Website Management

Part of the problem with talking about your website and its services is that there's a lot of jargon. It's pretty much unavoidable. Of course none of us want to fill our minds with more than we need to know… but there's a certain amount of jargon that can make administrating your website less intimidating.

This is particularly pertinent with making sure that bills are paid. It's important that you know what you're paying for — and why. If you don't, you're liable to get caught out by a billing scam or even worse, loose control of your website.

Some vocabulary

A note for computer engineers

From an engineer's point of view, many of the explanations below are technically imprecise. I don't believe the reader needs to be burdened by anything more than they need to know, so I've deliberately over-simplified in some cases.

The **Internet** and the **World Wide Web** (or Web for short) are *not* the same thing. The Internet is a **network** of semi-automated computers: the Web is something the Internet does. So if we imagine that the Internet is rather like a department store, then we can think of the Web as comprising several of that store's departments.

An **application** is a piece of computer software. Microsoft Word, Microsoft Outlook, iTunes and Adobe Photoshop are all applications that run on your PC. A **client** application runs on your PC, but its primary job is exchanging data with other, remote computers on a network, in this case the Internet. A **server** is a semi-automated, remote computer providing services to other computers.

When using your personal computer you expect all the software tools and applications you're using to be stored on the same machine. On the Internet this may well not be the case: your website's documents, your email service (a database if you have one, and so on) may well be sitting on several different Web servers (on different sides of the world!), with the machines passing data between them.

A **Web browser** is an application in which you view a Web page. Internet Explorer, Firefox and Safari are all Web browsers. Web browsers are client applications.

Note that a Web browser is not at all the same thing as a **Search Engine**. (Occasionally when asked "Which Web browser do you use?" people will reply "Google.") A

Search engine is basically (but put simplistically) a content index of Web pages. You use a Search Engine's services through their website in your Web browser.

In order for someone to visit a **website**, we need two elementary components: a **domain name** and a corresponding website. It's crucial to know that these two concepts are actually separate, but have gotten conflated in common speech. One can register a domain without creating a website for it. Having a working website, however, necessitates that you have a domain name.

The pair function together in the same way that a mobile phone needs both a number and a handset to work. One without the other is useless. A domain name is rather like a phone number: it directs a 'caller' to a particular website. In the same way, a website is simply a collection of documents and files that the domain name 'points' to.

ISPs and Servers

We've already established that a **server** is a semi-automated, remote computer providing services to other computers. However, the word 'server' is legitimately used in a two ways, which is in itself confusing. Unfortunately, the word is also commonly misused.

The main mistake is to talk about an **ISP** as being 'a server'. For example, people frequently talk in terms of wanting to 'change their server' or having 'trouble with their server'. In these cases, what's probably being talked about is one of their ISPs. An ISP — **Internet Service Provider** — is a company one purchases or rents an Internet service from. ISPs almost certainly use servers to give you a service, but they aren't themselves 'a server'.

You will almost certainly have multiple ISPs.

Your main ISP is the company you get your Internet connection from. So if you get broadband from, say, Virgin Media, they are your ISP (and to reiterate, not your 'server').

Once you've got your Internet connection you can buy services from other ISPs. If you register a domain name with a company like Fasthosts Internet for example, they would be the ISP for that service. But you may have your website registered with a third company — say 1 and 1 Internet — in which case they would be a third ISP. This is perfectly normal and legitimate.

Now it's established that the word server is often misused, I can move on to describe how it genuinely refers to two distinct things:

- A *computer* permanently connected to the Internet and fielding Internet traffic
- A specialist piece of *software* on a server handling the exchange of information.

For example, in common speech we usually use 'server' to mean the Web server hardware itself. However the software that handles requests to see Web pages is often *also* referred to as a Web server (although 'http server' is more accurate). Unfortunately we'll only know for sure which is which by context.

You will have heard the word 'server' used in several other contexts too: there are 'mail servers' (incoming and outgoing), 'ftp servers' and 'database servers'. These are all software on Web serving computers.

[h3] Other terms

A URL — Uniform Resource Locator — is a statement that pinpoints where a precise file is located.

We could see a URL as a map or address to a particular document, in a particular directory (or 'folder'), on a particular computer.

A URL includes a coded prefix (http:// is the most common). This is called a **protocol**. The protocol is a coded way of opening a communication between your (client) computer and the server. The http protocol, for example, is a request to be sent a copy of the file indicated in the rest of the URL.

So to summarize:

- **example.com** is a domain name
- **foo.example.com** is a sub-domain of example.com.
- **www.example.com** is a website under the domain example.com.
- **www.example.com/test/** is a directory in www.example.com
- **www.example.com/test/page.html** is a specific page in a directory on www.example.com
- **http://www.example.com/test/index.html** is a URL.

So we've established that there's a difference between a domain name and a website. When written down, however, it's not immediately easy to work out which is being talked about.

At one time the www prefix was mandatory. Nowadays we can still be confident that www.example.com is referring to the website, but dropping the www will often work just as well too.

The Web is full of shortcuts. http://example.com will *probably* work as a synonym to http://www.example.com. In fact, if we type any domain name into the address bar of our web browser, in *most* cases that will work just fine. The browser handling the address may have been set to presume we mean http://www.example.com/index.html (index.html is a default page and usually your homepage). That presumption's very helpful, but baffling in those rare instances when it doesn't work!

