

Make Your Website Work for You

by Kathryn Brewer

By now, nearly every church and school has a website. It's considered a necessity, but there is more to a website than an electronic address and online brochure. Your website can provide some powerful services if you have the right tools and expectations.

A Marketing Tool

First and foremost, your website is a face to your place. This is one of those places where people do judge the book by its cover. It's vital that your website reflect the quality that is present in your church and school. Like a storefront, people stop by and see what you have to offer. If your website is visually attractive, easy to navigate, and current with relevant photos, it will be working hard to give your church and school an excellent first impression of the quality of your programs. Conversely, a website that is old and outdated may be doing your marketing attempts more harm than good.

Nearly all major purchasing decisions are now made with some online research. Parents with young children will do part of their research for a school online, as will potential teachers considering a call, and new neighbors looking for a church home. You are in competition with every other school and church in your area for students, teachers, and members. Take the time to make a careful assessment of what websites of other institutions in your area look like and offer their visitors. How does your online presence compare? What kind of information is offered? People expect to be able to get helpful, instant, correct information about your institution online. High quality photos, a small smattering of statistics, genuine invitations to worship, and date, time, and place information for visitors are expected. You should provide the information they need upfront on the home page. Don't make them search for it.

If your school is part of your church, it's probably the most vital and largest mission your church supports. Your church and school website should reflect the importance of your school ministry with a large presence on your website's home page. A link to your school from a tab that is on the far-right side of the screen does not communicate the importance of this mission to your visitors.

If your website is visually attractive, easy to navigate, and current, it will be working hard to give an excellent first impression.



Rather, the electronic entryway to the school should be roughly equivalent to that of the church. Be bold! You could even consider buying a separate web address for the school, which would direct visitors to the appropriate place within the website.

Remember the basic Ws of informational journalism: who, where, when, what, why and how. Don't neglect "why" — your mission and ministry is why you are at work in the world.

Keep your site current

Once you have your presence online, you have created the equivalent of an online brochure. But the beauty of a website is its immediacy — your information needs to be current. Your events calendar is constantly changing. Staff additions and subtractions require revisions. Your community wants to see the latest news, sports scores, and event photos. Keeping a large website for a complex organization thoroughly updated at all times could be full-time job.

A content management system ideally provides editing tools for the website's content to a user who does not write html or other code. The system can be designed to provide specific roles to specific groups of staff members to update only the information that is



A well-planned content management system allows the ability to customize editing tools and capabilities.

Reprinted from



Shaping
the Future

LEA's members online magazine

pertinent to their job function. For instance, a relatively technically savvy webmaster would control the more complex aspects of the site, but additional staff members could make updates to specific parts of the website. Classroom teachers can have the ability to change the information that creates their own classroom page. Their updates can be as simple as loading new photos, changing weekly news, and updating homework assignments.

The benefit of a content management system (CMS) is that all content is stored in a database. The data includes everything from article copy, photos, and a sermon archive to calendar data, membership data, and classroom homework assignments.

A well-planned content management system allows the ability to customize editing tools and capabilities for people with varying levels of skills and for those who have oversight of specific areas of the website. This prevents a casual user from making changes to important pages and yet provides relief for the primary website administrator by allowing individuals to edit areas they know best. While a content management system would prevent a general user from making inherent design changes, webmasters are still able to make design changes and update all content that changes over time.

Content management systems

Content management systems come in two basic “flavors:” proprietary and open-source.

Proprietary systems are custom designed to work with a specific vendor. The license to use the proprietary system usually requires a monthly user fee, along with hosting fees. Often email addresses, domain registrations, and maintenance agreements are part of the package deal. Websites are designed and structured for the proprietary software. While these systems used to be the most common, they are far less flexible than open-source systems. If you change servers, or the service providers go out of business or become difficult to work with, you are unlikely to be able to move your website to another provider. More importantly, the proprietary systems may not be able to keep up with technology as it changes. Integrating third-party software like Fast Direct or ACS Technologies often requires high-level and expensive programming by your provider.

