

The necessity of city websites

By Shelby Fiegel

The Internet has changed the world we live in today. Over 90 percent of Americans have instant access to the Internet through an ever-increasing variety of venues. Out of that group, 94 percent use the Internet to make important decisions about their lives, whether it's where they travel, live, work, or establish a business. That's 19 out of 20 people who use the Internet to make decisions that affect their lives, and possibly your community.

The reality is that if you want new business, residents, or visitors to come to your city, it starts in front of a computer screen.

So, where do you begin? For many Arkansas cities the possibility of creating and maintaining a website is daunting. Who will manage and update it? How will you build it? What needs to go on it? To answer these questions, let's take one step at a time.

Who will manage and update your website?

This question is crucial in the beginning stages of website development. You need to identify someone in your community, preferably a city employee but possibly a volunteer, who either has knowledge of website editing or can be trained to manage a website. Your website should be updated periodically because Google ignores your website if it is not updated and viewers get a bad impression if there is old data on your website.

How will you build it?

Not everyone has to have a high dollar website. For rural Arkansas cities the most important thing is to have updated information in a readable format that is available online. One option to create a website is to take a regional approach. Contact officials from neighboring cities or your county and discuss the possibility of creating a regional website that houses your shared information. Combine your resources to make your region competitive. If new businesses, residents or visitors come to your region it will benefit everyone involved.

Some design firms across the state offer low cost design services as a part of their mission. One such

organization is Thrive, based in Helena-West Helena. Thrive (thrivecenter.org) is a design studio focused on generating economic and community development in the Delta. Do an online search to identify these organizations and reach out to them to see what they can offer your community.

Utilize youth in your community! Contact your local school district and explore an opportunity for students to design your city's website. EAST programs are a great venue to find talented students to aide in website creation. If you are lucky enough to have a university or community college nearby, especially one with a graphic design program, reach out to professors—maybe there is a class that can take on your community's website as a service-learning project or there could be an opportunity to create a design focused internship.

Set aside time for a member of your staff to get training on website creation. Many user friendly website creation tools offer free tutorials for an on-your-own training approach, such as: WordPress, Weebly, Wix or Squarespace.

Another option is to send out a call for community volunteers that have experience in website design. You never know what hidden talents your citizens possess.

Finally, contact your Planning Development District or local economic or community development organizations for suggestions on training programs and resources.

What needs to go on it?

Once you have designated someone to manage your website and found someone to design it, the question becomes what needs to go on it?

Here is a short list of the top things that need to go on your city's website:

- **Contact Information:** Make sure your contact information is extremely visible!
- **About Section:** In this area focus on the history of your community, marketing it, and its assets.
- **Elected Officials:** Include information concerning your mayor, city council, and boards and commissions.

- City Departments: Such as police, fire, public works, parks and recreation, and other departments.
- Economic Development Information: Include quick facts, demographics, permits and inspections, education and training, transportation, communications, public utilities, available sites and buildings, industrial park, and incentives.
- Residential Information: Focus on places to live, work, and play.
- Visitor Information: Showcase entertainment, arts, events, and parks and recreation activities.

Even small cities such as the city of Mulberry (pop. 1,685) and Vilonia (pop. 2,978) understood that a website was a necessity if they wanted to move their communities forward. Each city followed the steps outlined and now have well organized, fully functioning community websites.

In regards to the importance of having a community website, Mayor James Firestone of Vilonia stated, “Whether it’s a business or an individual, if you are considering making a move to a new area, you want to know what that area has to offer. If you are a current resident, you will have questions about city operations, ordinances and regulations, or just what’s going on around town. We live in an age where people want and need information. With the creation of our new website, that information is just a click away twenty four hours a day.”

You can view Vilonia’s website at www.cityofvilonia.net or Mulberry’s at www.cityofmulberry.org.



Shelby Fiegel is project coordinator of UCA’s Center for Community and Economic Development. Contact her by phone at 501-450-5269, by email at sfiegel@uca.edu, or visit the Center’s website at www.uca.edu/cced.



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