

# Web image? What web image?



**I**n times when budgets are tight and cost savings are crucial, maintaining your association's web site in-house may become an attractive—or maybe even the only—option. While having a web designer on staff is most often a luxury we can only dream about, it's not impossible to make a great impression on a limited budget.

It goes without saying that your web site serves as a face for your associa-

tion, and it's imperative to give it the same respect that's given to the staff that so appropriately represent your organization. Keeping this in mind, let's consider some of the fundamentals that are involved with making a valuable team member out of your web site.

## **Impressions are formed quickly—within seconds.**

Is your web site reflecting the reputation your association has worked so

hard to develop? How can you find out? Just ask! An unbiased opinion from someone outside your organization is a simple way to determine whether or not your site relays the image you've intended. But what do you do when you hear the dreaded word, “unprofessional?” When hiring a web designer is absolutely out of the budget, these quick tips and a little bit of research can make the difference between a good impression and a bad one.

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## It's all about the visitor's experience.

Web users have exacting expectations and short attention spans. It's said that a web user will decide to stay on a site within seven seconds. To keep visitors from clicking away from your association's site, make careful decisions about how you structure the site.

Position all the basic elements of your site where visitors expect to see them. It may seem like a good idea to go against the grain in an "out of the box" sort of way, but when dealing with web users, a site that strays too far away from the norm creates nothing more than confusion.

Think about why each element is

placed where it is. A functional web site is put together with deliberate placements that minimize distractions and maximize value. Upon visiting a site, users immediately begin breaking down what they see into small, easily digestible chunks. If the chunks of your web site are not strategically positioned to lead visitors toward the information they're seeking, chances are good that you'll lose that visitor.

Take a close look at all the elements that make up your site and ask this question of each of them: "What value does this have for my visitors?" If your answer is, "there isn't any," then it's time to re-evaluate why it's on the site at all. Wasting your visitors' time with unnecessary baggage can leave them

feeling irritated, and when you only have seven seconds to begin with, there's no excuse for wasting any of them.

## Maintain consistency throughout your site.

Unfortunately, there's no magic formula that will keep your web site visitors focused and engaged. However, there are a few standards that have been shown to help web users move through a site quickly and efficiently. While these basics may seem obvious, they're often overlooked. When maintaining your web site without the guidance of a seasoned designer, remember that consistency works wonders.

Pick a theme that compliments your

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—Melodye A. Turek, Executive Director, Colorado Safety Association



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association and stick to it. Be sure all of your pages use the same—or a very similar—arrangement of navigational items, graphic elements, and text areas. Page-to-page unity reduces the cognitive load on visitors and allows for a more worthwhile visit.

All the pages of your site need to look like they belong to the same site. Be consistent with your use of color and style, and know that nothing screams professionalism like well thought out usage of fonts. Select a couple of font faces and a couple of font sizes, assign them specific functions, and use them with consistency. Avoiding the temptation to load your site with too many varying fonts will have a huge effect on your site's respectability.

### Space is your friend.

The importance of space in your web design cannot be ignored. With a limited amount of space to work with, the urge to cram things in is understandable. However, your visitors' experience can be directly related to your willingness to give breathing room to the various elements of your site.

The flow of your site is dependent on the ability of the web user's eyes to move through it. Clearly formed paths created by space allow your visitors to make quick glances at your pages and still pick out the visual cues that they're searching for. Pages that are jammed full of "stuff" are most often seen as annoying because of the difficulty visitors have at focusing on any one particular thing.

Take a close look at some of the web sites that have impressed you, and evaluate their use of space. Compare these sites to yours and decide if your site can use a little breathing room. The nervous feeling of being overwhelmed by an overly busy web site is unmistakable. If you're getting that feeling from your association's site, your visitors are too.

### Learn from those who have been there.

Maintaining your association's web site in-house may seem like a daunting task, but the keys to a usable and professional looking web site are everywhere. The Internet is full of research and tools that all novice web designers should get familiar with. Simply plug the words "web design standards" into any search engine to start learning from those who have mastered the art of web design.

A web site is only valuable when it does what it's intended to do—provide your visitors with resources quickly and painlessly using a look and feel that represents your association as professionally as your staff. With folks' reliance on the Web for information, it's likely that your next member will see your site before you even meet. Make sure your web site has what it needs to put its best face forward. ■

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