

# Planning Your School or School District Website

By David Warlick

Perhaps the most critical step in building a web presence and the most often neglected one is planning. To build a website that accomplishes something for you or your school you must know what you want to accomplish. Before you start thinking about how you are going to build your web site, the look it is going to have, or its interactive features, you must have a clear idea of its goals and objectives – and that takes planning.

## Who Should be on the Planning Team?

This is a difficult question to answer. Your planning team depends so much on the character and culture of your school or school district, its condition, and the problems you want to solve by facilitating web-based communication. The number of participants is also critical. The smaller the number, the faster you will be able to move. At the same time, critical people can easily be left out, people who can be instrumental in helping plan a more successful web presence.

An effective web planning team will consist of three categories:

1. People who work with your information customers on all levels. This will certainly be teachers and administrators, but also guidance councilors, food services people, facility officials, and others.
2. Technical Staff. Even if you contract with a web design company, technical staff will be instrumental in aligning technical possibilities to the school or district's needs.
3. Information Customers: The parents of your students know their children, and they know what information will help them to help their children have a successful school year. It is also important to include a well-selected representative(s) of the community.

## What is the Planning Process?

It is important to structure your planning session(s) as much as possible. Otherwise, the meetings can deteriorate into issues that are not particularly relevant to the construction or retrofit of your school or school district website. Below are some questions to be answered in the planning process. These questions can serve as a structure for your meetings to bind to discussions to the task at hand.

### 1. Who is the intended audience of your website?

Who are your stakeholders? Examples may include:

- Parents,

- the broader community,
- people who are considering moving to your community,
- the central office,
- local and distant political officials

Think also about your audience in terms of how to best design your web site. What is their level of education? What kind of access to the Internet do they have? Will they have high speed or low speed access? Are they likely to be beginners or sophisticated users? Each of these answers will guide you in the types of features you will include in your site and how it will look.

## 2. What are your goals and objectives?

The distinction between goals and objectives is obscure for most people. But it is one that educators understand, almost instinctively. The goals are yours -- what you want to accomplish with your school web site. Examples include:

- Moving your school into the information age
- Improving effectiveness of teachers
- Improving academic performance of students
- Expanding the school community
- Increasing the number and effectiveness of volunteers
- Establishing online mentors for students and teachers

As teachers, our objectives describe what we want our students to know or to be able to do as a result of our instruction. As web planners, our objectives describe how we want to affect the behavior of the people, our school's stockholders, who visit our web site. When thinking about these issues, it is important to identify how your parents, general community, central office, and others can help you do your job. This will point to your objectives. Examples include:

- The community will maintain a positive and enthusiastic impression of your school
- Parents will want to become more involved in their children's learning
- The electorate will be eager to support progressive schooling
- Government officials will be more agreeable to funding progressive initiatives
- Students will be more engaged by their learning

Your goals and objectives are the most critical factor in building a web site that works for you. Unless you have clear ideas of what you want to accomplish, it will be difficult to build a site that accomplishes anything.

Your goals and objectives are your guidelines when selecting the features to include in your web site and also the look and feel of the site. All decisions about design should be made while looking through the lens of your goals and objectives.

### 3. What information will help you accomplish your goals?

This can be the most creative and exciting part of the planning process and is well suited for brainstorming. Simply list your goals and objectives, and then ask for ideas of information that will accomplish those goals.

In considering information to be included in your web site, it is important to discuss the procedures that will be necessary to convert the information from its current format to a condition that it communicates itself effectively over the web. There are two ways to think about this.

- a. **Technical:** What will it take to convert the information to web format. If the school secretary is typing up (with a typewriter) a monthly newsletter that you would like to include on the web, then get him or her a computer with word processing software that will easily convert files to HTML.
- b. **Design:** How should the information present itself? Understand that getting information onto the web is easy compared to getting the information from the user's screen into his or her understanding. Laying out information so that it presents itself effectively for accomplishing your goals is perhaps the most challenging part of creating a website. Think about how you best understand information. Typically, people understand a picture better than prose, graphs better than tabular data, charts better than outlines.

### 4. How will you structure your website?

The important thing to understand about the World Wide Web is the fact that it presents information in three-dimensions. From any on point, we can go in a variety of directions depending on our information needs. This characteristic can make your web site a powerful tool for solving problems. It can also render otherwise valuable content completely hidden from view.

Designing your website's structure should take this fact into consideration. Who will your audience be? What problems are they likely to be trying to solve by coming to your website? Where can you put the answers so that he or she can reach them with the fewest number of mouse clicks?

Always consider your goals and your audience, and the reason's that they have come to your website. Arrange your information and links for ease, convenience, and speed.

### 5. Facilitate review and feedback

Many web pages include the ubiquitous, "Under Construction" phrase. It should appear on all pages (not literally) because information changes, the needs of your information customers change, as does their level of sophistication, and your goals and objectives change. It is essential that you include plans for evaluating the effectiveness of your web site and that you facilitate feedback from your information customers.

It is easy to provide e-mail links in your web pages so that people can e-mail the webmaster with complaints and suggestions. This HTML code embedded in your web page will accomplish this.

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<a href="mailto:david@landmark-project.com">Webmaster</a>
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Users of your website, however, will seldom use this feature. They have come to your site to access information, not to provide it. You must be more proactive in pursuing valuable input from your web customers and here are some ideas for how to get it.

- a. Teachers, as they participate in parent conference, can ask parents if they have used the website before, what information they were looking for, if they found the information, did they enjoy the experience?
- b. If your school has an end of the year survey for parents, include some questions about your website.
- c. Include a form on your website that asks for input from users. The form should be short. It should look like a person could complete it within one minute. If it looks like it will require more investment of time than one minute, then people will not answer the questions. The form should not ask more than four questions. If you have more than four questions, then cycle them through each week. Ask four questions one week, then four different questions the next week.
- d. Ask parents during PTA meetings to raise their hands if they have used to website. Ask them to raise their hands if they found the information they were looking for. Ask them to meet with the webmaster after the meeting if they have any suggestions on how to improve the service.
- e. Establish a school web site advisory council, asking members to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the web information and on its design.

A marching band booster club wanted to employ web forms to encourage parent members to volunteer for committee work and other activities. They knew that simply putting a forms page on the web site and asking parents to go there and click away would not accomplish their goal. The web team realized that they had to provide the forms within the context of information that parents needed or wanted. So they decided to integrate the form into their monthly online newsletter. As articles appeared related to the upcoming activities in need of volunteers, the volunteer forms were embedded in the article.

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