

Tips on Using a Website for Connection and Community Building

These days organizations are developing a website even before they have a phone number or mailing address. Many free or affordable web-building/designing and hosting options now exist. While putting up a website may now be easier, it's important to structure and organize your website in a way that ensures meeting your visitor's needs for information, ease, comfort, aesthetics and learning. The tips below are offered as a companion to the WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT TOOLS included in the Team Development Toolkit. They are intended to offer some guidance, ideas and things to keep in mind when developing a web page or web site for your team or organization. When planned carefully, your website could serve as an easy-to-maintain, inexpensive strategy for ongoing NVC community building and connection.

TIP #1: CONSIDER YOUR OPTIONS – DO YOU REALLY NEED A FULL WEBSITE?

- If your funds are limited, you may consider resource sharing with another like-minded organization that already has a website in place, particularly if their site is visited frequently. The downside to this option is that you will not typically have a URL (website address / name) that is easily recognizable, since you'll actually be part of another organization's website construction.
- If you're a small organization that only puts on a few small trainings each year, you may only need one or two pages for your site. Your pages could simply list a brief description of who you are, and provide downloadable PDF files (Portable Document Format) of your training flyer and registration form. Your page could also include contact information if visitors would like to learn more (such as an email address).
- If you're using the route of 1-2 pages that includes PDF files of printable documents, you'll need to have access to Adobe Acrobat – the software used to create PDF files. This software typically runs about \$300. More information can be found on the Adobe website at www.adobe.com.

TIP #2: CONSIDER ALL COSTS INVOLVED – WHAT FREE RESOURCES ARE OUT THERE?

- Websites can be expensive, or free – the choice is really yours and depends on the quality you're seeking, the function of the site, and other factors. When planning your site, do some homework first to understand the choices available.
- WEB HOST – your host is where your site is stored when its viewable to the world. Many free hosts exist – but be cautious before you sign up for one, as some require you to put advertisements on your site in exchange for hosting. Hosts can run as low as \$6 per month, and as high as \$150 a month, depending again on the size of the site (how many pages, how large the site files are, whether or not your site interacts with a database, etc.). The key is to do your homework and find the best solution for your group.
- DOMAIN NAME PURCHASE – If you want a recognizable website name (such as www.cnvc.org), you'll need to purchase rights to the domain name. Typically you can purchase rights for two years at a time, and then you simply renew to retain the domain name rights. Once you've purchased the domain name rights, you also "own" the use of the domain name in email addresses (such as jsmith@cnvc.org). When searching for an organization to purchase domain rights from, BE CAUTIOUS! Unfortunately, there are many businesses out there selling domain names for \$70-\$150 each; while other will sell them for as little as \$20. Again, it's important to do your homework.
- WEB DESIGNER/DEVELOPER – You may choose to hire a web designer or developer, who could be responsible for a wide range of services, including developing your site plan, writing all site copy, designing all graphic elements, and writing all of the site code. Or, you can partner a volunteer experienced in web design or writing with the developer. In this partnership, the volunteer (who typically

knows your organization and NVC well), could develop the site plan, write all of the copy and serve as the liaison between the developer and the rest of your team/organization. Or, you could divide up a variety of these tasks to meet your specific needs for time and quality.

- **MERCHANT ACCOUNTS/PAYPAL ACCOUNTS** – If you plan on allowing visitors to pay for trainings online, you'll need to explore the costs involved with setting up a merchant account, or a PayPal type of account. These accounts provide a secure interface between your website and the user's bank account. Depending on the number of transactions you anticipate, your type of group/organization (nonprofit organization, or informal group), a paypal account may be more appropriate for your group than a merchant account. Do some research into both to identify all costs involved. Merchant accounts are linked to your organization's bank account, as they typically have set-up fees, and transaction fees.
- **MAINTENANCE COSTS** – If copy or information on your site changes frequently, you'll need to consider methods for maintaining the content on an ongoing basis. This could include hiring your web developer to do simple changes each month. OR, you may consider assigning a single volunteer familiar with web code to make the changes. Still another option is to purchase software that allows you to make copy changes easily with little to no web expertise. Overall, it's important to consider which option you'll be using and add this cost to your site budget.

TIP #3: ESTABLISH WEBSITE/WEBPAGE GOALS AND OBJECTIVES.

