

HOW?

Creating a website

Why do I need a website?

A website is a very useful asset for any organisation. For voluntary and community groups the key uses are to present information, raise awareness and involve people.

Web pages are an easy and inexpensive way to distribute information. They can readily be modified as details change. Increasingly people look first on the web for information about anything and everything.

A basic website can be set up as easily as producing a poster or leaflet.

How do I start a website?

Often an organisation will have printed information about itself and its activities – posters, leaflets, policies. These are a good starting point for the website content. Then think through all the sections you are likely to need:

- Contact details
- Location
- About-the-organisation
- Activities
- Events
- News
- Publications
- People
- Membership
- Links to other sites; etc.

Look for ideas on sites by similar groups.

You may decide that your organisation needs just one or two pages of basic details with infrequent updates. In this case an effective solution could be to have these pages incorporated into a larger site managed by another organisation. Search the web for local community websites, umbrella voluntary organisations (such as High Peak CVS) or sites in your area of interest, who will make a page up for you and index it on their site.

Alternatively you may opt to use one of the many free automated site builders, such as provided by

freemove.co.uk (wanadoo.co.uk), tripod.lycos.co.uk, uk.geocities.yahoo.co.uk etc. These can easily accommodate several pages complete with navigation links. Generally the layout is restricted to certain templates, but they are extremely easy to use. Text styles, colours and sizes can be selected from options; pictures or logos incorporated; borders and backgrounds chosen; features added; and the site will be automatically published. If you can surf the web, you can create a site.

If you want complete control over the layout, or need a large number of pages, then you may choose to design the site yourself and transfer it to hosted webpace.

What is webpace hosting?

The files containing your web pages need to be saved onto a computer that can deliver them across the web when requested by someone. This computer is called a server (it serves up pages) and is said to 'host' your pages on its webpace. You don't need to know anything about how this is done, as virtually all webpace is hosted by specialist companies who set it all up automatically.

The only complication is transferring the webpage files from your computer to the hosted webpace. This is generally done using File Transfer Protocol (FTP). Once it is set up you can forget about it, as subsequent transfer of files is no more difficult than moving files around in your own computer.

However, the FTP setup can be problematic and is one area where you might seek assistance from someone with experience. This is not to put you off doing it yourself, as hosting companies usually give very explicit instructions on what to do, and on paid accounts often have email assistance if you encounter problems. There are stand-alone shareware programs such as CuteFTP to undertake the FTP communication. Webpage design software should allow you to set up and perform the FTP from within the program.



HOW? Guides are written by High Peak CVS, for use by voluntary and community groups across the High Peak.

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How do I get a name for the site?

If you use pages on another site or free webspace the address will reflect their name. For example pages on freeserve could be yourname.fsnet.co.uk, while on High Peak CVS it would be highpeakcvs.org.uk/communitywebspace/yourname.htm. If you want something shorter and more apt, such as yourname.com or yourname.org, you can buy this domain name, if it is not already in use.

There are many companies that sell domain names. They allow you first to search and see what is available. The names ending in .com are supposed to be for commercial organisations, but are of benefit to anyone because they are so familiar to everybody. The .co.uk extension is also supposed to be for companies, but is used quite generally. Many voluntary and community organisations prefer .org or .org.uk.

The .uk endings indicate that the organisation is based in the United Kingdom. Search engines such as google.co.uk will focus on .uk sites if users select the 'pages from the UK' option. If you decide to go for either .org or .org.uk it is probably advisable to buy both, as this prevents confusion or the possibility of someone else acquiring the name.

For names ending in .org.uk and .co.uk expect to pay around £2.50 to £5 per year. The .com, .org and .net names are £10 to £15 annually, with a similar price for more recent name extensions such as .info or .biz. Cheap but reliable suppliers are: firevision.net, freeparking.co.uk, oneandone.com, ghoulnet.com, easyspace.com.

Where you buy your domain name should depend very much on how you plan to use it. If you have free webspace or pages on a larger site you will use 'web forwarding'. This is very simple to set up, merely by specifying the address of your homepage where you want your new domain name to point at. When people access your domain name they will see it in the address bar of their browser, though it will not change to reflect the different pages they navigate to. The forwarding method uses frames, which can cause problems. Though you can specify a title and keywords for the forwarding, search engines will not generally see the domain name you have paid

for, but will use the name of the actual webspace.

