

Web Sites With Event Appeal

By Zoie Clift



Photo credit: Actix, Ltd.



Photo credit: Samantha Bradshaw of Webboom Design & Development, Inc.



Photo credit: EDU Internet Strategies



From Registration To Evaluations, Event Web Sites Save Time & Money

Via the Internet, planners have a powerful tool at their hands. The web provides a connection with attendees, company decision makers, event planners, travel staff, on-site staff, or vendors by sharing information as well as collecting information in the most timely, up-to-date, cost effective, and efficient way available today. To put the power of the web in perspective, according to GlobalReach research agency, there are around 840 million users of the Internet worldwide. By integrating an event site into the routine, a planner can tap into this wide-reaching technology, and add a powerful card to their repertoire.

Taking an Event to the Web

"A website allows for great communications to attendees, whether it be the agenda, travel information, hotel information, ground transportation information or destination information such as weather, currency, or customs," said Terry Blumenstein, CMM, Partner with Coordination Plus LLC based in Sarasota, FL. "There is such an abundance of printed material received through regular mail, that a well designed and properly laid out website will attract more attention and direct attendees more quickly to the areas they need for information, than a printed brochure. Plus, with changes occurring on a daily, if not hourly basis, a website can be updated on the fly, versus printed materi-

al, which would require reprinting and another mailing." Blumenstein said the company directs attendees to their websites for meeting and incentive programs so that they can read about the destination and register for the event.

A useful plus of an event web site is that information about the event can be shared real-time. "Information about the attendees can be collected and reported on, sliced and diced in whatever way necessary and appropriate for the various audiences—company decision makers, event planners, etc.," said Samantha Bradshaw, a founding partner of Weboom Design & Development, Inc. based in Sausalito, CA. "An informational web site can be up and running within a business day, as opposed to printed informational pieces, which can take weeks to design, print

route, according to Rick Simmons, a Business Development Manager at EDU Internet Strategies based in Chester, PA, this depends on why a planner puts an event on the Internet. "The two big areas the Internet affords is the ability to market the event cost effectively and allowance for ease of registering for the event," he said. "Using SEM or Search Engine Marketing and the right research you can target the group you are after and appear where they are looking."

Reasons for Going the Web Route

Motivations for taking an event to the web are varied but sometime the decision doesn't require a second thought. "I plan events for people in the telecom industry specifically cellu-



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Partner
Coordination Plus LLC
Sarasota, FL

and mail. It is a fraction of the cost of print or snail mail. At every point along the timeline of an event, the web is more efficient, affordable, and timely."

As to the benefits of going the web

lar operators and vendors," said Theresa Tronolone, a Marketing Communications Manager at Actix, Inc., a global provider of wireless network performance engineering software with U.S.

headquarters in Reston, VA. "As these are the people on the leading edge of wireless technology they expect everything to be done through the Internet and e-mail. So it is highly important for me to have an event web site for any customer facing events. I tend to use e-mail blasts to promote our event rather than direct mail because as a company all of our commu-

will be there if it is a trade show or showcase event," he said. "Being live on the web also enables a planner to communicate directly with registered clients to ensure they show up, to provide them with resources to save them time with travel arrangements and to announce changes like new speakers or shifts in the meeting agenda. A web site also facilitates post meeting

of a solid site include an appealing, appropriate and creative design, intelligent and intuitive navigation and online forms, accurate and up-to-date reporting, a thoughtful collection of accurate, useful, up-to-date and interesting information, ease of use for both attendees and planners and that the site is easy to update at any time and from any computer connected to the Internet.

Another useful tactic to consider is your agenda. "What I tell my clients is if a big prospect was sitting in front of you and you knew they had already spoken to your biggest competitor, what would you tell them, what makes you unique?" said Simmons. "Tell those coming to your site why they should be there and why they should stay."

While it may be tempting to go for all the bells and whistles available to make your site stand out, holding off on these impulses is usually a better route. "Simplicity is a virtue," added Jacobs. "Registration functions including communication tools are very important. Don't overlook the importance of design. If the site looks sloppy or you can't identify what it is right away, that will cause trouble. The site should include pages on the agenda, lists of clients and vendors, the meeting location, and a survey for after the meeting.

