

EFFECTIVE WEB CONTENT

"A web site is not a newsletter"

A computer monitor is different in many ways from printed material. The type can be difficult to read because it is displayed differently depending on the computer screen, operating system and the visitors' resolution settings. Sentences can fill the entire width of the monitor and then some, thus being too wide for the screen setting.

A website is not an 8 1/2 x 11 piece of paper, a book or a newsletter. Printed documents are readily accessible. With printed material, one scans down the discreet print format, jumps to headings and paragraphs, turn pages and so forth. Our eyes have been trained to view paper as a medium. Website design should take this into account.

Websites have some advantages over printed material. Sites can be animated, contain images and text links and can be quickly changed and updated with little effort or cost. Sites can also be customized to each user by using JavaScript.

Several aspects of a website must work together to be considered effective. Content, presentation, technical construction and navigation are all important. The following discusses each aspect and offers tips.

CONTENT

Determine what you want to present and to whom the information is intended. Club site visitors may be potential swimmers and club members. LMSC site visitors may be club reps, LMSC members and potential swimmers. Be sure your content is geared to all visitors of the site.

Keep the information on the site up-to-date. Be sure practice times are correct and current. Delete outdated meet and social announcements. The entire site loses credibility if something is incorrect or blatantly outdated.

- Put important things for visitors prominently on the first page. Many sites tend to give the impression to visitors that Masters swimming is only about competition and records, by emphasizing these things on the first page.
- Invite feedback from your readers with a "mail to" link for comments, suggestions or questions to enhance the effectiveness of the website. Worthless responses can be ignored (don't respond to or waste your time on).
- Include information related only to the club or LMSC. Do not include local business links, time and temperature, or advertisements. Eliminate information and items that detract from the message, no matter how clever it is.
- Detailed information and large articles should be accessible through links for printing rather than expecting someone to read it all online.

- Run spell check and have someone else proofread all content.
- Submit the site to search engines and directories (Google, AOL, MSN, DMOZ) and local websites (sports and newspaper).
- Leverage content from the USMS website. Link to general information about masters' swimming, fitness articles, and training information. Tailor information for your LMSC or club by using filters available on various USMS web pages. Some examples of specific information that can be linked to are:
 - "Calendar of Events" for Northwest zone: <http://www.usms.org/comp/calendar.php - NORTHWEST>
 - "Top Ten" summary sorted by LMSC: <http://www.usms.org/comp/tt/toptenlmscsummary.php>
 - "All Americans" from the South Carolina LMSC:
<http://www.usms.org/comp/aa/aalist.php?CourseType=&Year=&Sex=&ZoneID=&LMSCID=55&ClubAbbr=>
 - "All Stars" from the Colorado LMSC:
<http://www.usms.org/comp/as/aslist.php?CourseType=&Year=&Sex=&ZoneID=&LMSCID=32&ClubAbbr=>
 - "Places to Swim" in the Pacific Northwest LMSC:
<http://www.usms.org/placswim/placswimform.php?LMSCID=36>
- Suggested content of interest to potential swimmers visiting site:
 - description of the club or LMSC and what it does
 - workout times and locations with directions
 - costs for joining and attending workouts and how to pay
 - contact names with email addresses and/or phone numbers
 - how to join or attend the first workout
 - membership application and directions on where/how to turn it in
 - calendar of events
 - list of member benefits
- Suggested content for club members:
 - welcome information for new swimmers
 - description of swimming terms and rules
 - list of officers and coaches with contact information
 - calendar of events (meets, fitness events, social events)
 - swimming articles and swimming resources or links to such
 - team records
 - photo album
 - club newsletter
 - workouts

PRESENTATION

The presentation and organization of a site can keep people interested or can turn people away.

Presentation includes page layout, arrangement, color and use of graphics. If the site is not visually appealing or is difficult to grasp, visitors will not stick around.

- Do not use a screen full of text. Text-heavy pages can read like Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Lengthy text requires the reader to persevere to get to the good parts. This causes eyes to tire before getting "to the point" of the information. Include empty space on the screen to give the eyes a place to rest. If a page must be text heavy, enable easy printing of the material to be read. It has been said that reading the Web is 25% slower than reading printed matter.
- Use images wisely and sparingly. Large graphics take a long time to download and can obscure the message. Graphics that blink or bounce across the screen distract the reader. Banners (advertisements), which have nothing to do with the site's content can, overwhelm or obscure the message.
- Consider a "bottom down" approach to writing, with the conclusion or summary on top. Visitors want to know immediately if the page is relevant to their needs.
- Simple construction of thought is best. Limit one idea to a group of words in a sentence, page or paragraph.
- Avoid technical terminology, unless the writer clearly and intentionally has a purpose in mind and definitions are available.
- Each page should be consistent in design and appear as if they belong together, e.g., the design from page to page should be the same.
- Use a readable font size and color against an appropriate background image or color.
- Use color carefully. Colors should have sufficient contrast to ensure readability.
- Use images to help give visual interest to the site but don't use too many. Graphics can be used reinforce a concept or text, enhance text, highlight text or replace text.
- Underlines are an Internet standard way to indicate links. Avoid using underlines on text that are not links. Highlight text using bold formatting, a different color or larger font.

