

Web Site Goals and Objectives

You can create Web sites to achieve a number of important goals and objectives. Here is a list of ways that you can improve your events by implementing a successful Web strategy:

Increasingly, the first place delegates and prospects will learn about your event is through your Web site. It is critical to develop a Web site strategy that addresses the specific needs of Internet users and helps your organization deliver successful events.

By implementing a well-conceived Web site strategy, you will accomplish much more than simply posting static event information online.

Increase attendance

Many meeting and convention Web sites are developed primarily or exclusively for the purpose of increasing attendance. By building a Web site that promotes an upcoming meeting and offers online registration, you expect that more people will register for your event. Bear in mind that because not everyone is comfortable using the Internet, you should continue to offer traditional ways to register, such as fax, mail and telephone.

Sell more booth space and sponsorships

Use your Web site to promote opportunities to exhibitors and sponsors.

Generate press coverage

The Web is an excellent communications vehicle to reach writers and journalists of both online and online publications. By making your Web site press-friendly, you are likely to generate coverage in the appropriate newsletters newspapers, publications, radio shows, TV and cable programming.

Enhance customer service

Your Web site is not just a sales and marketing tool; it is also an indispensable customer service hub that enables your organization to communicate in a responsive and rapid manner with customers and prospects. Your online visitors should be able to contact the appropriate staff members at your organization and receive timely responses to their email inquiries. Such a strategy may prevent customers from leaving your Web site in frustration, if they are confused by a registration form; and it will demonstrate to your clients that there is a team working professionally behind the scenes to address their needs.

Build online communities

Online communities can take many forms. Before, during and after a meeting, your participants can exchange thoughts by using interactive message boards, and discussion lists. By enabling your participants to communicate through online channels, you are increasing the likelihood that these daily interactions will encourage them to meet face-to-face at your upcoming events.

Content Planning, Development and Management

Once you have determined the goals and objectives for your Web site, the next steps are to determine specific features and functionality, then designate the people, division or organization that will build and support your site.

You should

- carefully plan and orchestrate the site development process to enhance the effectiveness of your Web site
- Map-out the key content sections of your site and how information will be linked.
- Agree upon an overall "look and feel" for your site, including a logical architecture and navigation system
- Implement a plan and technology that ensure your site is updated regularly
- deliver an engaging, interactive site that is responsive to the needs of your customers.
- To achieve this objective, your site has to be updated with fresh, compelling content and capabilities on a regular basis.

Features and functionality

When you plan the content for your site, be sure to include, at a minimum,

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- the basic information visitors need to know about your event
 - specific functions according to the goals and objectives for your site.
 - Introduction to your event and links to important content sections.
 - Agenda that provides times, dates and brief descriptions of all events, programs and activities
 - Keynote and workshop pages that provide detailed information about educational programming
 - Speaker information that offers biographies and pictures of presenters.
 - Exhibitor pages that provide exhibitors with information about the benefits of booking space and how to book a booth
 - Exhibitor database that attendees can search for specific vendors, products and services.
 - Secure registration form, so site visitors can register online and receive email confirmation. In addition, details should be included about how to register by fax, phone, email and regular mail.
 - Hotel and travel information with links to online booking tools or information.
 - Press section with the latest news releases that highlight the upcoming seminar as well as current meetings
 - A conference reminder or email alert feature that allows site visitors to enter their email addresses to receive periodic email announcements highlighting program features and updates.
 - FAQ (frequently asked questions) page that provides clear answers to questions that attendees often have
 - Contact page that includes the names of key event personnel with their email addresses and phone numbers so that site visitors can easily reach the appropriate people
 - Speaker and abstract management
 - Web-based surveys
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Merchandise sales

To sell conference proceedings, books, videos, audiocassettes and other merchandise through your Web site, you can use an online store. Your Web-based store will feature an e-commerce capability that allows visitors to add products to a shopping cart and then securely purchase selected products with their credit cards.

There have been significant advances in e-commerce shopping cart capabilities, and you or your Web developer should be able to deploy a shopping cart application in short order. Once a shopping cart application is stored on your Web server (or you can link to a shopping cart application), you simply use your Web browser to add products, pricing, shipping costs and any taxes.

There are two ways to process credit card payments. You can set-up a real-time credit card authorization system such as CyberCash (www.cybercash.com), which approves or rejects a buyer's credit card information on the spot; or you can process credit card transactions offline after the online purchase has been made. Real-time credit card authorization will simplify your life because purchases are automatically and instantly approved. And you won't have to call people back who gave you the wrong credit card information.

Chat rooms, message boards, and discussion lists

Features that promote interaction among participants before, during and after the event can drive traffic to both your Web site and your event. Chat rooms and message boards give site visitors a reason to return to the site and so be exposed to new offerings. Plus, attendees may be encouraged to sign-up to participate in various discussions implemented through email mailing lists.

