

Marketing 101 – Website Tips

Joshua Muse – joshua.muse@vermont.gov

Content

Priorities – When organizing your site, figure out what people most want to know (or alternately, what you most want them to know), and put that in front. Is it your upcoming events? Your book donation policy? Your downloadable ebooks? From there, fill in your menus with lower priority content. But don't feel like you have to include everything; when in doubt, leave it out until people ask for it.

Sustainability – Don't put information on your site unless you're sure you can keep it up to date. It's better to have a brief site than an out of date or inaccurate site. If time is limited, focus on content that won't ever change.

Menus – Have a coherent menu structure and stick to it. Try not to have menus, and buttons, and other buttons. Creating an intuitive, well organized menu structure is crucial, even though half of your audience might ignore it.

Search Box – I would recommend including a search box on your site if there's an option. It's a good backup to your navigation, and for some users it's their default approach.

Appearance – It's nice to have a good-looking website, but don't get too fixated on it. Don't be afraid to grab a template or start with something simple. A plain site with info beats an attractive one with no info any day.

Overloading - Don't overstuff your main page (or any other page for that matter). If you prioritize everything, you prioritize nothing. If you have a very strong visual organization (<https://www.sherburnelibrary.org/>), you can get away with it.

Underloading – On the other hand, you don't want a hundred pages, each with a paragraph of content. Like most things, it's about finding a happy medium.

Mobile – Making your site mobile-friendly is not totally under your control. But be sure to keep it in mind when you pick a platform/theme. From time to time, check to see what the mobile experience is like, and that nothing is too badly broken.

Accessibility – Making your website accessible to those with all types of disabilities can be intimidating, but there are a number of easy steps (such as always including alt text for images) to start with. Read more about it here - <https://www.w3.org/WAI/fundamentals/accessibility-intro/>

Trustee Agendas & Minutes – You and your trustees should be mindful of Open Meeting Law as it relates to your website. You can find out more at our page - <https://libraries.vermont.gov/services/public-libraries/trustees#OpenMeetingLaw>

Google Listing – Though strictly speaking not your website, the information that Google provides when people search for your site is increasingly important. For many people this is the first (and possibly only)

information people will see about you. Make sure it's correct! If it's not, suggest an edit (you need a Google account to do this). You might have to do it a couple of times before it takes.

In the same vein, take a look at your Google Reviews. Overall, they should look pretty positive! If they don't, you could suggest that patrons write reviews! But don't do it yourself.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Website Content (starting with most important)

Tier One

- Hours, Location, and General Contact Info - Make them obvious, it's what a third of your visitors are looking for.
- Items you are legally obligated to include (Open Meeting Law)

Tier Two

- Link to Online Catalog – If available
- Events Calendar – Start with regular ongoing programs and/or a PDF of your monthly calendar. Updating a full web-based calendar with times and descriptions takes real time.

Tier Three

- Services They Are Looking For – Copying, printing, faxing, computers, WiFi, meeting room, magazines and newspapers.
- Services They Might Not Know About – Holds, passes, ILL, tool library.
- Online Resources - Listen Up Vermont, RB Digital, Vermont Online Library, HeritageQuest, Universal Class, and anything else you have access to.

Tier Four

- Staff & Trustee Directory
- Things you feel obligated to put on, but that no one ever reads – History of the library, about us, eight-year-old photo galleries.

Making a Website

How Do I Make a Website? – Your basic options are to do it yourself, pay someone to do it, or find a volunteer/pro-bono opportunity. Basic websites are easier than ever to create, and you don't need to know HTML (though it will come in handy every now and again). If you want to go beyond the basics, it becomes a time vs. money question in terms of doing it yourself or hiring out.

Warning – Be careful if considering a proprietary, non-standard site created by a small vendor. If the vendor disappears, will you still be able to make changes on the site?

Learning to Work with Websites – There are thousands of resources for learning the ways of websites, from books and Universal Class, to YouTube, in-person classes, and more. Make sure it's the right level for you.

Software – Most website production is done in a web browser now, so software isn't really necessary. You may want a basic graphics program (Adobe Photoshop Elements is a pay option, but there are also free ones), but that's about it.

Web Hosting – There are numerous web-hosting options, depending on price and level of technical knowledge required. WordPress, Weebly, and Wix focus on cheap and/or easy sites. Google Sites is free but very basic. SquareSpace offers a few more features at a higher price. And DreamHost offers a free basic hosting for non-profits but requires a bit more web knowledge. There are literally hundreds of other options in each category, I am just sharing a few of the better-known ones.