TECHNICAL CONSTRUCTION

The appearance of a site varies because visitors have different browsers, computer systems and computer screens. Test the site in using different browsers to avoid errors in its graphics, links, JavaScript or its page code. Parts of a site may not work for some or all visitors.

Club, LMSC, and zone web sites can be hosted on the USMS web server. Although the USMS help and documentation is not as complete as that found in a large commercial hosting company, the USMS server is free to all USMS organizations. Information and resources on hosting setup is found at <http://hosting.usms.org>.

There is a private section on the USMS Discussion Forum devoted to web hosting and web site development and is available for all club, LMSC and zone webmasters to use. Anyone in USMS can request inclusion in this forum, and can be used to post questions.

- Keep it simple! Complicated JavaScript, code or Flash animation may work fine on one computer but not on another. Not everyone has the latest high-speed connection or a computer with the latest fastest processor. Some visitors may be browsing using Web TV or a cellular telephone where JavaScript and frames are not easily displayed. Some may be using a browser with images turned off so only your text appears.
- Not everyone uses the same computer operating system and browser. Test the site on with other browsers and operating systems to be sure it works properly. Ask friends who may own different equipment to review the site. Remember that some browsers have bugs and even though your site is technically perfect, buggy browsers may not display as you intended.
- Put graphic images on a diet. Compress graphics and photos for publishing on the Web. Large uncompressed graphics take longer to download and take up more space on the site's server. Photos should not be full screen and at the highest resolution. Computer screens only display a resolution of 72 to 100 dpi.
- Be sure pages load fast, especially the first page. If the first page takes more than 10 seconds to download, many visitors will move on. Some visitors use dial-up modems. Uncompressed graphics and photos, complicated JavaScript, java applets and animations add to the download time.
- Computers come with different sets of fonts. Designate substitute fonts in the style definitions and style sheets to ensure the text is visible on all computers. Check the appearance of the substitute fonts.
- Keep frames off the first page of the site. Bookmarks generally do not work with frames, so using frames on a first page prevents someone from bookmarking your site!
- Test the address of linked sites regularly. The address of linked sites may change or disappear altogether.

NAVIGATION

Screen menus are only part of navigation. The website content must be organized to find information logically and quickly to enable a reader to skip from page to page and move within a page.

- Navigation tools on a web page should be easy to find and understand. Many sites have a navigation menu across the top and/or down the left side. Complex sites repeat the navigation at the bottom of the home page and principal sub- pages.

- It is confusing if menus are scattered on a page.
- Link to other Websites. Content from another site that is relevant should be incorporated by linking to it, rather than republishing someone else's page. Leverage content from the USMS website (www.usms.org) with links. The advantage of linking to the other site is to avoid constantly checking the content for updates.
- Keep links brief and in plain language. When building a link, it is best to display a name in understandable text, rather than using the URL address. For example, display "pool map" on the site instead of the actual internet address of <http://www.mapquest.com/va23/2334+al/03.htm>.
- Subsequent pages are for data, detail and complex subjects and should be organized in a logical manner.
- Subsequent pages should be accessed by a link and consistent with its preceding page.
- Provide navigation menus on all pages (except printable text pages) to return to the "home" page. Ideally, provide all navigation menus on all such pages.
- Keep the number of menu items to less than 10. A long list of menu selections is intimidating and tedious. Use submenus or additional menus on each page.

RESOURCES FOR WEB SITE DESIGN

Online resources

<http://www.webmonkey.com>

Tutorials, examples, script library

<http://www.bignosebird.com>

Free scripts, tutorials, tips & tricks, design examples

<http://www.webpagesthatsuck.com>

Tips and examples of what not to do with website design

Books

Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity

by Jakob Nielsen

covers the topics of page design, content design, and site design

Prioritizing Web Usability

by Jakob Nielsen

follow-on book to the previous recommendation, providing insight into usability

Don't Make Me Think

by Steve Krug

design book that covers the kinds of problems users experience when visiting a web site

Newsletter Hints

The USMS Planning Committee developed these hints using questionnaires sent to all LMSCs. Please feel free to suggest changes or additions. Send comments to Communications AT usms DOT org