- Work with your team to brainstorm and then solidify the goals and objectives of your website.
- **INFORMATION ONLY:** Is your goal to provide basic information about what your group does and additional contact information such as email address(es) and phone number? Is your goal to also provide basic information about NVC, and links to other NVC groups in your area? Is your goal to provide NVC resources? Is your goal also to list information about area practice groups, volunteer opportunities, and workshops? All of these goals would result in an "information-only" or "static" type of website, meaning that people come to your site seeking more information.
- **INTERACTIVE WEBSITE:** In addition to providing basic information, do you also hope to provide interactive elements, such as workshop feedback forms, donation forms, online workshop payment, and/or a form for joining your community by interacting with a database? All of these functions result in an "interactive" or "non-static" website.
- **COMMUNITY BUILDER:** Do you want your site to serve a community-building function? If so, you may consider using bulletin boards in your site design. While these need to be maintained to some degree, typically they allow people in your community to post information (such as inspirational stories, questions, or advice) related to NVC. You can also build community by creating an e-newsletter. To develop your database of recipients, consider developing a "join our community" section. This can be a form that gathers basic contact information from site browsers. On the page, users can be asked if they'd like to receive your e-newsletter, and can then be prompted to enter in their email address. If you're using this option, be sure to let users know that their information will not be shared with any outside parties.
- **EASY TO UPDATE:** Do you want to create a site that is easy to update, even though you'd like to post a variety of information that changes frequently? If so, you may consider developing a password accessible administrative section to your site. Sections like this can be programmed / designed so volunteers with no web experience can add/edit or delete listings for practice groups, workshops and volunteer opportunities. Typically these sections use forms with set fields. The user enters information into all of the fields, and the web developer programs the site to list the information into a particular order, with particular design elements, on a particular page (or pages) of your website.

TIP #3: IDENTIFY YOUR WEBSITE'S TARGET AUDIENCE.

- Who is most likely to visit your website? People who have already been trained in NVC and are seeking additional educational opportunities, or connection to a local NVC community? Like-minded organizations? Other area NVC groups/communities? All of the above? Try to brainstorm all possible audiences. Then, determine which audience(s) will most likely visit the site most frequently – these are your "target audience(s)."

TIP #4: IDENTIFY AUDIENCE'S INFORMATION NEEDS.

- What information do you predict your target audience will be coming to your site for? Perhaps they did a search on "peace" or "nonviolence" and your website came up – though they've never heard of NVC before. Or, perhaps they're a veteran to NVC and have just moved to the area.
- Brainstorm all possibilities. Then, identify the top 5-10 information needs that you believe will be most common among your target audiences. It's important that when developing your web content that you appeal to all audiences – yet it's also crucial that your copy is intriguing and understandable to someone who has never heard of NVC before.

TIP #5: IDENTIFY YOUR NEEDS.

- Brainstorm with your group all of the needs that will be met by a website. For instance, is it efficiency (we may save time, since we provide so much of the same information over and over by phone or email)? Will your needs for support be met (the site will offer free promotion of your trainings or practice groups, helping ensure greater attendance and less leg work for you)? Will your need for sustainability be met (will your site copy request donations to your organization, or even online donation payment?)
- Once you've brainstormed all of the group's needs, start connecting them to the needs of your target audience(s). Create a list of the needs that you hope to meet (for your audiences and your team/group). Use this list to help determine the content for your site.

TIP #6: BRAINSTORM WEB CONTENT.

- What will your site include? What copy/written text (how much do you want to say about NVC, what info do we want to share about your organization), graphics, stylistic elements (logo, quotations), colors, downloadable files (flyers, registration forms, donation forms), interactive elements (mail-to forms, forms connected to a database), etc.
- At this stage, brainstorm a list of all hopes for content, but try to keep your group focused on the needs they are trying to meet AND their goals/objectives. For instance, if your main goal is to spend only \$200 on the entire site, it may not be possible to have a lot of interactive elements, or sophisticated design.

TIP #1: BRAINSTORM WEB MANAGEMENT OPTIONS.

- Does your group have a volunteer available who is willing to manage the site (make changes as they arise, trouble-shoot any problems, change graphics or swap out downloadable files as needed)? If not, determine what financial support you're able to provide to a web developer to maintain your site. Inquire with a few developers to see what support your budget can provide you.

TIP #7: IDENTIFY WHAT INFORMATION WILL CHANGE FREQUENTLY.

- Training programs/workshops, volunteer opportunities, and practice group information – if you plan to list it – will typically change frequently. Identify any other information that you anticipate will change frequently.

TIP #8: DEVELOP A SITE PLAN OR MAP.

- Develop a plan for your website and a site map that includes an outline of each page – what copy, design elements, links and downloadable files will appear on each page. Your plan and site map will help your web developer determine how much work will be involved in constructing the site. It will also help your team get a clear picture of the organization of your site. Once developed (or even as it is developed), you may consider different organization approaches, adding other pages, or even simplifying your site significantly.