



Creating and Managing a Municipal Website

One of the services that provided great opportunity for enhanced communication within towns, and greater community resilience was the creation of municipal websites. Through the Vermont Digital Economy Project and its partner organization, the Snelling Center for Government, we created or updated 26 municipal websites for towns across Vermont. Although our project is concluded, we wanted to share the process that we used to create these municipal websites with anyone who is interested. They are below.

A good starting point for this learning is our other article, called [5 Tips for Creating a Successful Municipal Website](#).

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The Value of Municipal Websites

Municipal websites are valuable for a number of reasons:

Communication: To begin with, these sites are a powerful tool for towns to communicate with their citizens, and they allow site visitors to get quick answers to easy questions.

Participation: In addition, these websites expand opportunities for citizens to participate in and be informed by local government. In many smaller towns, town offices are only open at certain times of day, which may be inconvenient for many of those towns' residents. By offering more information online, a town is offering an opportunity for more of its residents to be well informed, and to participate in the process of keeping the community running smoothly.

Access: As more and more people become accustomed to finding the information they need online, municipal website can enable towns to communicate with visitors and residents in a way they are accustomed to.

Economic Development: Finally, these websites offer towns the opportunity to showcase their communities. A well-constructed municipal website is often the first result on a search engine when somebody searches for the name of that town, so if that site has information for residents and visitors alike, it can be a true driver of economic development.

1. Where Does Your Website Currently Stand?

When a town decides it is time to either update or create a new website, the most important first step is to look at what it already has, and to understand what it needs. A town needs to understand who is using its current site, why, and what information users are expecting to find on the site. If a town has no site, then it needs to understand what questions its citizens ask the most frequently.

Usage

If there is already a website, look at the data that it has been collecting. The best scenario is if the site is already using Google Analytics, which can be used to look at a variety of important data, such as where visitors come from, what they're looking at, and how long they stay. Most web hosting services do provide some data on web usage, though, and it is important to look at whatever data is available, to determine who the site's visitors are, and why they are visiting.

Content

Whether there is already a site in use or not, it is possible to gain some understanding of what types of content users are most interested in. You can find this information by looking at what pages are visited the most, or looking at the history of searches that users have done through the site's search-bar, if it has one. If there is no site, think about what forms are requested most frequently from the town offices, or what questions are brought up by people in conversation, or on social media platforms like Front Porch Forum.

Updates

Finally, to analyze a site, you must also ask yourself how it is currently being run. Is this process of keeping up the site done in-house, and if so, by whom? A mark of a successful municipal website is one that can be managed internally, without resorting to (or paying) somebody outside of the town itself. It is also helpful, when looking at a current site, to think about structure, age, and aesthetics. What impression does the site currently



give to people looking up the town to perhaps visit it? Can community members find information easily? How frequently is it updated? Answering these questions will help give a better sense of what will be needed in the future to maintain a new, well-managed, usable, and up-to-date site.

2. Soliciting feedback from the community

A town's municipal government is there to serve the best interest of the town, and thus of its community members. In order to do so, it is important to solicit feedback from a town's citizens, when putting together a new site.

The Snelling Center for Government conducted a Community Discussion around the website in many of the towns they served. Through this process they invited residents to come participate in a facilitated discussion about their community. They made sure to keep the focus positive, to celebrate what was working, and asked what folks thought would be useful on the sites. This was important for a couple of reasons:

1. Municipal websites should exist to inform and serve citizens. If sites do not have relevant or useful information to the site's visitors, they won't be adopted by the community. Adoption matters, especially in emergency settings.
2. Conversation can derive information that can be used in the development of the websites. In the towns where the Snelling Center conducted these meetings, residents shared information that wouldn't have been gained from talking with one person in town. Thus, this meeting prevents site development work from being done in silo, and allows the sites to truly reflect the communities they are representing.

Read examples of how the community helped to give great insight into the municipal website in [Mendon](#) and [Wilmington](#).

3. Mapping out content

Based on analytics data and feedback, work to create a site-map and to prioritize content. This content should be organized under heading and sub-headings, which will then become the menus and navigational structure of the website. [Click here for an article on the approach one library took to organize its content.](#)

4. Designing and Building the Website

Choosing a Content Management System (CMS)

A Content Management System is the platform that enables a website administrator to add new content and to update the website when appropriate. While it is always helpful to know basic HTML and CSS to make the site function, many CMSs do not require that skill, and instead offer easy-to-use, What You See is What You Get (WYSIWYG) editors for adding content.

