Developing an Effective Web Strategy

A roadmap to help you plan and prioritize what you need

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ACS Technologies™

Empowering your vision.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Being on the Web is an essential part of doing business in the 21st century (regardless of whether you operate in the public, private, or not-for-profit sector). The big decision for most organizations is how to get there. Efficiency, reliability, and affordability are major considerations best weighed before your Web effort gets underway.

This paper provides a roadmap for planning a Web effort. Along with suggestions for prioritizing objectives so they reflect organizational needs, budgets, and constraints, it addresses key issues such as whether to use in-house or external resources, what to look for in a hosting service, when to consider an Application Service Provider (ASP), and the pros and cons of custom and template-based development strategies.

It also includes a discussion of one of the more important – if overlooked – aspects of Web development: content management.

Content management involves creating, editing, and updating the content (text, images, audio, and video elements) that makes a site attractive to current and potential users.

Content management systems (CMS) provide a workaround for avoiding the Webmaster bottleneck. Many organizations rely on CMS to overcome the challenges of maintaining a vibrant, engaging Web presence. It's likely this technology will play a significant role in your migration online.

The key to an effective Web strategy is determining which CMS will be most efficient, effective, and affordable for your organization. Successful CMS solutions include crucial features (such as a defined editorial process, workflow, distributed communications, and automated placement) for overcoming the challenges of operating in a Web environment.

Reviewing this paper will provide you with essential criteria for making the most appropriate Web choices for your immediate and long-term needs.

GOT A DREAMY WEB STRATEGY?

In the 1989 hit movie "The Field of Dreams," Ray Kinsella (played by Kevin Costner) is compelled to build a professional baseball diamond in his Iowa cornfield. "Build it and they will come," whispers an ethereal voice. Ray complies and legions of lost souls do indeed gravitate to his patch of baseball paradise.

Consider building a Web site for your church, school, ministry or other faith-based organization, and it's likely a subconscious force will start whispering a similar refrain in your ear. "Build it and fundraising will improve." "Build it and membership will take off." "Build it and administrative costs will drop." While all these outcomes are possible, none are guaranteed.

Plan and Prioritize

Creating a dream Web site (and avoiding nightmarish complications) is much more likely if you map out a plan before the first line of HTML code is ever written.

Begin by creating a preliminary list of objectives and then prioritizing them in a way that reflects your organization's needs, budgets, and constraints. Perhaps improving communication with members is your number one issue. Maybe fundraising is a close second, while engaging potential members and automating routine but time-consuming processes are nice-to-do's that you could leave for a later date. (You get the idea.)

To further help with the decision-making process, divide your list into immediate and long-term objectives. It's important to think through your long-term needs at this point so you can avoid unnecessary rework and expense down the road.

After completing your list, circulate it among staff, leaders, and volunteers. This reality check will enable you to validate the project objectives and, just as important, build support for the Web effort among key constituencies.

Vetting your objectives before development work begins puts you in a stronger position to evaluate and select appropriate resources. It also makes it easier to address the budget issues – and constraints – that are integral to any development effort.

Steps to Building a Web Site

Plan and Prioritize. Develop a list of immediate and long-term objectives and secure buy-in from key players.

Identify Resources. Determine whether in-house or external resources or an Application Service Provider should handle the project. Evaluate external vendors carefully before committing.

Consider Design Options. Consider whether you need a custom or semi-custom Web site. A template-based, semi-custom strategy offers an affordable alternative to a more costly custom site.

Decide on Hosting. Evaluate the total cost of hosting your site internally versus outsourcing to a third-party provider. Outsourcing is usually more cost-effective.

Consider CMS. Decide how you plan to manage your Web content. A content management system (CMS) can help you maximize your online potential.

BUILDING YOUR SITE

Identify Resources

Next, decide who will build your Web site. The choices are basically; (1) use in-house resources, or (2) contract with outside consultants or Web development specialists.

While using in-house staff might seem to make the most economic sense, at least one internal study suggests that it can be 12% to 40% more expensive. This is because in-house departments often aren't staffed to undertake serious Web work.

Filling out your roster may entail hiring new programmers and buying additional software tools. Even so, it might take your home team more project hours to complete the work than an outside group that specializes in Web development.

It's also important to consider the impact an in-house strategy might have on your overall operation. Assigning the IT department to Web work may detract from its core mission. Enthusiasm for your new Web site will wane quickly if systems start to crash and routine maintenance falls behind schedule.

If you consider outside resources, you will find a range of options from virtual Web teams to medium-sized Web shops to Application Service Providers (ASPs) with the resources to design, build, and host your site.

One type of operation isn't necessarily better than another. But the choice you make should match your immediate and long-term Web requirements.
When evaluating vendors, ask questions such as:

- Does the firm understand your organization and the community you serve?
- Does the firm have the right skill set to meet your objectives?
- Has the firm deployed sites of similar size and complexity?
- Does the firm have the expertise to create the functionality you need?
- Does the firm have a track record of meeting deadlines and budgets?
- Can the firm's technical approach scale up as your needs change?
- Does the firm rely on open-standards tools and practices?
- How likely is it that the firm will be around in one, five, or ten years?