It might be a stretch, but I'd also contemplate a blog for clients to communicate their expectations or to comment on the agenda."

Content to Include

Once an interest is sparked in taking on the web, the next step is building a solid site. "When creating a website, allow time to review, review and review again," said Blumenstein. "Think of all the data you may need to communicate as well as what data you need to capture for the event. Always ask for more information from attendees than you need. Start out with an idea or theme that you want to communicate and have your web designer suggest to you what they think will work best. Use them as a partner and use their expertise."

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She added that two years ago the company created a web page for an event that was linked through its corporate site. "As we have a niche market we are not advertising to the general public so it does not need to be as robust but must include good graphics and clear instructions," Tronolone said. "It is also vital to have registration done through a web site both for the registrant and myself as a planner. As the form information is dumped into a manipulative report it helps in all aspects of planning and it takes out the double data entry of using other forms of registration. As a one-woman show this is key to getting the event done on time."

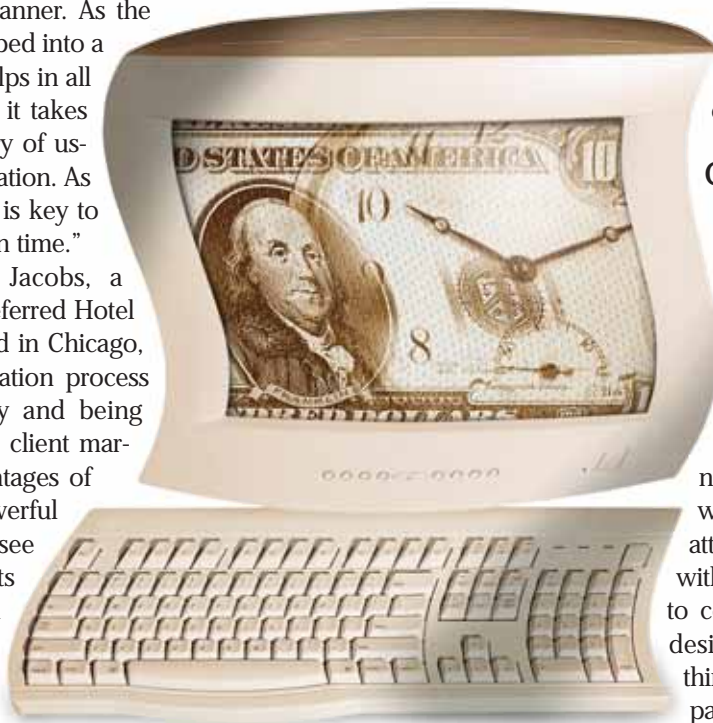
According to Craig Jacobs, a Managing Director at Preferred Hotel Group, a company based in Chicago, IL, managing the registration process efficiently and promptly and being able to conduct targeted client marketing are the big advantages of an event site. "It is powerful for clients to be able to see other client participants that have registered, and to potentially communicate directly with them, and to see vendors that

communication and database management for future events."

Making a Site Standout

Once the motivation to create a site has been instilled, the next step is creating a powerful site that gets a message across. "A website is outstanding if it communicates the message clearly and concisely, is easy to navigate, and attractive," said Blumenstein.

According to Bradshaw, other facets



Another key is to keep in mind your audience. "When planning the beginning stages, a planner must think like the registrant who knows nothing about the event," said Tronolone. "A piece of information that you take for granted like the location might need to be at the top of the page with a link to local area information even if it is NYC. There is always someone who has never been to your location before. I would look up other conferences and events similar to the one I am planning to see what worked and what didn't and try to customize it to our customers and their needs."

Also, consider installing traffic reports. According to Philippa Gamse a web strategy consultant and creator of "http://www.cyberspeaker.com", the keys to evaluating the return on investment from your site, to improve it, and often to further development ideas can be found in your Web traffic reports. These show what visitors are

looking for, how long they spend on the site, where they go, where they leave, and what rate of response you get to the various calls to action. Without these reports, Gamse says a planner is just shooting in the dark with



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their Web investment. Gamse also suggests that every page of the event site should have a strategy. "Too many Web pages end weakly, with no clear calls to action," she says. "Don't make your visitors have to work to decide what to do next, they won't! Invite the visitor to interact with you, or go to the next page, but make it easy

and obvious. At the appropriate place in each page include a link to the appropriate form, 'register for this meeting', 'ask for an exhibitor packet', or whatever invitation may be relevant."

