

DESIGNING YOUR CONGREGATION'S WEBSITE

A RESOURCE FROM THE CENTER FOR CONGREGATIONS

It's been said that the website is the congregation's new front door. A current, user-friendly website is a must for a congregation. The website needs to make a great first impression and function well for its users. To meet this need, your congregation may decide to start from scratch and build a new website, or you may choose to make significant changes to your current website. Before you begin, check out this report, highlighting the experiences of other congregations and the advice of professionals in the area of congregational communications and websites.

We asked communications and website professionals what makes their congregational clients successful and satisfied with their web projects. And we talked to congregations who hired professionals and those who opted for a DIY site. We asked what they learned and what advice they would offer to others embarking on this journey.

PLANNING FIRST

However urgent achieving a new website may seem, time spent on the front end is essential and results in a more satisfying project and a more effective website. Begin by reviewing the key points of your congregation's identity, mission, vision and/or purpose. These elements will provide your website's content, and they will help you make decisions about style, look and layout. "Don't rob yourself of your congregation's unique vision and calling," advises one professional web developer.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

View your website as one communications tool among many. Think about your overall communication strategy and where the website fits into that strategy.

A consistent message across all forms of communication is important. For some congregations, addressing the communications strategy will include professional identity and branding work and/or an audit of all current



communications and their effectiveness. Other congregations will take a straightforward approach, simply creating consistency in the style, logo and keywords across all print and digital communications.

"The congregations that struggle the most are those that don't have a communications team in place," says a communications consultant and web designer. Your congregation may not have a staff of communications professionals – many congregations will opt for a volunteer team with some staff input – but before you start on your website, make sure someone is responsible for coordinating communications.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Clarity about your audience is also important. Before you begin, identify who your website is addressing, and spend some time understanding those you



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hope will use it: What features and information would be helpful or engaging for them? How are they accustomed to using websites and digital media?

For example, if those you seek to reach are accustomed to online shopping and bill-paying, they might prefer to register for events and make donations on your website instead of in person or via the US mail. If your users tend to access the web from smart phones, be sure you build a website that is optimized for mobile access. Or maybe your users simply need information about your congregation and events, so there is no real need for a lot of bells and whistles.

Clarity about the audience and the goals for your website will allow you to determine what kind of a site you need and how much tech expertise is necessary to build it. Further, it will enable you to make use of analytics once your website is live. Analytics refers to the analysis of the use of the website, such as how many people have visited the site in general, how many users visit a given page, how many users click on a certain link, etc.

OVERSIGHT AND UPDATES

Before you build your new site, think about how website maintenance and updating will fit into the ongoing life of your congregation and the structure and flow of how you get things done.

Continual oversight of the message and the look is important. Plan ahead for how that will happen. In addition, maintaining and updating your site will have both a technical side and a content side. Who will be responsible for what, and what expertise and time commitment will be required? It’s important that more than one person in the congregation know how to update the site technically in order to avoid delays or bottlenecks if the key person isn’t available. But don’t make that technical person responsible for all the content: content updates

will need to come from those who lead the ministry areas.

“I had the time to take charge of the congregation’s website,” said one volunteer, “but it was hard to figure out what to emphasize because I wasn’t at staff meetings.”

Ask who will be responsible for providing updated content for each ministry area (new photos, new graphics, calendar and event updates). Finally, determine who will coordinate the message and hold people accountable, so your website is always up to date with fresh and relevant content.

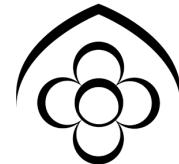
BUDGETING TIME AND MONEY

Congregations are understandably concerned with the monetary cost of development and maintenance of a new website. It’s important to budget realistically.

“DON’T BE AFRAID TO ASK QUESTIONS... to understand the process, to understand the tech lingo, to make sure you get what you want.”

However, many congregations fail to ask on the front end what their new website will cost in hours. Over and over, we hear from congregations who say “we set deadlines and watched them blow by” or “we had no idea how much time this would take.”

A common mistake is assuming that a professional website developer or a willing tech-savvy volunteer eliminates the need for a significant time investment on the part of congregational leaders. The technical side of building a website can be outsourced, but no outsider — even a single congregation member who hap-



pens to have design skills — can create the content (text, photos, etc.) or determine the priorities that will drive layout.

Ask a web developer — or another congregation that's recently completed the process — to forecast the amount of time you will need. Professionals told us the congregation's website project leader will need to work about 15 hours per week for about three months, not including technical work. Budget that time on the front-end. Remember that time committed to the website project, whether by a volunteer or a staff member, is time away from other things. If this leader/coordinator role is to be fulfilled by a staff member, be sure to remove some other duties for the duration of the project.