Possible Contributors

- LMSC officers and committee chairs
- Clubs reporting activities
- Regular columnists
- Coaches or swimmers submitting favorite workouts

Possible Topics

- Meet entries
- Meet results
- Write-up about meets
- Places to swim with workout times
- Social and locker room chit chat about members
- News-making activities of members
- Technique articles
- Workouts
- Health articles
- Weight training
- Open water events
- Triathlons
- List those who are aging up
- Focus on a member
- Calendar of local meets
- List officers
- List website address
- Top Ten from your LMSC

Hints to Make Editing the Newsletter Easier

- Use an electronic folder for articles to be used in each issue. Aim to receive articles by email or to download them.
- Keep a folder for "fillers"—short articles or workouts to fill a page. Pictures and graphics also work well.

- Use a familiar computer program. Start out just using a word processor (there are templates for newsletters). Some LMSCs use word processors, some use publishing programs—whatever works. Switch to a publishing program as you feel comfortable.
- If possible, use a professional printer for printing, collating, mailing the newsletter. Your Registrar can provide addresses electronically, on a disk or can produce labels.
- If you cannot afford to use a printer for collating and mailing, get a workout group to help one day after practice.
- Set a format and stick with it.
- Recruit others to contribute regularly. Once contributors see their articles in print, they tend to send new articles. Possible items: columns, profiles, meet write-ups, workouts, nutrition, and news about members.
- Use the USMS website as a source for articles. Go to www.usms.org. Check the list on the left of the screen.
 - a. LMSC Info: Click here and a map pops up. Select an LMSC to get a link to that LMSCs Website. Many LMSCs publish their newsletters online.
 - b. Fitness: Provides an article per month.
 - c. Training: Articles on drills, etc.
 - d. Links to other sources can be found at <http://www.usms.org/links/>
- ***** When using articles from another source, be sure to get permission, list the author and the location of the article (website, another LMSC's newsletter, etc).*****
- Use Hy-Tek to print results in a condensed format (small print and three columns). This option works well for newsletters.
- Find a local swimmer who has a digital camera. Pictures can be emailed and inserted into newsletter.
- Have someone proofread.
- Have contributors send articles electronically. Try not to retype anything.
- Develop a list of website addresses for various clubs and LMSCs that have a good newsletter.
- Try to include more than just meet entries, results and announcements. Include at least one article on technique, training, etc.
- Ask other LMSCs or clubs to include you on their mailing list.
- Two excellent sources for graphics/clipart are www.swim-city.com and www.swimgraphics.com. Be sure to include the website address when using their graphics.
- When using photos in newsletters, particularly online newsletters, be sure to reduce the file size so the photos don't cause loading and printing problems.
- Distribution method hint: E-mail a link to the electronic newsletter rather than attaching it to an e-mail.

KEEPING INFORMATION CURRENT

USMS compiles a number of data bases that need input from LMSCs, clubs, and individuals. Please take the time to update the following:

- List all sanctioned events on the USMS Calendar of Events. The submission form is available at <http://www.usms.org/comp/eventform.php>?
- List pools with practice sessions and lap swims in Places to Swim at <http://www.usms.org/placswim/>. Each listing has a link for modifying the listing. Additions can be made at <http://www.usms.org/placswim/placswimadd.php>.
- Submit meet results from all sanctioned meets to meetresults AT USMS DOT org. Current Top Times and Individual Results on the USMS web site, located under the Competition tab, access a database of individual results that is a consolidation of all meet results files submitted on-line. These times are not tied in any way to the USMS Top Ten. Current Top Times and Individual Results are basically one big virtual meet. The database is an unedited composite of all meet results submitted. The results are best explained as a guideline or yardstick that swimmers can use to gauge progress compared to other competitors of the same age group. Top Ten Recorders are requested to e-mail meet results just as soon as meet results become available. The database has a time value for swimmers and is most useful if it is continually updated as the season progresses.

The files submitted for Current Top Times upload must be zipped, should contain splits of individual events (if available in the meet results) and must be one of the following formats:

- SDIF (created via most meet management software)
- Hy-Tek Exported meet results, format .CL2 (zipped by Hy-Tek during Export)
- Hy-Tek Backup (zipped by Hy-Tek during Backup)

Displays of Current Top Times on the USMS Web Site show the best time of a swimmer in an event. The unique key that distinguishes a swimmer is the combination of name, club, age and LMSC. It may appear on the display that the same swimmer is listed multiple times in Current Top Times, but any variation in the combination of name, club, age and LMSC will cause the individual to be listed as a different swimmer.