

So You Want a Web Site: Guidance for Sea Grant Web Proposals

In order to improve the Web offerings of the various Sea Grant programs, the Sea Grant Webmasters present some guidance to assist in the creation and maintenance of Web sites from their conception.

Web Sites and the Printed Word

It is important to think of Web sites as products with similarities to and differences from print products.

Like print publications:

Products have an assorted cast of contributors:

- The writer, who collects information and writes the product
- The editor, who reviews, corrects, and or suggests changes to the product.
- The designer, who lays out the product.
- The producer, who works with the writer and/or editor and/or designer and/or printer/Webmaster to get the product made.
- The printer/Webmaster, who physically transforms the designer's work into the finished product.

In Sea Grant printed products, as with Web sites, one person may be performing more than one of these roles.

Web sites present us with the opportunity to reach a vast audience, and the proliferation of sites and of users encourages Sea Grant to pursue Web sites as another communications tool. Nevertheless, Web site proposals should be put through the same rigorous evaluation as print documents. It is important for the writer who desires a Web site (or to post Web content) to meet with the producer and Webmaster to determine the feasibility of the product. For Sea Grant, this usually happens in the proposal stage. Just as specific printed products are included in outreach and research proposals, so too must Web sites/content be included—they cannot be an afterthought since they are as integral to communications as books, brochures, videos, audio programming and other communications products.

The same questions that apply to consideration of those products apply to Web sites:

1. What is the purpose of this product? Is the product, as conceived, likely to achieve this purpose? (For instance, while the goal of disseminating planning guidelines among town planners is a good one, if those planners do not have Internet access, a Web site designed for them will not achieve its goal.)

2. Who is the audience? This needs to be just as well defined as it would be for a print product. While the Web makes information and sites accessible to more people than would receive your printed document, that doesn't mean more people are actually going to read your material just because it's on-line. (For instance, if a person surfs the Web for information on boy bands, they are not going to land on a Sea Grant Web site. Let's hope. And if they do, they are going to leave, fast.)

3. What is the level of effort needed to create the finished product? The higher the level of interactivity and design, and the larger the amount of content, the more time and money it will take to design the product— factors that must be included in proposals. The Webmaster can help determine the level of effort and the cost.

4. How will the product be promoted to ensure its success? For Web sites, this entails making sure the site is indexed by search engines, requesting links to the site from appropriate sources, advertising the site in print products such as program brochures and magazines, and sending announcements to potential users (such as librarians, legislators, teachers, etc.). Who will be responsible for this? How will success be evaluated? Note: This is an ongoing task, which leads to:

Unlike print publications:

1. Web sites are never finished. This is critically important to understand. It is important that the initiator of the site (usually the writer) maintain the information on the site by periodically providing the Webmaster with updated phone numbers, links, and other content. The Webmaster, who manages multiple sites with hundreds of pages and links, cannot do this alone. Having out-of-date information on a site (“This project will be completed in 1999.”) is worse than having no information because it detracts from Sea Grant’s credibility as an information provider—if one portion of a site is out-of-date, it makes the whole site suspect. Also, it is irresponsible to provide incorrect information to clients who rely on Sea Grant.

2. Sea Grant should capitalize on the opportunity for dynamic content that the Internet offers. While it is possible and necessary to post static information—program objectives, fact sheets, etc.—programs can get the most out of a site that allows them to offer content that print publications can’t. For instance, a slide show or video clip might show how a flounder changes as it matures, or how a fish behaves when being pursued by a trawler.

The Role of the Webmaster

Familiar throughout Sea Grant is the limitation of time, personnel, and funding to accomplish every goal set before it. The same is true with Web communications. As one Sea Grant Webmaster comments: “If I have one pet peeve, it’s the concept that one communicator can effectively wear all the hats needed to do Web, print, editorial, design and IT efforts. Not that I really mind—I love the diversity of these challenges—I just want to do a better job with all of them.”

It is important for the Sea Grant network to understand that a Webmaster is a professional in an evolving field with its own standards for site navigability, usability, content, and style that all Sea Grant Webmasters strive to adhere to, regardless of whether they approach creating Web sites from a writing, design, or computer background. Some programs run their own servers, others rely on campus servers; some have strong information technology (IT) support from their colleges, others do not. It is important for administrators making decisions about Web issues to familiarize themselves with the opportunities and constraints of their program’s Web operations. Each program differs in the resources available for Web site design and maintenance, therefore each program must scale its expectations for its Web site to the resources it provides its Webmaster. Nevertheless, it is important for each program to support its Webmaster as it does its administrators, extension personnel, communicators, and educators, with opportunities for professional networking and training. Training and professional development are especially

crucial for Webmasters to keep up with the ever-evolving software and hardware needed to maintain vital Web sites.

*Note: Guidelines for Sea Grant Webmasters are located at
<http://www.wsg.washington.edu/pubs/guidelines/locator.html>*

Quotes from Webmasters:

“If the PIs consulted with me before submitting their proposals, I could give them some sense of the time and resources it will take to accomplish their Great Idea, and propose alternatives to ‘just throwing it on the Sea Grant Web site.’”

“While it is relatively easy to convert a print document to html (or pdf), this really doesn't take advantage of what we can do in this medium. Nor does it allow us to properly manage/integrate our sites.”