“IT’S NEVER FINISHED. Go live when most of your priorities are met, and think of your website as a work in progress.”

In addition, determine on the front end the time commitment for keeping your new website content up-to-date and technically maintained: How much time will it take the responsible parties to gather information and to make regular and seasonal updates? There's nothing worse than a beautiful (and expensive) website that is clearly out-of-date.

WHO'S IN CHARGE

A successful project needs a single person serving as the champion, the team leader or the project coordinator. Whether you choose a professional web developer or a DIY web development tool, you need someone from the congregation to be at the helm of your project.



The most successful project leader will be one with skills in motivating and leading people and in managing projects. This person also needs significant knowledge of the congregation's ministry and programs or easy access to those who do. This role is not primarily a technical one. The project leader may work with a small team or committee of 3-5 that gives regular reports to a staff member or to the board. Beware of a large, unwieldy group “representing the whole congregation.”

Use whatever channels work best in your congregation for keeping the members, attendees, staff and board informed about the process. Give your website project leader the latitude and the authority to make decisions and do the work. Involve your wide circle of stakeholders (staff, board or council, ministry leaders and key volunteers) on the front-end as you set the vision and determine the strategy. Then delegate the work to that small team, and make sure they have the information, the access and the authority they need.

EXPERTISE

You've done all your legwork, clarifying your goals and strategy, budgeting the time and money, and putting your project leader in place. Now it's time to decide what you will do “in-house” and what you will hire professionals to do. Those decisions are driven by the availability of funds and



“MOST PEOPLE THINK a website is a technology problem — the tech is the easy part.”

WHAT TO DO AND NOT TO DO

DO set goals for your website. What is its purpose? Who do you want to reach? What message does your congregation want to convey?

DO have clarity and enthusiasm about your congregation’s mission, purpose and ministries before you begin a website project.

DO identify a leader/champion for the project and empower that person to lead the charge.

DO be very realistic about the time commitment involved in a website design, redesign or major overhaul. Match the calendar for the website work against the overall congregational calendar.

DO make use of analytics and respond to what they are telling you. You may have a favorite page, but if no one is responding to it, you need to make a change.

DO create a system for how updates will be done. Identify a point person to ensure that updates are created and implemented in a timely fashion. Nothing kills interest faster than outdated information.

DON’T try to begin this project at a time the congregation is especially busy with other things.

DON’T confuse print and digital communication methods. Writing for the web is not the same as writing for print media. A common mistake is to overwhelm a website with too much text which research shows website visitors are unlikely to read.

DON’T assume a professional website developer can do the heavy lifting for you. “When we hired the pros, I thought it would be, ‘here – do this,’” recalled a busy pastor. “They said, ‘we’re here to guide you and coach you on how to do it.’”

time and the expertise that may be available within your congregation.

Whether you hire expertise or find it from within your congregation, there are many skills and roles involved. The most obvious is the technical expertise – the person or persons who will put together the technical side of your website and make sure it works. While this is often where congregations start, this is the least important skill in the overall project. Communications expertise is equally, if not more, important. Good professional web developers often provide both the guidance to make your site an effective communications tool and the technical expertise to make the site function.

If you choose to use a DIY web template service (e.g., wix.com, weebly.com, e-zekiel.com), you have solved the technical side, but you still need to fulfill the communications role with a skilled person in your congregation or with a paid consultant.

Other tasks along the way include writing the content, taking the photographs and creating other graphics that will be part of your website. Often congregations recruit these skills from within. But you don’t have to. Some congregations find it’s worth it to hire a professional web writer, since writing for the web is different than writing for print and other media. A professional photographer or videographer may be able to capture the feel or the look you want on your site.

Your project leader/coordinator will pull together and access the paid professionals and the congregation’s staff and volunteers who will fulfill these different functions. The success of your project includes determining which skills you have within your congregation and which skills are best outsourced. Think about this in terms of development, launch, upkeep and maintenance.



CONCLUSION

Whew! Advance planning, realistic budgeting of time and money, choosing and empowering a team leader, and engaging the professional consultants and the expertise of the congregation's staff and volunteers, all come together in a website your congregation can feel proud of. When this project is complete, your website will continue to grow, develop and change through tweaks and edits under the guidance of your communications team.

RESOURCES YOU CAN USE

For resources on this subject, check out the Congregational Resource Guide (CRG) at <http://thecrg.org/>. Suggested CRG search terms: website, internet, web, new media, media.

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Feel free to contact the Center for Congregations for assistance in clarifying the process and identifying resources for your congregation's website project.

Building a Website is part of the Special Report series. It is intended to provide information and ideas about the website building and renovation process. We hope you find this helpful in your work as a congregation.

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