Here is a good definition of a content management system, from <http://www.joomla.org/about-joomla.html>:

“A content management system is software that keeps track of every piece of content on your Web site, much like your local public library keeps track of books and stores them. Content can be simple text, photos, music, video, documents, or just about anything you can think of.”

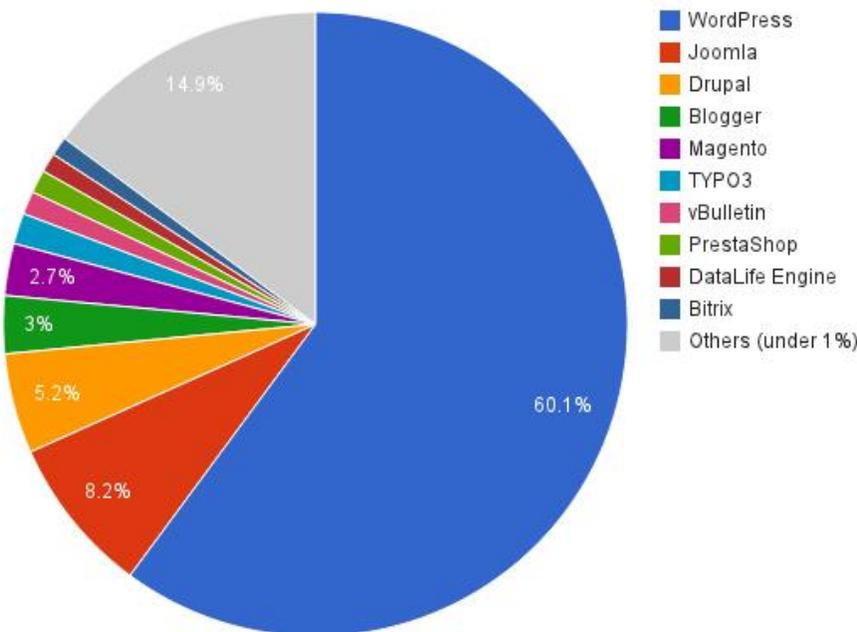


While many CMSs are proprietary, some of the most popular systems are open-source, meaning they are free to use, and develop. Usually, this means there is also a vibrant community dedicated to building and improving that system, of whom you can ask questions. Proprietary CMSs, on the other hand, often cost an annual fee, and are frequently less flexible. However, they do have the advantage of usually coming with a help line to call and receive answers.

Below is a chart of the Content Management Systems being used across the internet as of 2014. We strongly suggest using a CMS that has a large user base, because it means there are a large number of people invested in keeping it updated, free of bugs, and running smoothly. It also means there is a larger community of people who have probably run into whatever questions you might have already, and how know how to solve them.

For the websites we built, therefore, we used WordPress.

Market Share Trends Web Content Management Systems



Data collected by W3Tech.com / Last update: July 1, 2014

Building for Web and Mobile Devices

A site should be built with more than just computers in mind. The current web browsing landscape is rapidly changing: By 2015, more Americans will access the Internet via mobile devices than desktop PCs. (Source: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/egov/digital-government/digital-government.html>), and in 2011, global smartphone shipments exceeded personal computer shipments for the first time in history. (Source: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/egov/digital-government/digital-government.html>). A successful website, therefore, must look good on a desktop, laptop, tablet, and smart phone, across a variety of different web browsers. In other words, new sites should be designed to be responsive.



Basic Usability and User Experience

No matter what the content on a website, if a user cannot find the information he or she needs in a manner that is simple, clear, and easily navigable, then the website is not successful. This is what usability refers to: ensuring that the information a user is looking for is easy to access and that the site is simple to use.

Usability also refers to ADA compliance. As a municipal website, it is doubly important that the site be easy to navigate and ADA compliant. You can find a list of compliance standards for the state of Vermont here:

<http://www.vermont.gov/portal/policies/accessibility.php>

User experience, on the other hand, focuses on the overall experience the user had on the website. Perhaps it was easy for her to find the information she wanted, but she came away feeling unhappy about the experience. Think about walking into a dim, dirty store. You may be able to find the toothpaste you were looking for, but the experience could have been better. A website should have both good usability and a good User Experience.

