

Making the Most of the Web – a Guide for Small Museums

Introduction

A presence on the Internet for a Museum is no longer optional – even the smallest Museum must have a web presence. It can seem daunting when considering the sophisticated web sites that are now de rigour for the larger Museums. But the small museum curator need not despair – the Internet has not yet been taken over completely by global capitalism and there are still a lot of free resources out there which the hard-up but creative curator can make use of. Putting a few free resources together with a site full of good content can still provide an Internet presence that can match the facilities of the large museum.

Flash! Man or Content King?

A cursory look at the Internet will reveal a mind boggling number of totally useless sites – beware of those sites that start with a 'Flash!' animations – the user waits for the site to load and then behind it is a vacuous web site which is often little more than an on-line brochure. The small museum curator can take reassurance from the fact that for a Museum content is King! - it is the key to a long future on the Internet. Sophisticated design and advanced usability is secondary. The museum which spends its resources on providing useful content with a simple elegant design is better served than the Museum who hires an expense team of web programmers but does not put the effort into the content.

Planning is Essential?

It has to be said that the more work that is put into planning the better the end result will be. Have a look at the Web Site Style Guide at <http://www.webstyleguide.com/process/index.html> for more details. But don't let it stop you getting stuck in as soon as possible – start with a Blog or a Facebook page and try out your ideas. And don't forget that the most important aspect of planning is to understand your audience. The following sections depend upon a good knowledge of who the site is aimed at.

Lost in HyperSpace? - Give it a Good Name!

A web site is dead in the water unless it can be found – a fantastic web site may never be visited unless people can find it. Can users and colleagues remember the domain name? Perhaps www.bbc.co.uk is the classic example – the problem is that not many people are as lucky as the BBC to have such a well known brand and a simple identify. Often the obvious and the best name has already been used. But the museum should do its best to create a domain name that is similar to the name the museum is known by or at which a user can have a good guess. Tricks include using seeking the name amongst .co.uk, org.uk, ac.uk , .net.

You can use an abbreviation (as in www.vam.ac.uk) but this example is perhaps difficult to guess! Or you can do what many museums do and use the full name either hyphenated or not

(www.foundlingmuseum.org.uk/or www.florence-nightingale.co.uk). If the site has already been taken the Museum can always add 'the' to the beginning as in www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk.

As to which suffix the Museum should use – there is no hard and fast rule (.museum ending seems to have died a natural death) My own feeling is that org.uk is appropriate for Museums – although the large nationals have taken it upon themselves to insist on .ac.uk. It is possible to be bold and give a different name for the Museum web site We considered oldoperatingtheatremuseum.org.uk to be too long and unwieldy and considered the more radical

www.sawbones.org.uk

before choosing www.thegarret.org.uk because the Old Operating Theatre was in the Garret and it seemed a nice conceit to think our stuff was 'in thegarret'.

Whatever is chosen make sure it is simple, easy to remember and does not suffer from uncertainty in recall. The ideal should be 'once heard never forgotten' – it should also be Google friendly (see below) and it should relate to the Museum's overall branding strategy.

First Page in Google or Die!

Of course, with the advent of Google most people do not get to the website by typing in the url - even with a good name the site may still be the virtual equivalent of Pitcairn Island. The aim must be that if someone types the name of the museum into the search box in Google it should appear first in the search results or at least on the first page. How is this achieved? It is essential to design the site to be found – this means having a search engine strategy. This is a dark art for which the rules are always changing but the following will help.

Firstly, take a leaf from Google, Yahoo, YouTube. Their name is unique, and so searching for Google will not bring up a huge load of false hits. If the Museum is called the Chocolate Museum it will be hard to find and harder to create a successful search strategy. Of course, the Museum may not be in a position to change its name just for the purposes of making its site more visible in Google. So, to increase the chances of hitting that vital first page the following are hints:

Make sure the Museums web pages contain the words and phrases that its users will want to find . Analyse the phrases the Museum's intended audience will be using to find the site. Make sure that these key words and phrases are put not only in the body of the document but if possible in the page title, and even the url, and also create 'meta-tags' for keywords and description in the header of the web page. It is not difficult to do but it does help lift the pages up the table.

