

Transportation Outreach Planner

Demographics > Age > Seniors > Websites

Public Outreach Strategies

Websites

Quick Links

Toolbox Navigation

- [Recommended Target Groups](#)
- [Strategy Class](#)
- [Strategy Types](#)
- [Description](#)
- [Special Uses](#)
- [When to Use](#)
- [Cost](#)
- [Time](#)
- [Implementation Guidelines and Suggestions](#)
- [Lesson Learned/Challenges](#)
- [Case Studies](#)
- [For Further Information](#)
- [Sources](#)
- [Provide Feedback](#)

Recommended Target Groups

Education

College Education
High School Diploma
No High School Diploma

Language

Creole
Other
Spanish

Disability

Hearing Impaired
Other
Physically Challenged
Sight Impaired

Income

Low Income
Middle to Affluent

Vehicle Ownership

Non-vehicle Owner
Vehicle Owner

Race and Ethnicity

Race and Ethnicity

Age

Seniors

Working Age Adults

Youth

Strategy Class

- General

Strategy Types

- Civic Engagement
- Educational
- Promotional

Description

A website is a collection of webpages that contain content including text, video, music, or graphics. Websites can vary widely in terms of design and how much information they contain. A website is accessible through an internet network by way of a unique internet address, referred to as a **Uniform Resource Locator (URL)** or **domain**. While it is possible to have a website on a private local area network, the World Wide Web holds all public websites. The following provides a brief overview of how websites work: ¹

- **Web Page:** Each webpage is written in simple text and formatted using **Hyper Text Markup Language (HTML)**. **HTML tags** are used to control how a page looks on the screen, including color, font size, etc.
- **Homepage:** All webpages in a website are usually accessed from the **Homepage**. In the homepage the various webpages are organized into a hierarchy and are accessible through hyperlinks, which transport the reader from the homepage to the desired webpage, thus facilitating navigation through the website.
- **Web Browser:** A web browser is a computer software application that interprets HTML tags so that others can view a webpage as it was intended. The web browser also enables users to search and retrieve information from webpages through the internet. Netscape Navigator, Microsoft Internet Explorer, Google Chrome, and Mozilla Firefox are examples of web browsers.
- **Web Server:** A web server is a type of computer software that can communicate with a web browser and respond to a request for a webpage through the Internet. The web server **hosts** a large number of websites, and their respective webpages, and makes those pages available for viewing to anyone connected to the internet. In order to be hosted by a web server, owners of the websites pay a **hosting charge** to the web server.

Special Uses

Websites can be used to: ²

- Disseminate information
- Create an on-line resource library
- Create educational or promotional campaigns
- Facilitate public input and public discourse

When to Use

Websites have become an essential element in business and public work. Websites establish credibility and have become the modern-day equivalent of a calling card or community bulletin. Today, most people look to the internet to find information; therefore, web presence is an important component of any public information or outreach effort. Websites can be used to announce events, educate the public, and convey information. Agencies can also use websites to engage the public through virtual forums and electronic surveys. It is also possible to create project specific websites to help establish a public image and generate interest regarding a particular project.

Cost

***** High (\$10000 to \$50000)**

The cost of creating and managing a website can be high, depending on the complexity of the site and how interactive

the site will be. Expenses include the domain name, web hosting, computer equipment, software, development costs, and staff time. The costs may range from several hundred dollars to several thousands of dollars. Other associated costs include photography, graphics, and any other services to enhance the site. The most expensive cost for maintaining a website is generally staff time.

Low (up to \$999)	*
Moderate (\$1,000 to \$9,999)	**
High (\$10,000 to \$50,000)	***
Very High (Above \$50,000)	****

Disclaimer: The cost estimates provided are intended to be a guide. Project costs will vary depending on the size and nature of the project.

Time

*** Multiyear

Although most websites can be developed within a relatively short amount of time, they require on-going maintenance and updates. For example, a site that is very interactive may require daily monitoring to ensure that the public comments and questions are addressed and properly monitored. However, a site that is only used to broadcast announcements and information may only require weekly updates.

1 to 3 months	*
6 months to a year	**
Multiyear	***

Disclaimer: The time estimates are approximations. The duration of a project may vary depending on various factors, including size and budget.