Here is a helpful article explaining these two terms: <http://www.uie.com/brainsparks/2007/03/16/the-difference-between-usability-and-user-experience/>

You can find some great information on usability and User Experience, particularly as it relates to government sites, here: <https://www.digitalgov.gov/2014/11/07/welcome-to-user-experience-month/>

There is also a usability starter kit, with great resources, here: <http://www.digitalgov.gov/resources/digitalgov-user-experience-program/digitalgov-user-experience-program-usability-starter-kit/>

Other Considerations

- **Community Television / Public Access Station Partnerships:** Some towns have created partnerships with their Community Access station to video meetings, a link to which is then posted on the website. This expands opportunities for citizens to participate in government, and promotes transparency. For example, the [Town of St. Albans](#) posts a link on their website's front page to their [selectboard videos](#) in addition to [the minutes](#).
- **Information for non-residents:** While residents do access municipal websites for information, the majority of the site traffic we found when we looked at municipal website's analytics was coming from other geographic locations. For example, in Halifax, the town's top 7 visitor locations were as follows: 1. Halifax (7.5%) 2. Burlington 3. Brattleboro 4. Montpelier 5. Manchester 6. Amherst 7. New York (1.7%). There is therefore an enormous opportunity to improve visitor engagement on these sites even without becoming a tourism site. For example, you may consider offering information about what it's like to live in a town, adding links to area Chambers, making sure there are photos of the area, and listing or linking to local events.

5. Creating a process for continued updates

Planning: Criteria For Success

In order to keep the site up to date and successful after its launch, it is important to have a plan in place before the site is launched. A town should be able to answer the following points before the site is built and before any requests are made to have a volunteer/vendor create a website:

1. Who has final decision making authority the website and budget?



2. Who will manage the site once it has launched?
3. List each person's Roles/Responsibilities
4. Have a privacy and linking policy in place on the website.

Internal Management

Below is a very basic example from a Digital Economy Project Town of a clear document whose purpose is to clearly identify Roles & Responsibilities of each website user. When creating your own document for your site, make sure the selectboard, Town Clerk and other officials understand who does what for continuity of operations, especially in an emergency and for standard business:

Administrators: Jane Doe and John Smith

Task: Upload Agendas (SB, PC, DRB). Upload Minutes (SB, PC, DRB)

- **Who:** Jane Doe
- **When:** Minutes will be uploaded within five days of the meeting. Agendas will be posted 48 prior to a regularly scheduled meeting, and special meetings will be posted 24 hours in advance.

Task: Emergency Information

- **Who:** Jane Doe
- **When:** In and emergency!

Task: Keep News and Announcements Current and Update Announcements Box

- **Who:** John Smith
- **When:** News and Announcements will be updated weekly, on Tuesdays.

Additional Resources

- [Stories about Municipal Websites](#): read about the experiences that towns had with the process we described.
- [5 Tips for Creating a Successful Municipal Website](#): five suggestions to ensure that your town's new municipal website is dynamic, usable, and up-to-date.
- [GovLoop](#): A website for staying in touch with a community of government workers, with articles that address topics from one's online presence to office management.
- [DigitalGov](#): A great resource on effectively bringing government online.
- [vermontbroadband.org](#): The Vermont Digital Economy Project's Predecessor, e-Vermont, also worked with the Snelling Center for Government on Municipal websites, and created a [website](#) with a repository of information for officials and citizens who want to build a web presence for their town or make improvements to existing online information. The resources below were created in 2012 and have not been updated, but the majority of the information is still relevant and helpful:



- Check out the [Plans and Policies](#) section for examples of strategic plans, website policies and web manager job descriptions and written by municipal officers, along with a sample RFP for website work and questions to ask before hiring a vendor to do Web-related work.
- Search the [Resource Library](#) for links to topics related to website and online application management.
- Look through a [town website template](#) filled with examples of useful content that encourages transparency and openness in local government.
- Read the [e-Gov Blog](#) section for tips on optimizing search for town websites, municipal records retention on the Web and registering a town website for a .vt.gov domain name.