





INTERNET 101

Content Development – Make Your Website Sing!

By Michael R. Geisen

How can you make a website sing? Pretty much the same way you make your real world festival or business sing – give your customers what they want; that siren song will keep them coming back. We work to make websites for festivals sing by using the multimedia capabilities of the internet to communicate the fun and excitement of the festival. By multimedia, we mean heartwarming and entertaining photos, video, audio and written stories. With the internet, we can bring the sound, sights and experience of the real world festival to the festival website; that's when people start reliving the fun and excitement of the festival and that's what keeps people coming back to the website, buying admission tickets online and making plans to attend the festival with their family and friends.

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With more than ten years of experience in designing, building and supporting websites for clients around the world, overwhelmingly, our experience has been that organizations tend to put a lot of effort into developing the best website design they can and then content development does not get nearly the same level of effort and definitely not the same amount of budget. This edition of Internet 101 is intended to point out the value of developing good content and it will give you some ideas and guidance for getting that done even without an abundance of staff time and budget.

A well designed website, similar to a well designed building, will catch your eye. A good design will get you to stop and take a look, but it is the content of a website, like the people and furnishings within a building, that will decide whether you spend any time in the building and whether you come back. A website with engaging content will leave people wanting more; engaging content is what keeps them coming back. Every festival and event needs to make content development a priority.

There are good reasons that developing content usually takes a second seat to the design of a website. First, designing and building a website is almost always done by web professionals outside of the festival staff, so the design project doesn't usually demand too much time and effort by the festival staff. Content development, on the other hand, is best done by the festival staff because they know why their patrons love their festival, they know the stories and the history, but con-

tent development does require time and effort. Second, although most of us use the internet every day, that doesn't make us experts in developing content, so that work for most people, can be challenging at best and often is just too difficult. There are a number of ways to overcome these challenges though.

The most important step towards developing good content is a decision by the festival's leadership to make this goal a priority. Every organization should develop a plan for content development with priorities, goals and timelines. Too often, this does not happen and then, before you know it much of the content on your website has been there for years or, worse, is out of date. That's not to say that old content is always bad, but I'll come back to that later. It's worth repeating though, unless there is one or more inspired individuals in an organization who takes on the work of developing content on their own initiative, content development requires a commitment that starts at the top.

In making a commitment to improve the content on your website, it can help to divide your website into sections and then set priorities. Think of which aspects of your festival are the most popular - the entertainment? the food? the midway? Prioritize content development starting with the most popular sections and then set goals with solid timelines.

A great way to reduce the expense and share the workload of content development is to have a content management system built into your website. With a content management system, non-technical people will be able to update text and

images, add and delete pages, add videos and links to PDFs, update navigation, and more. There are dozens of good options for content management, the one that we have installed for most of our clients with outstanding results is Adobe's® Contribute®; a \$199 software application that is usually installed on one or more computers in your office. I have received more than a few jubilant phone calls and emails from clients who, once they began using this system, were thrilled to be able to finally keep their website up to date without having to rely on a web professional for every detail. Also, because this application is easy to use, the workload can be shared.

Contribute® is a highly versatile, yet simple option. For the next level of capability, we recommend and install systems like Joomla! or Drupal. I know, those are odd names, but these systems, and many others like them, really work because they are used to create and manage content on millions of websites around the world.

When you're ready to select a content management system, it is best to consult with a trusted web professional to help you decide which option is best for you. That person can also set up the system and provide any needed technical support in the future. While these systems give non-technical people the ability to get a lot done with website content, they can require technical support. Additionally, there are other aspects of a website that will require professional support so it's likely that you'll need a competent web professional to help as needed.

After you've installed a content management system that lets you be the master of your website content, a highly valuable and vastly under utilized resource for generating that content is user-generated content. Think of how many people visit your fair every year with digital cameras and video recorders. If you only invited them to submit their photos, videos and stories, you would receive a wealth of content that could substantially improve your website. Even better, you can offer an incentive, such as a contest where the submissions will be judged or there may be actual prizes awarded to the winners.