Open-source systems are platform based. The software that drives the system is available to anyone, and once configured it sits on your hosting server. Any site updates and changes are stored in your database on your server. While the server requirements can be complex, there are many, many qualified providers who can host your system, and many qualified programmer and website designers who can service the site. Open-source can



The website can be designed and programmed to control the way data is presented,

mean “free,” but configuring the site’s structure to meet your needs, integrating your organization’s software, and designing a custom look often need professional help.

The major open-source content management systems are WordPress, Joomla, and Drupal. **WordPress** was initially designed as blogging software, but is frequently used to power a complete website. The learning curve for WordPress design and configuration is lower than other systems, but nearly any add-on, template, or widget that provides additional functionality has a cost associated with it. WordPress data management is less readily available and flexible. **Drupal** is not for the faint of heart. It has a high learning curve, but the rewards are a nearly endless stream of available plug-in “modules” to perform a wide range of functions and software integration that are all truly free, although someone who understands the system will need to configure them. The result is an impressive range of options to build a powerful website. **Joomla** falls in the middle, with an easier learning curve than Drupal, more complex abilities than WordPress, and far fewer professionals working with it than either. Joomla has very specific programming rules that cannot be broken, making it less flexible but easier to maintain.

Make your website work harder for you

There are many ways a website can provide access to information for both exterior and internal audiences. The website can be designed and programmed to control the way data is presented and who can see and update it. While the investment can be substantial, the benefit is a strong partner in your church and school ministry.

Let’s take a look at a couple of ways a powerful website can work even harder than you do:

Mission Impossible?

Imagine a congregational directory completely updated and correct at all times, with no staff time invested to accomplish this. Is that even possible? Yes! Each congregation member or family unit creates a username and password. With this, they have online access to update contact information, family photos, student college

addresses, phone numbers and perhaps other data. The information is stored in a database. Select information can be published on the website, with no additional work by the webmaster. Members can choose which elements of their profile they allow to be made public. Members can only edit their information, whereas administrators can edit anyone's information. The system can be configured so that the changes need to be approved before being made public, a role which could be a staff member or a volunteer within the congregation.

It's nearly automatic, because members aren't changing the web page, they are changing the data for the web page, and only have access to their own data. Now your website is working overtime. Not only can congregation members and school families change information that appears on the website, they are also updating your mailing list, maintaining your alumni list, and pledging online. They could access their pledge information, check their YTD contributions, and donate online. Your website has now contributed to an updated congregational and school directory, without much staff involvement.

Traffic Cop

Your building is a busy place. Your school has sports programs, field trips, music concerts, fundraising events, academic calendar dates, and tuition deadlines. Your church schedules Sunday school and adult education programs, music ministry concert series, Vacation Bible School, scouting programs, older adult programs and Bible study groups. Add to that: building maintenance needs, worship leadership rotations, public programming like Alcoholics Anonymous, and private weddings. If you have more than one calendar to keep this all straight, you are asking for a scheduling nightmare. How can your website help?

Your website can contribute to an updated congregational and school directory.



HELPFUL DEFINITIONS

URL (Uniform Resource Locator): The readable address of a web page, in contrast to your IP address which is your real address.

IP (Internet Protocol) address: A series of numbers that provides your address to the world. This is your real address.

Domain: A name for your domain that is more memorable and informative than the IP set of numbers. While the IP address is useful immediately, a domain name needs to be "propagated" to the internet system before it becomes findable. You can think of the IP address as a location's GPS coordinates, and the domain is your street address.

DNS (Domain name server): A computer at your internet provider's data center which translates the URL (a humanly readable name) to the IP address (which is a series of numbers, your real address).

Server: This is the storehouse for your data and website. It is at a remote location and often consists of many secure and very large computers at multiple sites to insure that your information is always "up," online and accessible. Using our street address metaphor, this is your mail carrier.

Host: Like a dinner table host, the host has the tools, knowledge and software available to make your website function. You pay a monthly or yearly fee for hosting. Extending our metaphor, you could think of the host as your post office.

