these electronic connections are internal and take the user to another page within the same website. Other links are external and take the user to another, different website.

What You Need to Create a Website

There are three basic things that you need to be able to do in order to create a website from scratch for your organization. You need to be able to: design the website; post or “publish” the website on the Internet; and maintain the website to keep it current and accurate.

Designing the Website

A website is comprised of one to many web pages. Someone who designs a website designs it page by page. Each page may consist of digital text, images and graphics.

Web pages exist in an electronic form and must be designed so that they appear attractive and legible on the variety of computers that people might have. A web page is created using computer code, which consists of letters, numerals and symbols whose combination gives directions for such things as picture placement, font style, and size of margins. Some people design a website using just the code. Others use software creation programs such as Dreamweaver or Frontpage that have been developed to produce the code as the designer visually arranges text and images on the screen.

If you want to design your own website, and you do not have knowledge of coding, you can take a course in Dreamweaver or Frontpage. Courses are available through many venues. You will also need to install the Dreamweaver or Frontpage software on a computer where you can work on developing and eventually maintaining the site. Though commercially expensive, this software is available to non-profit 501(c)(3) organizations for a very low cost.

Alternatively, you might also find someone who can work with you on the design. Many high school and college students have web software proficiency.

If you make an arrangement with students or other knowledgeable people to design your site, remember that you will still need to work with them to provide the information that you want to appear on your website. It is critical that you play a role in deciding what kind of information you wish to be posted. Anyone in the world with access to the Internet will have access to your site. Some information is desirable and very appropriate to post. Other information may not be. For instance, you may not wish to alert the world about the valuable artifacts in your collection, especially if the museum building has limited security.

Also keep in mind that you want a website that will be accessible to all of your users. Encourage your designers to design with the *W3C's Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) Guidelines*, which can be found at <http://www.w3.org/WAI/gettingstarted/Overview.html>.

The Town of Berry worked very successfully with an instructor and class at MATC to create a website for the town. You can see it at <http://www.townofberry.org>

Posting or “Publishing” the Website

Once a website is created, it needs to be posted or “published” on the Internet. It is posted onto the Internet with a special, powerful computer called a server.

Any given website exists because there is a server somewhere that “hosts” it. The server is the computer that also keeps the website going in the vast electronic network called the Internet. The server is usually not someone’s personal computer; it is usually a computer that is dedicated solely to hosting the website and managing traffic to that website. Also, the server need not be physically close. Some Wisconsin websites are hosted by California servers.

A person or a group that wants to have its own website needs a server to host it. There is usually a yearly fee; sometimes it can be as low as \$25 annually.

Sometimes, larger, non-profit service organizations will offer space on their servers to smaller non-profits free of charge. They would also usually provide the technical support to maintain the server. An example of one of these organizations is DANEnet. DANEnet hosts the Dane County Historical Society’s website.

Depending on who is hosting your website, you may want to purchase an address or URL for your site. This is not always necessary, but can provide some benefits. For example, Dane County Historical Society has not purchased an address for their site, so their site address is the hosting organization’s address <http://www.danenet.org/dchs>. The Town of Berry, on the other hand, has purchased <http://www.townofberry.org>, so that their address reflects who they are and not their hosting company. Work with your hosting company to determine the best way to purchase and implement an alternate address.

Maintaining the Website

Though the bulk of the work in creating a website comes at the beginning of the process, it is also important to keep in mind that a website must be maintained, especially if you post calendars of any sorts, or upcoming events, etc.

Those who use website creation software, such as Frontpage or Dreamweaver, can easily make changes to their website. It can literally take just a few minutes to make changes. If there is someone in your group who can and is willing to do this, this may be an avenue for you.

There are also other options. Contribute is the name of a software package from Macromedia that allows people to make changes to their existing websites without knowing Dreamweaver, or Frontpage, or how to code websites. It is available to 501(c)(3) organizations for a remarkably reasonable price.

Your organization may also consider asking someone who has web proficiency to help you. For instance, with her knowledge of Dreamweaver, the town clerk maintains the Town of Berry website. If asked, there may be someone in your community who would maintain your site for you.

Some Simpler Ways to Go

Create a single informational web page that is posted on another organization’s website

An organization may also develop a web page that is posted on another organization’s website. For instance, the Cross Plains-Berry Historical Society might consider requesting a page on the Town of Berry’s website which is already established. When the MATC students designed that

site, as part of the process they created templates and identified timesteps, font sizes, etc. to be used in creating future pages. Many of the design decisions have already been made for any new pages to be added to the website. To create a new page, the historical society would still need to provide the text and images, and someone would still need to put it all together. However, that would not be nearly as time consuming as designing and developing a website from scratch.

