The OPAL Guide to…

Creating an effective website

More and more people use the internet to find information and communicate with one another. Not having a website means missing out on this huge potential audience. A website can help promote your society’s aims, advertise events, attract new members and improve communication between existing members.

Creating a website doesn’t have to be expensive or hugely time consuming – a basic website can be completely free. The cost and complexity will depend on what you want your website to do.

When setting up a website for the first time, it can be difficult to know where to start. The sections below take you through some of the first steps.

Free websites

Basic websites can be created free of charge. Type ‘free website’ into a search engine for a range of companies that offer this service. You’ll be able to customise a template with your own colours, fonts and photos. This may be all you require, but there may be restrictions, such as advertising, limited storage space, or a limited number of email accounts. In most cases you can pay to remove some of these restrictions.

Registering and hosting your website

If you want a website on a specific domain, with more than a few pages then you will need to pay. Prices start from as little as £25 a year depending on what you require.

You’ll need to register a domain name and pay to have your website hosted on a server. Fortunately, everything can be done through one company. Type ‘website hosting and registration’ into a search engine for a wide range of companies that can help.

Costs will vary depending on the domain name you want and the complexity of the website, but roughly start at £5 per year for a domain name and £20 per year for web hosting. You can always upgrade your hosting package, so start out with something simple.

.com, .org, .co.uk, .net – which type of domain should I choose?

It doesn’t matter too much which type of domain you choose. The most important thing is to get a name you are happy with – if possible something that includes the name of the group.

Domains ending with .com, might be more memorable, but they are slightly more costly and many common names are already taken.

If you are a larger or growing society you may wish to purchase more than one domain (eg birdgroup.com and birdgroup.org) to prevent others using the same name and ensure your society’s website is easy to find. Visitors to additional domains can be easily redirected to your preferred website address.
Designing / building your website

Don’t worry if you don’t know how to build a website, most hosting companies will offer a simple website builder with templates that can be easily customised to suit your requirements.

Complex sites with specific requirements e.g. online recording, will probably require bespoke building by a web design company which can be quite costly.

Your website should include all the information that a potential new member would like to know. Most websites have sections such as:

- About the group
- Membership
- Contact us
- Events calendar
- Links (link to other similar organisations, and ask them to link back to your website in return)

To make your website as attractive and easy to use as possible, you should:

- ensure your homepage makes it clear who your society is and what it does
- include links to the different website sections (usually on the left or top) to make it easy to navigate
- keep the colour scheme simple and ensure good contrast between text and background colours
- avoid flashing text boxes
- keep paragraphs short and break up text with subheadings
- put important messages in bold text
- avoid over-complicated language or technical terms
- use lots of pictures – but make sure you resize them before uploading. Images with large file sizes will make the page slow to load.

Look at a range of other websites to get a feel of how you would like yours to look and 'sound’. People generally find it harder to read text on a computer screen compared to on paper, so you need to make it as easy as possible for visitors to find the information they want.

Think about your target audience and write appropriately. Tips on how to write effective web pages can be found here.

Promoting your website

Your website might be brilliant but unless people can find it easily, it will not be effective. Follow the tips below to make sure your website is easy to find.

- Include the web address on all publicity materials, at events and activities, and at the bottom of emails.
• Submit your website address to major search engines to ensure your site appears in their searches. Click on the following names to link straight to their website submission pages:

  Google     Bing     Yahoo

• Improve your search engine ranking by:
  − Linking to other relevant websites and more importantly making sure they link back to you
  − Write descriptive titles and Meta tags for your pages. Ask someone with experience to help you with this if you are unsure.
  − Create a site map which links to all pages on your site (often created automatically by website building software)
  − Visit the Web Marketing Today website for more tips and ideas

Security issues with websites

Personal security
There can be security issues with putting the contact details of your committee members on your website. However, allowing people to contact you is also very important. Avoid giving postal addresses, and where possible set up a generic email address for the group that one (or a small group of people) has the responsibility for checking e.g. info@opalbugsgroup.org.uk or opalbugs@hotmail.com.

Data protection
Do not collect more personal information from members than you need. Do not email people or pass on emails if the recipients have not given their consent. All personal data you store about your members, including email addresses, should be dealt with in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998).

Spam
Putting email addresses on the internet can result in spam. One solution is to change them slightly so they don’t appear to be email addresses and so aren’t picked up, for example write email addresses in the format lucy.carter[at]nhm.ac.uk with a sentence explaining to your web visitors to substitute the [at] for an @. Alternatively, create an online form that visitors fill in with their contact details and their query.

Dictionary of web terms

Blog – short for weblog, this is a regularly updated online diary/journal of someone’s activities. Most blogs are interactive so readers can leave comments and the person writing the blog can respond.

Domain name – this is the name that identifies a website, for example "opalexplorenature.org" is the domain name of the OPAL website.

Link - A web link is a word or phrase on a web page that will take you to another web page if you click on it. They are usually underlined, so to prevent confusion avoid underlining words that are not web links.

Metatags – Text and keywords that describe your website to search engines. Metatags are not visible to web page visitors.
**Search engine** - A website that collects and organizes content from the internet which you can then search through.

**Search engine ranking** – How search engines rate your site. If you have a high ranking, your website will appear higher up the search engine results making it easier to find.

**Server** – where your website pages are stored

**Spam** – Junk email

**URL** – the address of a website e.g. [http://www.OPALexplorenature.org](http://www.OPALexplorenature.org).

**Visits** – the number of people that have visited your website (often incorrectly referred to as ‘hits’).

**Web Host** - A company that provides space on their server to allow an organisation or individual to make their own website accessible via the internet.