Content management system: A website development platform that stores the majority of the site information in a database, which provides the ability for authenticated users to maintain, add and update data, which may include photos, content, and articles. The best of these require no knowledge of html coding for content editors.

UI (user interface): The editing tools available to those with permission to update content; the navigation tabs and links for general visitors that help them move around your site and get requested information quickly.

Open source: Software or systems that are available free as a download. A good example of open source software is the Firefox browser, which is free and is updated whenever there is enough improvement to warrant an update. A large number of contributors keep the software updated and synchronized with current computing resources and trends. (You may wonder why people do this for free, but that is another article.)

Proprietary: Owned by an organization, likely licensed to your organization for use in your website. Proprietary systems often include ongoing monthly fees for the use of the system in your website. Unlike open source solutions, proprietary developers make system improvements when called upon to do so and charge market rates for the work.

Drupal, WordPress, Joomla: These are the three most popular open source content management systems. These vary in their ease of use, ease of website set up, costs for added functions, number of users (popularity), and how much complexity can be built with the system.

Build a calendar that allows visitors to choose the information they need to see. Each event is entered as spreadsheet data by whichever staff is responsible for the event. The data includes dates and times, room needs or a room assignment, and room set-up needs. The data from the spreadsheet is selectively published to the website. Website visitors can then select the kinds of calendar information they are looking for. School families can select views for the school. A visitor can look for Bible study opportunities. Congregation members can find out about adult education opportunities. Building staff can keep track of room and equipment use. Calendars can be viewed by week, weekend, month, or year, depending on the viewers needs and preferences.

The website can provide Google-based reminders about field trips, committee meetings, and sport events directly

Build a calendar that allows visitors to choose the information they need to see.



from your website to those signed on to follow. You can even add categories for those who need access to the information. The building maintenance and organ tuning schedule doesn't need to

be public information. But the authorized person given access to that part of the calendar can have accurate information online.

And like magic, your calendar is useful to many categories of people looking for very specific events — with minimal staff oversight.

Classroom Pages

Each week teachers used to send home a newsletter with important dates, homework assignments, contact information and maybe a classroom photo. How many of those got lost or were unavailable when needed? Using the website, each teacher can create their own classroom page available only to those with the correct login credentials. Teachers can refine the design and layout of the page as much as they desire, depending on their own interest level and skills. It can be as simple as updating the content and replacing a photo. From an administrative point of view, each teacher has access to only their classroom's page, and each parent only has access to the newsletters for their children's classrooms. All the newsletters would be on your website, so the basic design would reflect your school's branding and image.

Using this same concept, lay leaders within the church

Using the website, each teacher can create their own classroom page.



can also create ministry pages and keep them updated for their specific committee and ministry partners.

Students can use the classroom page to access links to upload Moodle assignments, remind them of their passwords for online textbooks, and link directly to your online resource center for student research. Parents can access the online grading system through the classroom page and have direct contact links to teachers.

Easy Giving

Another place where your website can reap immediate rewards is in eCommerce. If you are accepting credit cards for payments already, putting the software in place to allow purchases online is a gentle next step. Contributions, donations, tuition payments and pledges can be made online. Parents can check their tuition balance, pay for school lunches, and buy spirit-wear online. Members can also make contributions online and monitor their pledge. There is a long history of making it as easy as possible for people to part with their financial resources, and the website is your next best friend.

Can my website do all that? Absolutely.

Creative thinking can make your website investment serve you well for many years. Don't get overwhelmed with the idea of updating your website, and don't be content with a mediocre website that doesn't represent your organization or isn't working hard for you. Make the investment and watch the returns! While there are many people who design websites, not all have the ability to creatively think about how to use your data to run the website and have the programming chops to make that happen in a user-friendly way. Look for a team of website professionals with skills in visual and user-interface design as well as website-based programming skills. Careful investment in a well thoughtout website will provide a long-term, online presence tool that will work as hard as the rest of your staff.

Kathryn Brewer is the long-time art director for ShapingtheFuture and owner of Brewer Communications, Inc., which provides website design and development as well as marketing communications design.