Implementation Guidelines and Suggestions

The following serve as recommended guidelines and suggestions for creating or redesigning a website:

- **Determine the purpose of the website and who the target audience will be.** Will the website be created to provide agency information or will it be a project or plan-specific website? Who is the target audience, and what information will they be looking for? The answer to these questions will help to guide the design of the website.³
- **Decide who will design and manage the website.** Although it possible to build a simple website with basic knowledge of programming language, the more complex and interactive a site is, the more important it is to assign people who have strong experience working with websites. This will help agencies to avoid unnecessary delays or costly mistakes. Below are various things that agencies should consider when selecting the staff or consultant to develop and manage the site:⁴
 - Experience with website development and management
 - Knowledge of programming language and software
 - Ability to commit to timelines and make required changes and updates

Depending on how often a site will be updated, agencies may need to assign a dedicated staff person to manage the site. This will help to ensure that public requests are addressed in a timely manner, that information is regularly updated, and that public postings are monitored for inappropriate content.

- **Select a web hosting service.** Most public agencies have access to government servers under which they must operate. In such cases, the agency website and the domain are part of the organization's server. However, most non-profit and private entities will need to select a service provider to host the website. There are a large number of web hosting services; therefore, it is best to compare what they offer. Things to consider include fees, data capacity, design limitations, and customer service. Some sites provide website templates, emails, and customized domain names.⁵
- **Register a domain.** The domain name, also known as the web address or URL, is a unique name that serves as the website identifier. Selecting the domain name is important because it is the most basic way that people will find the site. Unless an organization has its own server and web hosting capacity, it will have to register the name with a web host and pay a fee for registering the domain name. Below are a few tips for selecting a domain name:⁶
 - In order to create brand consistency and make it easier for the public to find the site, the domain should reflect the name of the agency or the project
 - Avoid long names or words that are difficult to spell
 - Avoid hyphens

Once an organization has the domain, it needs to select the suffix that reflects the type of site it will be. For example,

government sites end with .gov, non-profit sites use .org, educational organizations use .edu, and commercial sites use a variety of suffixes, including .com, .net, and .co.

- **Determine the information to be included in the website.** Websites can be simple or they can be complex interactive sites. The resources that are available to maintain and manage the site will often dictate how elaborate the website will be. At a minimum, however, all sites should include the following information:⁷
 - Mission and purpose of the organization or project
 - History of organization or background information on the project
 - Contact information (Including address, telephone number, fax number, email address, etc.)
 - List of staff persons, as well as members of committees and advisory boards
 - Services or programs that are provided
 - News and calendar of events (Including public hearings, community events, ribbon cuttings, etc.)
 - Resource library
 - Links to additional information
 - Picture or video gallery
 - Frequently asked questions page
 - Volunteer opportunities
 - Guest book and community feedback section
 - Links to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.
 - Blog or chat room (If there are sufficient staff resources available to oversee the blog or chat room)
 - Site map
- **Determine how the website will be structured.** Considerable thought must be given to the structure of the site and the content to be displayed to ensure that users will be able to navigate easily through the website. What is important to remember is that web users do not read web content the same way that they read a paper document. Research by Nielsen Norman Group has shown that web users skim for information. They usually do not read the majority of the content that they view. Furthermore, there are some areas of the computer that readers tend to focus on more than others.⁸ Websites need to be designed keeping these factors in mind. The following include several recommendations for enhancing the a websites usability:⁹
 - Text should be easy to read and legible.
 - Writing should be kept to a minimum. Avoid long paragraphs or sentences.
 - Articles should be easy to skim. This can be done by using bullets and highlighting key words.
 - Use headers on long articles to break up the text.
 - Titles and headings should start with key words.
 - Place important information at the start of the article.
 - Avoid putting words or paragraphs too close together. Spacing improves reading comprehension and speed.
 - Use photos and images to enhance content. Avoid having stock photography that is not related to the text.
 - Use numbers instead of spelling out words.
 - Use the Readability Test Tool to determine the reading ease of an article.