Advertising – Keep in mind, however, that low cost websites (like WordPress, Weebly, and Wix) often include advertising, which can vary from slightly annoying to downright obnoxious. You may be able to pay a bit more to get rid of advertising. (all prices based on annual billing)

- Weebly – Ads are more discrete, but it's not until the \$12/month level (Pro) that you can get rid of them.
- Wix – The \$11/month plan (Combo) gets rid of ads.
- WordPress – Their ads have gotten really bad. \$5/month gets you a personal account with no ads.
- Jimdo – The \$9/month (Start) plan has no ads.
- Squarespace - \$12 for their cheapest (Personal) plan. No ads.
- DreamHost – If you have the institutional knowledge to setup and make your own website, they offer a basic hosting plan free to non-profits.

Hosting Options

- Weebly - <https://www.weebly.com/pricing>
- Wix - <https://www.wix.com/upgrade/website#/>
- WordPress - <https://wordpress.com/pricing/>
- Jimdo - <https://www.jimdo.com/pricing/>
- Google Sites - <https://sites.google.com/new>
- Squarespace - <https://www.squarespace.com/pricing>
- DreamHost - <https://help.dreamhost.com/hc/en-us/articles/215769478-Non-profit-discount>

Get Feedback – Once your site is up and running, ask patrons and friends for feedback. Get their general impressions, as well as having them try to find some specific things. Keep this feedback in mind, but don't knee-jerk change things just because of their suggestions.

Backup your Content – Just like other content, the test of whether or not to backup is how upset you would be if it disappeared. Keep a document with all of the significant text on the site, and a folder with the images and other documents. I often find it easier to write content in a word processing program, and then just paste it into your website; otherwise a web hiccup or timed out login can lose 45 minutes of work.

Lifespan: How long does a website last? – It lasts as long as it still works for you and your patrons. Sites are replaced because they look out of date, they aren't able to do what you want them to do, or because they're a pain to work with. Sometimes a visual refresh/reorganization does the trick, while other times you may need to start from scratch.

Website Examples

You can find a list of all public library websites in the state here (Thanks, Jessamyn!) - <https://www.vermontlibraries.org/vermonts-public-libraries/>

There are a lot of great sites all over the state, but here are a few who caught my eye. I tried to include a range of platforms and library sizes, so it's not intended as a slight if you're aren't on the list:

Abbott Memorial - <https://www.abbottmemoriallibrary.org> (Squarespace)
Albany Public - <https://www.albanypubliclibraryvt.org/> (Squarespace)
Aldrich Public - <http://www.aldrichpubliclibrary.org/>
Bixby Memorial Free - <http://bixbylibrary.org/> (WordPress)
Blake Memorial - <https://blakememorial.org/>
Brandon Free Public - <https://bfpl.insignails.com/Library/Home> (uses the front page of their ILS)
Cabot Public - <https://www.cabotlibrary.com/> (Wix)
Carpenter Carse - <https://www.carpentercarse.org/> (Squarespace)
Chelsea Public - <http://www.chelsealibrary.com/> (Weebly)
Cavendish Fletcher - <https://www.cavendishlibrary.org/> (Wix)
Cutler Memorial - <https://www.cutlerlibrary.org/> (Google Sites)
Deborah Rawson Memorial - <https://www.drml.org/>
Dorothy Alling Memorial - <http://www.williston.lib.vt.us/>
Fletcher Free - <https://www.fletcherfree.org/>
Glover Public - <http://gloverlibrary.org/>
Greensboro - <https://www.greensborofreelibrary.org/> (WordPress)
Hartland - <https://www.hartlandlibraryvt.org/>
Jeudevine - <https://www.jeudevinememoriallibrary.org/> (Jimdo)
Lydia Taft Pratt - <http://dummerston.org/boards/library.asp>
Maclure - <http://www.maclurelibrary.org/>
Manchester - <http://mclvt.org/>
Milton - <https://miltonlibraryvt.org/> (WordPress)
Moore - <http://www.moorefreelibrary.org/>
Moretown - <https://moretownlibrary.com/> (WordPress)
New Haven - <https://www.nhcl.org/> (Google Sites)
Norwich Public - <http://www.norwichlibrary.org/>
Orwell - <https://orwellfreelibrary.org/> (WordPress)
R K Kittay - <http://www.rupertkittaylibrary.org/> (Blogger)
Roger Clark Memorial - <http://www.pittsfieldlibrary.com/> (Weebly)
Sherburne Memorial Library - <https://www.sherburnelibrary.org/>
South Burlington - <https://southburlingtonlibrary.org/>
South Hero - <https://southherolibrary.org/> (WordPress)
South Londonderry - <http://www.southlondonderryfreelibrary.org/>
St. Albans - <https://www.stalbansfreelibrary.org/> (Weebly)
Stamford - <https://www.stamfordlibrary.org/> (Wix)
Swanton Public - <http://swantonlibrary.org/> (WordPress)
Waterville Town - <http://www.watervillelib.org/> (Google Sites)
Windsor Public - <http://www.windsorlibrary.org>