Search engine 'spider' programmes prowl the web trying to work out what sort of page each page is. They use an increasingly sophisticated set of instructions to help searchers information they are searching for. Items they consider are the presence of the words and phrases in the url, the title, high up the page, and on the page itself. They also consider how recently the page was updated and how many other sites of the same type are linked to the site. This Google page rank idea was set up to try to stop the sleazy merchants on the web over promote their sites but setting up front pages which just repeated the key words endlessly. The thinking is, if a site is any good, other sites will link to it.

So, it is becoming as important to set up as many relevant links as possible to the Museum's site. This means doing some physical marketing - going out there and encouraging people to link to the Museum site – ring them – write to them, meet them – the best way to drive people to the Museum's site is to speak to them.

Submit It!

The Spiders follow links around the Internet, to find new pages unlisted so therefore it will not find the Museum's site if it is not linked to other sites. Even if links have been set up it may not find the site quickly so it is wise to 'submit' the Museum site to as many search engines as possible. The best way of doing this is to do each search engine individually taking into account the 'algorithm' used by the search engine's spider. Many of us have not got time for this so it is possible to hire consultants to undertake the work, or there is software out there that will do it for you – just type in submit search engines in Google and a whole list of sites will come up for example:

(<http://www.submitexpress.com/submit.html>) or you can use free submission software like <http://www.addurlfree.com/> and <http://www.Addme.com>.

These are not as good as doing it yourself but they can be used to good effect for the time and resource strapped web manager.

Clean, Uncluttered Design

It is possible to create a reasonably professional looking web site with modern software without being a graphic designer. There are several ways of creating that design at a reasonable cost or indeed no cost:

1. Use a Blog, or Group hosts, to create your site. Google, Microsoft, and Yahoo, and among others provide blog and free group host sites. They are simple to set up and can be used to provide basic information about your site. Customisation of Blogs is pretty good nowadays and rather more limited in the Group sites. It does provide a way to get started, to provide essential information about your site and to help communicate with users (see below). (try <http://www.blogspot.com>) or www.yahoo.groups
2. Use a Wiki Host – a wiki is a collaborative group editing environment. A Museum could use it to mobilise a group of volunteers to create online resources. Very little knowledge of computers or design is necessary. To see what can be achieved have a look at: www.wikipedia.org. Wiki can be hosted at <http://www.seedwiki.com>, or <https://www.pbwiki.com/>
3. Hire a designer to create a template for the site designed so that staff can use that template to fill the site with data and images – this reduces the costs very considerably and gives you control of the web site. This means you can update it regularly and are not dependent upon getting extra funds.
4. Create a very simple but elegant design and do the web site design work yourself
5. Use a ready made template – fairly good designs can be packaged with your web site editor or can be downloaded from the Internet

(Net objects Fusion is a reasonably priced web design package which comes with excellent templates <http://www.netobjects.com/>)

(To download a free template from the Internet search for “free html templates” in www.google.com)

(Alternatively, find a web design you like on the Internet and use it to inspire your own design – you can even save the html files to your own idea to have a look how it was designed)

Doing it Yourself

If the decision is made to create or maintain the web site yourself, check the following:

1. An HTML/Web Design Software (Frontpage, Dreamweaver, NetObjects Fusion. Free editors include AOL Press (<http://software.visicommedia.com/en/products/acehtmlfreeware/>) and web sites can be edited using OpenOffice.
2. Skills in using Scanners, digital cameras and an image editor (e.g Photoshop, Paint Shop Pro, or the freeware programme The GIMP – <http://www.gimp.org>)
3. Simple knowledge of uploading html files to the Internet host – available in the html editor or separately as a ftp programme (eg wsftp.com)