When designing a website, it is important to know that web users read information in blocks. They swipe their eyes in an "F-shaped pattern," from left to right, then down the page. As such, important information should be placed accordingly.¹⁰

- **Be familiar with regulations governing "fair use" and public domain materials, as well as copyright regulations.** It is important to ensure that the information that is posted on the website complies with regulations relating to intellectual property rights. Before posting any information on-line, agencies need to determine whether the material is considered part of the public domain, or whether it is copyrighted. Photographs, clip art, videos, and music are also subject to intellectual property rights. As such, agencies need to make sure they have the licensing rights to any such material in order to avoid any potential legal issues.¹¹
- **Test the website and obtain feedback regarding the design and content.** Testing the website prior to launching is important in order to identify any possible problems with the website. Agencies can ask staff members, committee members, and community representatives to view the site and provide feedback. Below are some questions to consider when testing the site:¹²
 - How fast and easily does the site load with different internet connections (i.e. DSL, cable, dial-up, wireless)?
 - How does the site load using different browsers (i.e. Internet Explorer, Google Chrome, etc.)?
 - Is the information easy to find and organized in a logical manner?
 - Is the site attractive and easy to read?
 - Is the content of the site useful?

- **Fully inspect and edit the website prior to launching.** Missing tags, broken links, search engine optimization, and website design flaws can affect a website's traffic. It is important to check and inspect the website thoroughly before launching.¹³
- **Publicize the website and improve search engine optimization.** In order to attract users, the website needs to be promoted. Information should be included on all agency material, including newsletters, brochures, reports, etc. Agencies can send email announcements to their constituents to let them know of the site. If the agency has sufficient resources, paid advertisement should be used to further promote the site. Agencies should also take the following steps to improve the search engine optimization of the website on internet searches:¹⁴
 - Submit the website for inclusion on the major web search engine sites and directories.
 - Request community guides to post the link to the website on their sites.
 - Use meta tags to help improve search engine optimization. Meta tags provide keywords and descriptions on that help search engines to index and locate individual web pages.
- **Monitor website participation.** Websites offer agencies a means of monitoring and measuring participation. Agencies can track how many people entered the site and what they viewed. Rating and voting mechanisms can be used to obtain information on likes and dislikes. This will enable agencies to evaluate the site and make improvements. In addition, agencies can use WebsiteGrader.com to evaluate the technical quality of their website.

Recommended Target Demographics

As the internet has become more accessible, it has become possible to reach a wider demographic through this medium of communication. More people are using cellular phones and other mobile devices to access websites and to communicate on-line. However, it is important to note that, even though the use of the internet is growing, some groups remain under-represented, such as low income households.¹⁴ Therefore, agencies should not overly rely on websites. When developing a website, agencies need to remember that there is a segment of the population that does not have computers or on-line services.¹²

Lessons Learned/Challenges

Below are key points to keep in mind when creating or redesigning a website:¹⁵

- **Avoid including too much information on a website, as it can make a website appear cluttered and create information overload.** Information overload can discourage users from looking through the site. The volume of information that is placed on a website can make it difficult for the user to navigate through the site.
- **Information that is placed on the website should be updated frequently in order to maintain public interest.** To show that information is current, it is important to include the date of each update. This helps the reader determine the timeliness of the article.
- **Attention should be given to ensure that the website content is accessible to persons with disabilities.** Too many graphics can make it difficult for people with disabilities to read a site, particularly if using special equipment to read the site.
- **If redesigning a site, special care should be taken to ensure that users will be able to find the new site.** This is particularly important if the new site will have a new name. Through domain redirection, it is possible to redirect traffic to the new site.
- **Public involvement efforts and outreach can be enhanced through the use of websites.** Through websites, agencies can conduct surveys, create electronic bulletins, obtain community feedback, and provide access to public records and reports. By coupling the website with social media sources, such as Twitter and Facebook, it is possible to create a dynamic interactive platform for public involvement.