Making the site user friendly is also

of benefit. "While Flash and some of the other sizzle special effects may seem great to you - most users want information," said Simmons. "Keep the page in HTML and content is the key. If you want to use the Internet and marketing is your aim, and it should be, then optimize your site. If you don't know how, and it is getting more and

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K.I.S.S. Checklist

Here's your **Keep It Simple Site Checklist**. Remember to think of everything you'll need both pre- and post-event. Make your site inviting, call your visitors to action and be sure to make the site user-friendly. This alphabetical checklist will point you in the right direction. Plus, we've added extra boxes for your own unique content—

- Agenda Pages
 - Announce Changes
 - Attendee Evaluation
 - Blog(s)
 - Client List
 - Company Marketing Materials
 - Event Description
 - Information on Attendees
 - Logistical Information
 - Air Travel
 - Hotel
 - Ground Transportation
 - Meeting Location and Description
 - Messages from Executives Vendors
 - On-line Registration
 - On-Site Activities
 - Photos
 - Post-event Survey
 - Rules and Qualifications for Incentives
 - Schedule of Events
 - Session Descriptions
 - Share Experience with other Attendees
 - Staff
 - Testimonials
 - Traffic Reports
- Other:**
- _____
 - _____

more complicated, it will be wise to hire an SEO firm to help drive the right traffic to you."

Finding help

Luckily, there is no shortage of web development companies available for planners to consider. "It is helpful to have a company that has standard reports and easy to use web page creation when you are not a web master yourself," said Tronolone. "I also love that these companies set up the databases that back up the information captured on the event website. Having used Access many moons ago I vowed never to have to create my own database again. Why reinvent the wheel when you have so many other details to worry about?"

Tronolone said she is even thinking of creating an event web site for the company's internal events so that staff can get their information at one source and RSVP. "Our staff is constantly on the Internet and therefore it is becoming more comfortable for them to get all their information there as well and makes it easier for me to have to put the information in only one spot," she added.

Just because you hire a SEO firm doesn't mean you will lose control and be out of the planning picture. For example, Webboom, whose site can be found at "<http://www.webboom.com>", recently added a feature that allows a planner to insert the text, pictures and links in each of the websites sections, thus giving a planner more control of his or her site. "It reduced our costs as well as we handled more of the actual content of the sites," added Blumenstein, who uses this company for his website work.

"A planner should find a web developer that specializes in events," notes Bradshaw. "The web developer should be able to guide the planner through the potential uses of the web, specifically with the planner's event in mind. A planner should compile his or her "dream list" of anything and everything he or she might need to share with his or her "entire group"; attendees, com-

pany decision makers, other planners, staff, vendors, etc. Any information they can provide the members of their "entire group" throughout the program, both pre- and post-event should be considered."

As for pre-event information, Bradshaw said the website could include rules and qualifications, qualifier standings for incentive programs, event materials such as company marketing materials, sessions descriptions, schedule of events, logistical information such as air travel, hotel, and ground transportation information, on-site activities and event description. Also messages to participants from Presidents and Senior Sales Executives can be included. "On-line registration is the most efficient and accurate way to receive information from attendees," added Bradshaw. "Intuitive web forms can collect data from attendees in whatever format necessary and distribute reports on that data in a variety of formats to any number of people with unique responsibilities having to do with the event."

Post-event, a planner can receive attendee evaluations, using online surveys, in order to measure the success of the event and potentially plan more effective, educational, and exciting events in the future. Post-event websites can also be a place for attendees to share their experiences with other attendees, as well as photos and testimonials. Event planners can use the post-event website to create excitement about the next event. For example, for company incentive programs that run year after year, the announcement of next year's incentive destination could keep the sales momentum up.

In short, a useful and successful event site allows attendees to get accurate, up-to-date information with as few clicks as possible. The site is fast, collects and reports on all information needed to produce a successful event and is easy to update on-the-fly. With these facets in place, a planner should have few worries and breathing a little easier, content with the knowledge that the site is online and as effective as possible.

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