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Marketing wisely on a shoe-string budget

This is the third in a series of articles intended to help chapter marketing teams maximize their "bang for the buck", particularly when faced with a limited budget. Last time we looked at some no-cost ways to get the word out, a.k.a. the "free stuff". This time, let's take a look at what should be the backbone of your marketing and branding strategy: your website.

If you don't yet have a website, there is no better time than now to start. If you do have a website, read on, because there are some things to consider that may make it more effective. I'll try to make this as non-technical as possible, but that's not always easy to do, so if you have any trouble absorbing this, please send me an email and we can set up some time to talk on the phone.

First, let's make it clear that a Facebook page does not replace the need for a website for two simple reasons: 1) not everyone uses Facebook, so if you rely on it exclusively you are limiting yourself to a subset of your potential market; and 2) anything you post to your page has a very short lifespan in a typical user's timeline before it scrolls off into oblivion. For example, we have around 830 "Likes" on the Far Western District's Facebook page, and a typical post may reach 150-200, meaning it appears in their timeline; from that we typically have 10-20% engagement, i.e., clicks to read the post. Those are not terribly good odds, and so while Facebook is a good and free supplement, it should not be your only iron in the fire. A better approach is to use your Facebook page as a means of drawing people to your website where you can present the full pitch of "who, what, where, when, why, and how" in a clean and concise manner, where you have full control of how it is presented.

If the reason you don't have a website is because you think, "I'm not a programmer", or "I don't know HTML" then relax because nowadays there are tools that make it as easy as creating a Word document. With a little practice, you'll get the hang of it in no time, and you will be pleased with the results.

Domain name

When planning a website, the first thing to consider is your domain name, as this is your initial "branding" to get people to visit your site. A domain name is a unique name that identifies both you and your website. It is case insensitive; so don't worry about upper and lower case. A good candidate is the name of your chorus or quartet, followed by a suffix.

Common suffixes include ".com", ".org", and ".net". It really doesn't matter which suffix you choose, but I personally prefer ".org" since we are an organization, not a commercial business. Keep in mind that domain names are cheap, so you may want to consider getting all three as a way of securing your identity (more on that later).

Keep in mind that the domain name MUST be unique, so find out if that name is available. There are a number of tools to do this, and you can find them by searching for "domain name search tools". If you find that the name is already taken, then try adding hyphens (musicmakers.org -> music-makers.org) or appending "chorus" or "quartet" to the name (musicmakers.org -> musicmakerschorus.org) and search again.

Unfortunately there are some "scalpers" that will buy up domain names by the score and then try to sell them at a premium price. I've seen some popular names that are available for a "mere" $20,000.00! A typical name is in the $10-15 range, so forget that and keep searching.

Web hosting

Once you have identified your domain name, it's time to shop around for a web-hosting provider. There are hundreds to choose from, and besides price, here are some things to consider.

Storage

For most small and medium web sites, several gigabytes should be plenty of storage. Some hosts may offer "unlimited storage". *Caveat emptor!* Read the

fine print!

Bandwidth

Bandwidth is the amount of data that your host will let you and your visitors upload and download (cumulatively) in a given month. Some hosts offer "unlimited bandwidth"; again, read the fine print.

Subdomains

If you're just starting out, you'll likely begin with a single, public facing website. But maybe later on you'll want to add a "members only" site, or one to sell show tickets or merchandise. These are often done using what is known as a subdomain, which is actually a separate website that resides in a subfolder.

Database

Today's websites store their content in a database, usually MySQL, so make sure the web host offers that feature. You'll need a separate database for each subdomain, so also consider the number of databases they provide in the hosting plan.

Email

Do they offer email accounts or forwarding options? These are very useful for providing consistent email addresses for your group, particularly your chapter officers, *e.g., president@mychapter.org.*

Tech Support

Find out when, where, and how you can get support when you need it, and well as the response time you can expect. Stay away from hosts that only offer support through a web-based "ticketing" system; 24x7 phone support is the best option.

Site Backup

Stuff happens. Your web host should offer AUTOMATED, daily backup of your website files and databases. If they do not, keep looking.

Website Security

Although less common, websites can get attacked by malicious activity, similar to a virus getting on to your computer. Your web host should offer both detection and correction as a service.

Building your website

Many hosts now offer "website builders" that profess to have your website up and running in a matter of minutes. While that may be somewhat true, I've looked at several offerings, and can advise that you'll wind up with a very basic website that you'll quickly find does not serve your needs going forward.

A better solution is to start from the beginning using something called a Content Management System (CMS). A CMS helps you to manage the creation and modification of your website and – best of all -- it allows multiple users to work together in collaboration. In other words, you provide the guys in your chapter with a tool that uses a template for a common look and feel, and they become responsible for the content. It's really a win-win, because your chapter leaders can easily create and edit their own articles, maintain the calendar, and much more without needing to come to you every time.

The three most popular CMS are WordPress, Joomla, and Drupal. All three are open source and free to use. WordPress is by far the most popular and is a good fit for most chapter or quartet websites; it's also considered to be the easiest to learn. Next up is Joomla, which is a little more complex in terms of setup, but offers greater flexibility while still being very easy for your users to manage content. Drupal is technically the most advanced, but also requires a good deal of technical expertise and programming skills; it's probably not a good choice unless you're a seasoned programmer.

Your web host should at the very least offer WordPress and/or Joomla, and they should also offer a super-easy installer for your CMS of choice.

Securing your website with SSL

Nowadays we need to consider protecting our information as well as the visitors to our website. Although there is an additional cost involved, the solution to this is to protect your website using something called Secured Socket layer (SSL).

In layman's terms, when you have SSL, the stream of data that travels between the web server and the web browser on the visitor's computer is heavily encrypted (scrambled), making it virtually impossible for malicious programs to capture any information. A website secured with SSL has an address starting with "https"; an unsecured website starts with "http". If you are selling any products your website, it is ESSENTIAL to have SSL enabled. It's also a strongly advisable to use SSL anywhere you allow people to log in, such as your "members only" site.

For sites that are public facing, with no log-in capability, having SSL is still optional; however, be advised that in July 2018, Google rolled out an update to its "Chrome" browser – which currently has 62% market share, followed by Internet Explorer with only 12% -- which will display a big, new **Not Secure** warning next to your domain name in the address bar if it is not secured with HTTPS. Moreover, back in 2014 Google confirmed that their search engine – which currently holds 91% market share, followed by Bing with 3% -- scores a higher search engine ranking for websites having HTTPS than those who do not.

If this sounds like Google is driving the technology, you're absolutely correct. But it seems like every other day you read about some web site getting hacked, or personal information getting compromised, and so they are absolutely correct in moving this forward. The Internet is an amazing resource in terms of marketing, and it allows us to do some great things at a fraction of the cost, but we need to also make sure it is a secure and safe place for our members and our visitors.

Wrapping things up

We've covered a lot of territory this time, and if your head is spinning I again apologize if this was too technical. So let me close this installment by repeating that I am here as a resource to help you, and encourage you to contact me if you would like further assistance.