Case Studies

The Project on Government Oversight (POGO) conducted an assessment of federal agency websites and identified those that demonstrated best practices in carrying out the federal open government initiative. One of the noted agencies was the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Their website is well organized and easy to navigate through. Their home page has clear labels that enable the user to find information easily. It prominently displays a link that invites users to participate and learn more about their "Open Government" efforts. (<http://www.dhs.gov/index.shtm>).¹⁶

The City of Austin, Texas provides an excellent example of a project specific website. The "Imagine Austin" website shows how the internet can be used to inform and engage the public. In this case, the City of Austin used the website

for the comprehensive planning effort. The site includes a link that allows Spanish-speaking residents to learn about the plan and provide input. (<http://imagineaustin.net>).¹⁷

For Further Information

7 Best Practices for Improving Your Website's Usability: Provides recommendations for making websites more user-friendly (<http://mashable.com/2011/09/12/website-usability-tips/>).¹⁸

Website Redesign Best Practices: Provides useful tips for redesigning a website and improving search engine optimization (<http://www.sitepronews.com/2011/04/19/website-redesign-best-practices-part-1/>).¹⁹

45 Color Tools and Resources for Choosing the Best Color Palette for Your Designs: Includes links to tools that provide color palette suggestions for websites and analyze existing color schemes (<http://www.smashingapps.com/2011/05/24/45-color-tools-and-resources-for-choosing-the-best-color-palette-for-your-designs.html>).²⁰

Sources

- 1 Brain, Marshall, "How Web Pages Work," How Stuff Works, 20 December 2011, (<http://www.howstuffworks.com/web-page.htm>).
- 2 Hampton, Chris, "Chapter 6, Promoting Interest in Community Issues: Section 16, Creating a Web Site," The Community Tool Box, 5 July 2011, (http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/section_1074.aspx).
- 3 Hampton, Chris, "Chapter 6, Promoting Interest in Community Issues: Section 16, Creating a Web Site."
- 4 Hampton, Chris, "Chapter 6, Promoting Interest in Community Issues: Section 16, Creating a Web Site."
- 5 Hampton, Chris, "Chapter 6, Promoting Interest in Community Issues: Section 16, Creating a Web Site."
- 6 Hampton, Chris, "Chapter 6, Promoting Interest in Community Issues: Section 16, Creating a Web Site."
- 7 Hampton, Chris, "Chapter 6, Promoting Interest in Community Issues: Section 16, Creating a Web Site."
- 8 Nielsen, J., "F-Shaped Pattern for Reading Web Content," 17 April 2006, Alertbox, 22 December 2011, (http://www.useit.com/alertbox/reading_pattern.html).
- 9 Gube, Jacob, "7 Best Practices for Improving Your Website's Usability," 12 September 2011, (<http://mashable.com/2011/09/12/website-usability-tips/>).
- 10 Nielsen, J., "F-Shaped Pattern for Reading Web Content."
- 11 Stanford University Libraries, "Copyright and Fair Use: Welcome to the Public Domain," 2010, Stanford University, 20 September 2011, (http://fairuse.stanford.edu/Copyright_and_Fair_Use_Overview/chapter8/8-a.html).
- 12 Hampton, Chris, "Chapter 6, Promoting Interest in Community Issues: Section 16, Creating a Web Site."
- 13 Hampton, Chris, "Chapter 6, Promoting Interest in Community Issues: Section 16, Creating a Web Site."
- 14 Hampton, Chris, "Chapter 6, Promoting Interest in Community Issues: Section 16, Creating a Web Site."
- 15 Kemp, Ben, "Website Redesign Best Practices - Part 1," 19 April 2011, (<http://www.sitepronews.com/2011/04/19/website-redesign-best-practices-part-1/>).
- 16 Project on Government Oversight (POGO), "13 Best Practices for Open Government Webpages," 12 February 2010, POGO Blog, 12 December 2011, (<http://pogoblog.typepad.com/pogo/2010/02/13-best-practices-for-open-government-webpages.html>).
- 17 City of Austin, "Imagine Austin" 31 October 2011, (<http://imagineaustin.net/espanol>).
- 18 Gube, Jacob, "7 Best Practices for Improving Your Website's Usability."
- 19 Kemp, Ben, "Website Redesign Best Practices - Part 1."
- 20 Akhter, "45 Color Tools and Resources for Choosing the Best Color Palette for Your Designs," 24 May 2011, Smashing Apps, 22 December 2011, (<http://www.smashingapps.com/2011/05/24/45-color-tools-and-resources-for-choosing-the-best-color-palette-for-your-designs.html>).