EFFECTIVE WEB CONTENT

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.

Our eyes have been trained to view paper as a medium. With printed material, one scans down the discreet print format, jumps to headings and paragraphs, turn pages and so forth. Website design should take this into account.

Websites have some advantages over printed material. Sites can contain video or animation, 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 Delete outdated meet and social announcements. The entire site loses credibility if something is incorrect or blatantly outdated.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 new 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. Regular users generally know where to go further in the site for information.

- Invite feedback from your readers with a email link or form 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 them).

- 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.

- Use links to access detailed information and large articles for printing rather than placing it all up front and 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 found on other sites. 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

- Provide content of interest to potential swimmers visiting site. Examples include:
    -description of the club or LMSC and what it does
    -club 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
    -instruction on joining or attending the first workout
    -membership application and payment instructions
    -calendar of events
    -list of member benefits
    -list and links to clubs and workout groups on LMSC sites

- 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
    -workout times, locations, and directions

PRESENTATION
The graphic presentation and organization of a site can keep people interested or can turn people away. Appearance 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. 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 for reading. 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 overpower 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 an approach to writing that places the conclusion or summary first. 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.

- The design for each page should be the similar in layout, style, color, and graphics as if they belong together.

- Use a readable font size and color against an appropriate background image or color. Colors between text and background 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 to 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 can vary for visitors due to different browsers, computer systems and computer screens in use. Test the site using different browsers to avoid improper layout, bad graphics, errors in 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 for free, although the

USMS Help Documentation is not as complete as that found in a large commercial hosting company. 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 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 a cellular telephone where JavaScript and frames may not easily displayed.

• 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 render pages as you intended.

• Put graphic images on a diet. Compress graphics and photos in the web site. Large uncompressed graphics take long 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 al 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 book marking your site. Search engines may not find information on your site if frames are used.

• Test the address of links regularly. The addresses of links going to other 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 menus on the same page.

- It is confusing if menu have parts scattered on a page, or if menus are found in different places on different pages.

- Link to other websites. Content from another site that is relevant should be incorporated by linking to it, rather than republishing the contents. Leverage content from the USMS website 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.

- 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 if additional menu items are needed.

ADDITIONAL WEB SITE & COMMUNICATIONS FEATURES

- Javascript
  Additional function can be added to a web site by using scripts. Pull-down or collapsing menus, images that change when a mouse rolls over them, and pop-up windows are all examples of Javascript at work. Programming knowledge is not necessary because code for many scripts can be downloaded.

- Discussion Board
  Discussion boards can be used to allow all members to communicate with each other by posing questions, making announcements, coordinating competition participation. Discussion boards can be set up using free downloaded software, or can be set up with a free service such as Yahoo Groups or Google Groups.

- RSS
  Real simple syndication provides opportunities for users that subscribe to your site to be immediately fed content updates. RSS is most appropriate for regular changing content such as that found on a page with news.

- Email Lists
  Time-sensitive news and announcements can be sent out to members who receive email. An email list can be a simple collection residing on someone's computer, or a list using mail list manager software residing on the web site server. Recipients always need the ability to be

removed, or request to be removed from the list. Email sent should be short and concise, and be as infrequent as possible.

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

http://www.hotscripts.com
Scripted software and add-ons such as mail list managers to enhance your web services.

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 Neilsen
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