A better method is to change the name servers of your domain name to those of your webspace. The name servers are just pointers that the web uses to direct requests for domain name addresses to the server where the pages are held. Not every domain name supplier allows this facility, so you need to check before selecting a name host that they have the necessary DNS management (firevision.net and freeparking.co.uk do). Even then, many webspace hosts will not allow you to freely transfer your name servers to them. But there are some free hosts that will, so this is a worthwhile approach if you understand what to do.

The simplest method is to host your domain name and webspace with the same supplier. This gives less flexibility and there will generally be a charge for the webspace. Having your domain name and webspace with your Internet Service Supplier (ISP) is inadvisable as it reduces your future options to change ISP without disrupting your website.

How do I design the pages?

Webpage design courses have, until recently, often focused on using HTML to design the page. HTML (HyperText Markup Language) is a set of coded rules that your web browser (such as Internet Explorer) uses to make the page as seen on the screen. You can see this code for any webpage by selecting View and Source on the IE drop-down menu bar. At first sight it looks complicated, but is not that difficult once you see what it is doing.

However, there is really no need to know anything about HTML when designing a webpage, though it can be useful to understand a little when doing more complicated designs. The HTML code can be created for you by software that allows you to place text, graphics and links, much as you do on a word-processor.

Indeed MS Word itself can be used for this. If you select File on the drop-down menu bar of Word and select 'Save as Web Page...' a page will be generated that can be viewed on a web browser. The same can be done from MS Publisher and other components of the MS Office suite. This is a very simple way to design your webpages.

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If you want more direct control over the elements on the page, it is better to use software specifically for designing webpages. There are a variety of shareware or inexpensive packages that can be employed, but the standard software is Macromedia Dreamweaver or MS Frontpage.

Dreamweaver is the design package universally used by professional web designers and so is the preferred choice. The latest MX release is relatively expensive, but charities can get significant discounts. Older versions of Dreamweaver-4 or -3 are as good for the most part and can be acquired for little outlay. The full capabilities of Dreamweaver are somewhat daunting at first sight, but not a problem if you start with a simple design.

Design Considerations

Content is the key to any website. People view the site to gain information, not to admire the design. They will return to the site if they find the content useful. So make sure your site has the information people want, easy to find, simply and well presented, and up to date.

For beginners and experts alike, a significant aspect of design is borrowing ideas off others. As you surf the web, make a note of designs, features and ideas that you like, by saving a copy of the webpage or bookmarking it in a favourites folder. Templates of webpages can also be obtained off specialist sites such as freelayouts.com - these may have sophisticated graphical design, leaving only the text and photos to be customised.

There are many good guides to webpage design on the web itself (e.g. jessett.com).

The main concerns for the overall design are:

- Coping with viewing at different page widths (640, 800, 1024 and larger) – the simplest method being to fix the width at 780 pixels, allowing for the vertical scroll bar. Horizontal scrolling is to be avoided.
- Navigation menus should be on all pages, but not too dominant. Ideally the menu should act as a site map to indicate and access all the content - incorporating fly-out submenus can achieve this neatly, but a simple horizontal or vertical list is adequate for small sites. Duplicating navigation is

sometimes valuable, for example context-sensitive links to related pages.

- Avoid using frames
- Download times are less of a concern as many move to broadband, but the majority still use slow telephone lines. So, optimise any images and avoid using graphics where text will do (use style sheets). Photos in .jpg format can be significantly reduced in size by optimising in software such as Fireworks, PhotoShop, PhotoPaint, or shareware packages.
- Maintain consistency across pages by keeping navigation, text and other design elements in the same locations and to the same styles and colours.
- For text use a pale background with dark text or light text on a dark background. Avoid colour combinations that are problematic for colour-blindness – check how it looks in greyscale by saving a screenshot and removing the colour in a photo editing package.

Accessibility

We have a duty to make websites as accessible as possible, most particularly for those with visual impairments. It is important to use plain fonts such as Arial, of adequate size and in colours that are easily distinguished. However, this obvious visual appearance is only the surface of making webpages accessible.