How to Evaluate Web Vendors

Understanding. Do they know your organization and the community you serve?

Skills and Knowledge. Is the staff technically competent enough to meet your objectives?

Experience and Approach. What's their track record with similar projects, and do they rely on open-standards tools?

Scale Potential. Will their technical solution meet your needs now and in the future?

Consider Design Options

During this process, you should consider whether you need a custom or semi-custom site. A custom site is more or less built from scratch to meet your aesthetic, navigation, and functional requirements. A semi-custom site is based on a predefined Web template. It is semi-custom to the extent that your logo, institutional colors, and other design elements are plugged into predefined areas of the template pages.

The custom approach offers more flexibility, but it can be significantly more expensive to execute. That's because a

custom site is more labor intensive to design and program.

With a semi-custom site, the template serves as the framework for your site. Predefined areas of the template are populated with content (text, graphics, and images). Under some scenarios, you pick the template and use the vendors automated tools to "build" the site. For more complicated sites, the vendor pulls the pieces together and creates the functionality that enables visitors to interact with your organization.

It's important to keep in mind that template-based sites aren't necessarily boring or "cookie cutter" in appearance. Web designers have created libraries of templates that can help you to create an affordable Web presence that looks every bit as sophisticated and professional as a more expensive custom site.

Decide on Hosting

As you continue your decision-making process, you must decide who will host your Web site. Many vendors offer hosting as part of a turnkey service offer.

Some organizations opt to create their own hosting environment. This approach normally involves considerable up-front and long-term costs – and may not provide an environment that is optimally reliable. These costs can easily add up to tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars. Before you decide to host in-house, conduct a detailed cost analysis. Look at not only the equipment acquisition costs but also the long-term costs of maintaining the infrastructure.

In most cases, it is far more economical to outsource hosting to a third-party data center or hosting service. Because these organizations support a number of customers, they can more efficiently manage the expense of providing a Web infrastructure.

Of course, not all hosting services are created equal. Before signing on with a service, it's a good idea to ask a few investigative questions, such as:

- How reliable is your infrastructure? (99.99% is acceptable.)
- Is your infrastructure in a redundant configuration? (It's better if it is.)
- What about backup power? (You want it.)
- How do you access the Internet backbone? (After several hops? Multiple hops are not good.)
- How do you physically secure your facility? (It should be a fortress.)
- What is your cyber security strategy? (You want sophisticated cyber guards.)
- Do you have a NOC (network operations center) and how is it staffed? (A good NOC is staffed 24/7 by operational experts.)
- Who do I call if I have a problem? (You should be able to reach support at any time.)

What to Look for in a Hosting Service

Reliability. It should be up and running 99.99% of the time.

Redundancy. It should have a way to switch to backup equipment (better yet, a backup site) in the event of an emergency.

Access. Direct access to the Internet backbone enhances service.

Security. Physical and cyber security are essential to protect your investment.

Supervision. Onsite staff working 24/7 minimizes problems.

MANAGING YOUR SITE

Decide on Content Management

Before you pick your team consider how you will manage your site once it is built. Most sites need a steady diet of new text, graphics, and images to attract new and repeat visitors.

Traditionally, organizations depend on a Webmaster (volunteer, full-time, or part-time) to post new content. This approach works, but it's not always efficient or reliable.

Organizations find that the Webmaster model leads to a bottleneck in the update process. Because content has to flow through the Webmaster for posting to the site, it's relatively easy for this person's workload to become unmanageable. The situation becomes even more untenable if the site has a lot of dynamic content and the Webmaster is a volunteer or part-time employee.

Consider CMS

It's possible to resolve this issue by including a content management system (CMS) as part of your overall Web strategy. A CMS consists of technology that allows anyone in an organization to create, review, edit, approve, and post Web content.

The most successful CMS solutions include features that have proved crucial to overcoming the challenges of supporting communications in a Web environment. These features include:

- **Defined Editorial Process.** This is a clearly defined system for creating, editing, and approving content. Depending on the size and complexity of the organization, one person may fulfill all roles or roles may be distributed among several individuals. Effective systems allow an administrator to assign content rights to individuals as needed.

- **Workflow.** A good CMS solution includes a comprehensive and consistent system for creating, revising, and deleting content regardless of where it appears on the Web site. Workflow capability enables users to control and follow content at each stage of development. It lets administrators and managers enter the system, locate content items, and quickly determine their status within the posting process.

- **Distributed Communication.** A CMS solution should allow authorized system users to view, modify, and place content items from anywhere. The best solutions let users work from any Internet-connected computer. Administrative information, such as the creation date and creator of a content item, also should be available to site users with appropriate access rights.

- **Automated Placement and Deletion.** A good system allows you to input a command that pulls the content automatically, and that causes new content to appear at preset times.

CMS solutions are available as stand-alone applications and as part of turnkey Web-development packages. As sites become more complex and expensive to maintain, more organizations are viewing this technology as an essential infrastructure investment. If you elect to buy a CMS, make sure it includes the features your organization needs right now and for the foreseeable future.