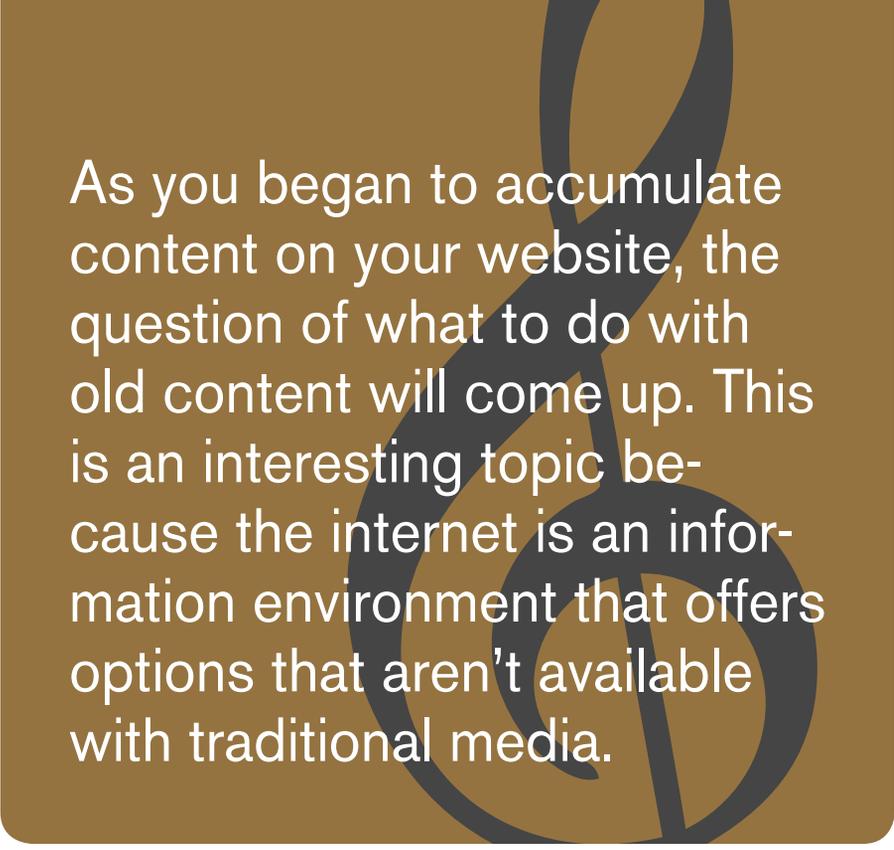
CNN has an increasingly popular program called iReport (www.ireport.com), where their viewers are invited to submit pictures, video and written reports of newsworthy events. With no more incentive other than the opportunity to have their work published, thousands of people submit reports to CNN every day.

Of course, user-generated content isn't free because you'll need to put some thought into how you want the content submitted (probably email or online uploads), what file formats you want to accept and how to address the issue of

copyright. This can all be addressed in a single page of your website where you list the guidelines for submittals. If budget allows, you may want to consider developing an online system for your website, like the iReport system, which people could use to upload their contributions. Once you start receiving content, additional time will be required to review the submittals to find the gems and then to incorporate them into your website. In time, as people see these contributions to your website, more and more people will want to submit their work. By selecting, publishing and giving credit for good photos, videos and written stories, you will be inspiring even more people to submit their work and they will be motivated to continuously improve the quality of their work so that they can get their submittals published. They win, you win!

If you don't mind a little self promotion, an advanced solution for receiving photos online is our Ntelligent Suite Share the Experience Module. With this module, people can upload their photos, add captions, apply ratings to other people's photos. The Administrator has the ability to control what appears in public view. In the future, this module will be enhanced to support uploading video and written stories. You can see an example of it here, www.ocfair.com/My-Community/publicGalleries.aspx.

As you began to accumulate content on your website, the question of what to do with old content will come up. This is an interesting topic because the internet is an information environment that offers options that aren't available with traditional media. With other media, space and cost limitations usually require that old content be removed or archived so that it is no longer easily accessible to anyone who might be interested in it. With the internet, this is not the case because space is unlimited and the cost of maintaining content is very low. Because most of us are not used to this, far too often, content that was created at great expense and that is still of value is removed from a website in the interest of keeping the website "clean and orderly" when it could have been kept online, where people can still get to it. The solution to keeping aging, but still valuable content on line is navigation – simply make adjustments to your navigation so that people will have the shortest and easiest path to the newest, most valuable content while still having a way to get to the older content that is still of value. Also, if you keep your content online, the search function on your website and the search engines will still give people direct access to it.



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This is the perfect time for me to cover one other opportunity for content development that, from what I have seen, is an almost completely untapped opportunity. If your festival or event has been in existence for many years, the internet offers you an affordable way to make your historical information and artifacts, which are all too often suffering away in storage, available to everyone who may be interested. With a consistent off-season effort, over a period of years, your website could develop an historical section. This is the kind of resource that people discover and then spend time exploring, and that is what you want, because this is what builds and strengthens relationships, this is what keeps people coming back to your website and this is what will increase attendance.

As you publish content to your website, a parallel consideration is the appearance of that content. Attention must be paid to the fonts that are used, the length of a page, the layout of the content on the page, how and where photos and videos are displayed. The homepage is especially important. Using the office building analogy again, the homepage is like the lobby of the office building, it should communicate the highlights of your festival. Resist the urge to put too much content on your homepage – good navigation will get people to what they need in 1 – 3 clicks.

The real measure of the value and effectiveness of the content of your website is how many people are visiting and what they are doing while they are on your website. Too often, people will

look at your website and make decisions to change design and content based on what they see when these decisions should be based on data. As you improve your website, are you seeing growth in traffic and/or selling more admission tickets? The best resource we know of for measuring performance of a website is Google Analytics, a free service for tracking website traffic offered by Google. We have installed this for almost all our clients and then set it up so that a report is automatically emailed to them on the 1st of each month. If you would like to see an example report, follow this link, <http://ntelligentsystems.com/ns/documents/KCFTraffic.pdf>.

Good luck with your content development efforts and, as always, if you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Michael R. Geisen is the CEO at Ntelligent Systems. Ntelligent Systems is a team of marketing, web development and customer service experts working together with one goal in mind: to help organizations leverage the Internet as an effective communications medium. If you'd like to contact Michael, he can be reached at: michael@ntelligentsystems.com or 714 425 4970. www.ntelligentsystems.com. While this edition of Internet 101 covered a lot of ground there is still plenty to discuss so if I may be of service, please feel free to contact me.