Another idea might be to create a page on Wikipedia (<http://www.wikipedia.org>). This is a vast web-based encyclopedia where anyone can create or edit information. It is easy to create a page on Wikipedia, just by typing in information. They provide a tutorial to get you started on creating your own page (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Tutorial>). One advantage to putting information on Wikipedia is that Internet search engines love Wikipedia. If someone is searching for your society in Google, they will find it more easily if it's located in Wikipedia. Even if you decide to create a website in another way, you may still want to put some information into Wikipedia as another avenue for people to find you.

In both of the above cases, you need not be concerned about the server. That is the job of the organization maintaining the overall website. However, you still need to determine how you will maintain the site. In the hypothetical situation where the Cross Plains-Berry Historical Society asks the Town of Berry for a page on their website, the town clerk might also, generously, do the changes. In the case of Wikipedia, changes may be done easily on any computer with access to the internet. Special web design or editing software is not needed.

Provide information about your organization for posting on an already existing website

Another very streamlined alternative is to simply supply information to a page on another organization's website. In this scenario, you either email text or complete an online form providing such things as name of your organization, address, brief description of programs, etc. Some examples of websites that post these sorts of organization profiles or calendar items are MuseumsUSA <http://www.museumsusa.org> and Portal Wisconsin <http://www.portalwisconsin.org/>

Some sites will even automatically delete calendar items as they go out-of-date. Portal Wisconsin is one of these sites.

One advantage of this streamlined approach is simplicity. Your organization gains a web presence without investing a great deal of time, effort or expense. However, the type of information that you post is determined by others and may be limited by the hosting organization. For some, that may prove to be somewhat frustrating.

Another advantage is findability. Adding your information to sites like Museums USA and Portal Wisconsin gives users another way to discover your organization and what you have to offer. Like Wikipedia, you may want to add your information to these sites even if you maintain a separate web presence.

Choose the websites where you post information about your organization carefully. Not all websites may be desirable.

Obtaining Affordable Software

Local societies that are members of the Capital Region of the Wisconsin Council for Local History should all be 501(c)(3) organizations. That is an IRS designation usually obtained during the early years and formative stages of the organization. This designation allows the organizations to do such things as apply for grants from the Wisconsin Humanities Council, Dane County Cultural Affairs, etc. It also makes these organizations eligible to purchase software at a very low, non-profit organization price.

Non-profits can find discounted software is TechSoup Stock <http://www.techsoup.org/stock>. After registering, non-profits can order software and some hardware at deeply discounted prices. For example, Dreamweaver 8, which normally costs around \$350 can be purchased here by a non-profit organization for \$25. Contribute 4, which costs \$150, can be purchased for \$20.

A Summary of Choices

To maintain a website you need 1) a designer 2) a server to host it, and 3) a method of upkeep.

If you want to create and maintain your own website you need:

1. A designer.
 - You can learn web creation software yourself - classes are readily available through the UW, MATC and some high schools. The software can be purchased through TechSoup for an exceptionally low cost. The software must be purchased by the 501(c)(3) organization, not an individual, although it may be installed on an individual's computer as long as the software is used for society work
 - You can find a designer or group of designers with whom to work, such as students from MATC
2. A server.
 - You can obtain a computer powerful enough to be a server and do all the tech work yourself (although this is an option, it is not advisable)
 - You can pay a yearly fee to an organization that has a server and will do the technical work and upkeep of the server
 - You can find a larger entity that will provide space on their server to you free of charge because you are a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization
3. Upkeep.
 - You can make the changes yourself because you have installed web creation software on a computer and learned how to use it
 - You can make the changes yourself because you have obtained and installed Contribute, software developed to edit already existing websites. This software is easier to use than most web creation software. (You could combine this option with working with students to create the website. Once they create it, you could edit the site using this software, available to 501(c)(3) organizations at a low cost.)
 - You can ask a friendly, generous person with the necessary knowledge to make changes for you.

Advantages: *You have maximum control over content and design.*

Disadvantages: *Can be fair amount of work, though many people find the work interesting and enjoyable. There may also be costs involved depending upon the choices that you make.*

If you want your own page on another organization's website, you need:

1. A designer.
 - However, it is often easier to design a page on an existing site because the design has been determined to some degree
 - The design of some pages, such as those on Wikipedia, does not require knowledge of web creation software.
2. A server.
 - This is not an issue for you. The other organization will have the server.
3. Upkeep.
 - You may be able to make arrangements with the hosting organization to update your page.
 - The editing of some pages, such as those on Wikipedia, can be done easily without the knowledge of web-creation software.

Advantages: Less work, possibly less expense.

Disadvantages: You may have less input into the design.

If you provide information about your organization for posting on an already existing website, you'll need

1. A designer.
 - This is not an issue for you. You will simply be emailing text to a website such as Portal Wisconsin or electronically completing an online form.
2. A server.
 - This is not an issue for you.
3. Upkeep.
 - This may be easily done, by submitting changes in the same way that you submitted the original information.

Advantages: Even less work and less expense.

Disadvantages: You may be limited in what you can say about your organization. You will have no input into design. There may be no opportunity to use photographs.