The best way to build a vibrant online community is by selecting one or several people who will serve as moderators and facilitators of your discussion groups. If you simply place a chat room on your Web site or launch a discussion list without building a team of discussion leaders, it is very unlikely that anybody will participate. Moreover, the interactive offerings must be well promoted and easy to use to achieve a significant level of success.

Web-based education

To offer distance learning through your Web site, you will have to spend considerable time and effort during the planning and design phases. Determine if your audience is willing to pay to participate, or whether they expect free access; choose the best for-mat for the program content (for example, a one-hour presentation or a series of presentations over time); and select instructors who are comfortable using the Internet in general and as a teaching tool specifically.

Building a content-rich site only benefits your event to the extent that people can find it on the Web. As early as the content planning stage, you should begin to think about how to attract the attention of as many customers as possible. There are many ways to leverage the Internet to drive traffic to your Web site, and some — such as search-engine optimization — should be part of your site development strategy, not an after-thought.

These are some of the major traffic-building strategies you can implement:

Search-engine optimization

When Internet users surf the Web, one of the first places they often start is with the popular search engines and directories such as Yahoo! and AltaVista. To attract the attention of these users, you must ensure that the Web pages for your event are indexed or listed on these search engines and directories.

In some instances, you can pay a modest fee to each of the top search engines to make sure that your site is quickly listed. In addition, you can customize your Web pages so that they are search-engine friendly. By adding keywords that define your industry and formatting your pages to accommodate the preferences of top search engines, you may be able to have your site listed at or near the top of search-result pages. There are a number of specialized software programs that automate the process of optimizing your search-engine positioning. However, with hundreds of millions of pages on the Web, it is no small task to have your Web site appear at the top of a search engine list. Do not rely on search engines alone to attract users to your site.

News release distribution

Many organizations distribute press releases to promote their upcoming events.

TECHNOLOGY TIPS

Delivering a Great Site

- Content is critical — Present information in a clear, comprehensive manner. Site visitors must be able to access basic event information quickly and easily from the home page. Include the event name, location and dates right up front, so that nobody will miss this essential information. Plus, always include a brief description, the benefits of attending and the target audience on your home page as well.
- Straightforward navigation — Site navigation allows visitors to click on buttons or words to visit different sections of a Web site. Keep your site navigation as straightforward as possible, so that users will know how to find the information that is important to them. Highlight the navigation link for your registration form with a different color or distinctive symbol so that site visitors are encouraged to register for your event. And make sure the global navigation for your Web site appears on every page.
- Simple but elegant — Your site should be visually pleasing without relying upon large graphic files or unnecessary bells and whistles. If you use complex graphic images and high-resolution pictures, you will slow down access to your Web site, especially for users who are connecting to your site with slower modems.
- Be browser neutral — When you start the site design process, ensure that your Web site will be compatible with all major browsers. Different Web browsers have different approaches to rendering Web pages; your goal is to make sure that all browsers will function normally when they try to display pages on your Web site.
- Limit end-user technology — As a general rule, stay away from high-end Web technologies that require special browser add-ons for people to access your content. Remember, your goal is to encourage people to attend your events. If your site visitors cannot access your online information, they will become frustrated and leave your Web site.
- Create a secure web — When attendees register online with a credit card, they expect to be connected to a secure Web server. A secure Web server encrypts credit card and personal information so that other parties cannot access this confidential data. Work with your Web developers to ensure that your Web site and databases are safe and cannot be accessed illegally by unauthorized users.

CHECKLIST: MEETING AND CONVENTION WEB SITES

Define the goals and objectives for your Web site

- Increase attendance.

- Generate more press coverage for your events
- Create new revenue opportunities for MGS.

Select features and functionality to meet goals and objectives

- Basic features and functionality
- Home page with introductory information about your upcoming event.
- An agenda that includes time and date information for sessions and activities
- Pages that describe educational offerings including keynote presentations.
- Exhibitor pages so that vendors can learn about the benefits of booking a booth.
- A searchable database of exhibitors so that attendees can find exhibitors.
- A registration page so that attendees can register online
- Hotel and travel information so that delegates can make travel arrangements.
- A press section that provides journalists with quick access to event information.
- A conference reminder email newsletter that offers event updates
- A FAQ page that answers frequently asked questions.
- A contact page with the organizer's name, telephone and email address.
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Remember these key elements

- Provide good-quality, comprehensive, up-to-date information about your event on your Web site. Create a straightforward, global navigation system so that it is easy to find the desired information
- Keep graphics small so that users with slow modems can access Web pages quickly
- Ensure that your Web site is compatible with all Web browsers
- Don't require that your site visitors have the latest technologies or software programs
- Create a secure Web server to protect user credit card information and personal data
- Constantly check your Web site to make sure everything is working properly
- Determine how you will develop your Web site