

Web Site Updating: A Communications Initiative

Contributed by the Boston Society of Architects, AIA California Council, and AIA Philadelphia
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SUMMARY

A successful component Web site must contain timely information and be easy to use. Most AIA components that have maintained their own Web sites for several years find that success is an evolutionary process. A Web site must not only present an appealing, professional image to members and the public; it must also keep pace with the demands of members while attracting and assisting newcomers looking for information. The Boston Society of Architects, AIA California Council, and AIA Philadelphia each have Web sites that meet all of these objectives. Their strategies can make your component's Web site more successful, too.

CONDUCTING RESEARCH, IDENTIFYING NEEDS

Recognizing a need for change is the first step to successful Web-site redesign. When AIA California Council's site grew to more than 600 pages, the component realized it was time for a change. The site lacked consistent page layouts, images, headers, and style. It also lacked a search mechanism, and most of the pages were outdated. Clearly, the site was due for a redesign, but it was so large that the component barely knew where to begin. To solve this problem, AIA California Council developed a communications task force to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the Web site.

Gathering user statistics can provide vital information about the effectiveness of a site. Hiring a media research firm to conduct the evaluation is one option, but AIA California Council conducted its own research instead, using an online statistics tool. Many such tools are available for purchase on the Internet and can be customized to report on chosen variables.

The component gathered information on

- Hits to the site—totals and averages
- Page views—impressions, document views, and averages

- Visitor sessions—session lengths, international visits, and domestic visits
- Visitors—single visits and repeat visitors
- Most requested pages—views, visitor sessions, and average viewing times

The statistics allowed the component to determine which sections of its Web site were worth updating and which could be eliminated. They also provided insight into how to better develop the site to maximize visitor traffic and provide efficient service. With this background knowledge, the component developed a clear path to redeveloping its Web site.

DEVELOPING AN RFP

When the Boston Society of Architects (BSA) evaluated its Web site, it organized focus groups of members and held individual discussions with committee chairs and other stakeholders to gather ideas for improving the site. The component also researched Web-based technology and analyzed the success of different types of commercial and association-related Internet solutions.

BSA's next step was to draft a comprehensive request for proposal (RFP) for Web design and technology solutions. The RFP established the following objectives:

- Use technology to create a dynamic user experience
- Use technology to allow member firms to maintain their online firm profiles
- Create an easily updatable site with an administrator-friendly user interface
- Create a navigation system that allows a wide range of individuals easy and intuitive access to the information they need
- Create a visually appealing site that would attract and maintain the attention of visitors
- Provide e-commerce solutions for popular online listing services

- Supplement the resources of a small staff by enabling visitors 24/7 access to information, forms, documents, publications, and referrals

The RFP also outlined the history of BSA, described the target audience, and set guidelines for submitting a proposal. The component distributed the RFP to custom design and technology firms. After evaluating the proposals, checking references, and conducting face-to-face meetings, the component chose a technology firm that could best meet all of the Web-site redesign objectives.

OFFERING INTERESTING FEATURES

AIA Philadelphia's Web-site redesign demonstrated that well-organized features can make a Web site more interesting and user-friendly. The component worked with its Web-site consultants to create a site that could be a model for other AIA components around the country. The main features of the site include the following:

An architect finder that gives viewers a list of member firms, their addresses and phone numbers, and links to an informational profile of each firm. AIA Philadelphia's architect finder also links to AIA Access, allowing viewers to search by type of project for a list of firms with expertise in a particular type of work.

Online profiles of each member firm provide a page of information for each member firm, including size of staff, areas of expertise, names of staff, special services, examples of projects, and awards received by the firm. The firm listings and profiles were established as a free benefit of membership.

A professional services finder helps architects and others locate professionals offering services related to the building industry, such as engineers and contractors. The finder lists AIA Philadelphia's affiliate members, categorized by type of business. Many affiliate members have paid a small extra fee to have an online company profile that links from the company's name in the list or links to its own Web site. This fee for affiliates helps the chapter to offset some of the costs of the Web site's maintenance.

The online AIA bookstore offers online shopping at Philadelphia's AIA bookstore and design center. This section of the site provides photos and descriptions of books, gifts, and AIA documents and offers online purchasing. This section of the site has also contributed to increased sales at the store and has eased the process of buying books for customers with limited access to the store.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 21.01.01 Effective AIA Component Web Sites
- 22.07.05 Creating an Effective Component Communications Plan
- 21.01.04 Colorado Component Overhauls Communications

For More Information

See also "Marketing Design Services with the Internet" by Elena Marcheso Moreno, *The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice Update 2005*, page 27. The *Update* can be ordered from the AIA

Bookstore by calling 800-242-3837 (option 4) or by sending e-mail to bookstore@aia.org.



Feedback

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Key Terms

- Leadership
- Associations
- Design associations
- The American Institute of Architects
- AIA state and local components
- Communications
- Web sites