What Makes a Good Content Management System

Defined Editorial Process. CMS works best when it includes a defined system for creating, editing, and approving content.

Workflow. A good solution includes a system for creating, revising, and deleting content anywhere on your Web site.

Distributed Communication. A good system allows authorized users to work with content from anywhere.

Automated Placement and Deletion. An efficient CMS automatically handles content updates without requiring human intervention.

SUMMARY

It's critical to solicit input on needs and missions from key decision makers before starting the development process. After these objectives are nailed down, consider your options for carrying out the development process.

Before you opt for in-house resources or outside Web developers, make sure your choice makes fiscal and operational sense for your organization. If you decide to outsource, research potential vendors by asking a series of investigational questions.

During this process, decide whether you need a custom or semi-custom Web site. Semi-custom sites are more affordable (typically) but may impose limits on look, feel, and functionality.

Don't overlook two key issues: hosting and content management. Developing your own infrastructure can be expensive, but hosting services provide an affordable way to manage cost while ensuring reliability. Before selecting a hosting service, ask lots of questions about the facility and its staff.

As you consider how to manage your Web site, look for ways to avoid the Webmaster bottleneck. Many organizations decide to use a content management system (CMS) to overcome the challenges of maintaining a vibrant, engaging Web presence. It's likely this technology will play a significant role in supporting your migration online.

It's our hope that reading "Developing an Effective Web Strategy" has provided you with some critical insight into planning and prioritizing what you need online. Advancing your church, school or other faith-based organization with the right technology is paramount. There is much the Web can offer to benefit your organization in fulfillment of its mission. We encourage you to ontinue your pursuit of an effective Web strategy.

ABOUT ACS TECHNOLOGIES

For 25 years, ACS Technologies has developed outstanding software products and services specifically for faith-based organizations.

In serving over 12,000 clients, we focus on the special needs you address every day. And we design all of our products to work together so you enjoy increased efficiency and reduced redundancies. Our solutions are focused to empower our client partners with specially designed software solutions.

That commitment is one reason 7,000 of our clients have been with us for more than 5 years (and a third of those go back over 10 years). ACS Technologies is an integral member of our clients' operations. Because of this, ACS Technologies continues to receive notable recognition for its outstanding dedication to and relationship with its clients.

Provider of the Extend Platform

Some time ago we recognized that our church, school, and ministry clients needed an affordable way to harness the Web for communication, evangelism, fundraising, and more.

The result was the ACS Extend Platform, an intuitive suite of tools for developing, managing, publishing, and syndicating Web content.

Using our in-depth knowledge of organizations like yours, we created a solution that meets your immediate needs while providing growth pathways into the future.

The Extend Platform is a secure, reliable content management platform for faith-based nonprofit schools, churches, and other organizations. It includes powerful tools for managing content, increasing membership, services, and revenues, and even building networks of affiliated sites.

And it includes four service levels: Site Extend, Network Extend, Community Extend, and Custom Extend. The Extend Platform allows anyone (even non-technical computer users) to build a professional looking Web site – or a community of hundreds of affiliated sites – quickly and affordably. Customizable layout tools and templates allow you to develop Web pages and create, review, edit, approve, and post content.

Powerful Web Tools

The Extend Platform enables you to build a professional looking, affordable site in minutes or hours (not days or weeks). Essentially, this means you can secure the flexibility and functionality of a world-class site without a world-class investment in time or budgets.

We've been able to make the Extend Platform affordable by eliminating the need for special software, complex licensing agreements, and expensive hardware – and by placing the entire service on our own secure infrastructure.

Superior Content Management

Our standard content management tools are browser-based and secure. This means you can access them from anywhere the Internet reaches. Our standard components include:

- **Content Creator.** Lets users create and format content.
- **Content Manager**. Holds and displays all content items currently pending approval. Provides users with access to the editing and approval process.
- **Site Editor.** Ensures control of your Web site content. Lets you define editing and updating privileges for administrators and layout publishers.
- **Publications Manager.** Enables users to update published content automatically.
- **Workflow.** Lets you define distinct editorial process roles for managing the flow of information.

- **Media Manager.** Enables users to upload, manage, and share images.
- **Administration Tools.** Gives you the power to manage and update your own Web site.
- **Reports.** Keeps you up-to-date on site performance.

The Extend Architecture

The ACS Extend Platform is built on industry standards including SQL, XML, and XSLT for content markup and display, and Java and the J2EE open standard for the underlying code. The system is scalable (that is, it can grow with your organization) and offers many ways to integrate new and legacy data. For example, it supports the SOAP interface standard. Use of open standards throughout the system ensures maximum flexibility and adaptability.

The platform uses IBM Websphere at the Application Server tier. The database tier operates on high-end, high-performance databases. Both Oracle and Microsoft SQL Server databases are supported.

The architecture supports text-based browsers as well as most graphics-based browsers, PDA/Wireless devices, and Western European and other languages. ACS Technologies has endeavored to provide a universal platform for the distribution of your message to the world.

To learn more about ACS Technologies, the Extend Platform, and our approach to Web development, call 1-800-736-7425, email us at **extend@acstechnologies.com**, or visit **www.extendplatform.com**.