It is important also that the underlying code that delivers the webpage is constructed in such a way that the page can be read using automated text-to-speech software. The main consideration here is that the old method of laying out pages using nested tables to control positioning causes problems for the reading software and is to be replaced by the use of Cascading Style Sheets (CSS). Here it is useful to have the latest Dreamweaver MX2004 software, which can correctly interpret the CSS design as it is created on the screen.

This and other accessibility issues are addressed in the World Wide Web Consortium document 'Web Content Accessibility Guidelines', available on the Web Accessibility Initiative website at w3.org/WAI.

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You can check to what degree your page is accessible, in meeting these standards, by using Bobby assessment at bobby.watchfire.com.

Search engines

A search facility is a very useful addition to your site. Some people use them instead of the navigation menu. The search allows users to find pages containing words or phrases. Several web companies provide free services for indexing your site – atomz.com, freefind.com, picosearch.com.

As well as including the search box on the home and other pages, it is useful to have a search page offering more advanced search options. This can usefully be combined with an index for the site or site map, with hyperlinks to the referenced pages.

Registering your site with major global search engines is not as important as it used to be, due to the great prevalence of spidering engines, predominantly Google. These find and rate your site by links, so it is important to establish as many reciprocal links as possible with other related sites. It is also important to fill the <title> and description and keyword <meta> tags of your webpages with information useful to the search engine.

To promote your site more generally, make sure you have its address prominently on your letterhead and all publicity.

Professional design

Creating a simple website is within the capabilities of anyone who can use a computer and software such as a word-processor. However, complex feature-rich designs are complicated to implement and perhaps best left to professional designers.

Going beyond the simple considerations of layout and navigation there are a number of additional coding methods to achieve complex requirements. Those using design packages such as Dreamweaver will soon be drawn into altering the HTML code by hand, as this is facilitated by the software. The next step is to tackle dynamic HTML (DHTML), which for the most part involves incorporating JavaScript, a programming language to alter the code interpreted by the browser. Often this can be done by inserting bits of code off

specialist websites without really knowing how they work internally.

Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) are an increasingly important part of the design process as they allow great control over the style of text, images, table cells, and positioning. Beyond simple use to fix the style properties of a whole page or site, CSS are not really recommended for the novice.

Active databases are another area best left to professional designers. These require coding in a language such as VBScript to produce active server pages (.asp), which the server interprets to produce the HTML code sent to the browser. Server Side Includes (.shtml) are another simple example of code that is inserted on the server. Active generation of pages on the server is now a widespread practice for professional sites and you will often see in your browser address bar file endings such as .asp, .php, .cfm.

Many professional sites now have custom graphics to give a unique look and appeal. This requires some proficiency in the use of image manipulation software such as Macromedia Fireworks, Adobe PhotoShop, Corel PhotoPaint, etc. Dynamic graphic and text effects are now frequently added using Macromedia Flash, which is also a specialism.

If you find all this complexity rather disconcerting you should be assured that there is no great difficulty in creating a simple website – anyone can do it. But you should be aware that there is some 'rocket science' out there that you may wish to get professional help with. Professional designers will charge somewhere in the range £500-£2000 to do a customised design, depending on the scale and features required. You may find that you are then committed to them, as it is difficult to make alterations to the site without their involvement.

Final pointers

- Any site is better than no site - have a go, it is easy to do a basic informational site.
- Domain names are cheap - buy a nice simple one and use it in all your publicity.
- Make use of free services – webspace, templates, site features, images, software.

Creating a website

- Anything you want to know about creating websites is on the web – search google.com.
- Take notice of what appeals about other sites – use it on yours.



Who are we?

High Peak CVS works to ensure that local voluntary and community groups can access as much support, advice and information as possible. We help groups in many different areas, such as funding, charity registration, practical services including printing, training and links to training and with legal issues. We have resources, including a meeting room, computers and OHP for use by groups.

To find out how we can help you, please contact us on 01663 735 350 or email hello@highpeakcvs.org.uk
Visit us at www.highpeakcvs.org.uk