JavaScript is a common Web programming language. It is inserted into Web pages in amongst the HTML code. It's sometimes called a **client-side** language because it is executed in your Web browser (the client application). It's also called a 'scripting language' because it orchestrates **behaviours** according to a preset plan ("do this if the user does 'a', do that if the user does 'b'" and so on).

Email

In this section we're going to look at how to common email issues.

It's not compulsory to get an email address from your ISP. In other words, if you are getting broadband from Virgin Media, you are not compelled to take any other services from them … and neither should you! If you decide to change ISP you will lose your email address (and website if you have one), so always get your email account from a separate ISP.

There are two basic ways email is managed by the user:

- **Webmail** services like Yahoo! Hotmail or Googlemail are accessed remotely via a Web browser (Internet Explorer, Firefox or Safari). Mail is composed, sent and received via a website.
- **Application-based email** is managed from a software application on your own computer, e.g. Microsoft Outlook or Apple Mail.

In the first case, as long as we have an Internet connection, we have access to email and from any computer anywhere in the world. All mail is read, sent and stored whilst it is still on the receiving server: files (e.g. attachments) are only downloaded to the 'local' PC when the user chooses.

In the second case we are confined to our own computer. We have to perform several set-up steps ourselves (e.g. ensuring that incoming and outgoing mail servers are specified). All mail is downloaded directly onto our own computer, read and sent from there.

Mailboxes

In addition to this there are several types of mailbox. The two key models are the standard, POP3 mailbox and the email forwarder.

By analogy, a standard emailbox is just like a pigeon-hole mailbox: messages are simply dropped into it and stay there until you collect them. (A webmail account is effectively a POP3 mailbox.) By contrast, an email forwarder immediately forwards a message on to another mailbox, which makes them useful as aliases.

How email works

Talking about setting up email and diagnosing problems is hampered by poor clarity about what's actually happening. The process is in fact broadly analogous to conventional mail and thinking in this way helps diagnose problems.

When you press 'send' your message is first forwarded to an outgoing mail server, which acts like an outgoing sorting office. In other words, upon receipt, the 'sorting office' looks up the place that the message is addressed to and passes it on. It is picked up by the

incoming mailserver and added to your private mialbox until you collect it (unless it's a forwarding account, in which case the mailbox will daisy chain the message onto another mailbox).

So the main thing to remember is that *exchanging email involves using two different servers:*

- The **outgoing** mailserver will *probably* be owned by your ISP. It will probably be prefixed 'smtp.' (for example smtp.virgin.net or smtp.blueyonder.co.uk).
- The **incoming** mailserver can be traced by the domain name after the @ character in the email address. It will probably be prefixed by 'mail.'. So name@example.com's incoming mailserver will *probably* be mail.example.com. If you were having trouble getting email from name@example.com, you should approach the administrator of example.com.

If you have a website, it's almost certain to have an email service. Most websites will only have an incoming mail server (e.g. mail.example.com).

Email First-Aid

Diagnosing the problem requires clarity about where the process is failing.

- **If you can't send or receive**, then you need to investigate your own computer, followed by the ISP that gives you your internet connection. It's highly unlikely that service would fail from both incoming and outgoing servers simultaneously. It could be that your Internet connection itself has failed: check that you can call up a (random) webpage. If you can't achieve that, then there's a likelihood that either something between your computer and your ISP has failed (the computer itself, the router or the modem) or that your ISP is having a problem. Eliminate these causes before calling technical support!
- **If you're sending but not receiving**, you've got an Internet connection, so you need to check your own email application for errors first and failing that, tackle the administrator of the incoming mailserver.
- **If you're receiving but not sending**, you've got an Internet connection, so you need to check your own email application for errors first and failing that, tackle the administrator of the outgoing mailserver (probably the ISP that you get your internet connection from. You can work that out by looking at what the outgoing mailserver is called: if it's, say, smtp.virgin.net, then in all likelihood it's going to be Virgin Media you need to contact).

Spam, spam, spam, spam

Choosing and using email addresses

Spammers are basically lazy. However they can afford to be, because so many of us do things that make it easy to harvest email addresses.

- Don't use patterns like info@example.com, webmaster@example.com or sales@example.com. Spammers log domain names and simply spam these patterns of address simply because they are so common!
- Don't expose an email address in any webpage. It's relatively easy for spammers to create a program that 'reads' Web pages and collects email addresses. Since many of us want to be contacted by email through a website, there are four ways to tackle this:
    - **'Mung'** your email address by disguising the crucially identifying characters e.g. address['at']example['dot']com. The downside is that this tactic confuses users and forces them to work that bit harder to send you a message.
    - **Use forwarders**. Create temporary email addresses that only appear in the website and forward all mail on to your official address. When the website address starts attracting spam, simply delete it and insert a fresh one.
    - **Use JavaScript**. Ask your website designer to obfuscate all email addresses using a little program inserted into the Web page itself. This is a common strategy, but only an option if your designer understands this suggestion!
    - **Have a contact page with an email form**. Again, only an option if your designer is able to implement the suggestion.

Nice people can be spammers too!

We all unconsciously assume that spammers are malicious people who are trying to sell you fake watches, sex aids or trick you out of your bank account's passwords.

Unfortunately spam can be considered to be any mass unsolicited email. Sending out your new postal address to everyone on the Order email list is a form of spam.

There are progressively less harmless versions of this, though.

- Sending out an invitation to an event you're running at your local centre also seems harmless. However consider that attaching a 1MB image to the message can be a real nuisance to someone who has to download it by dial-up Internet connection. You could clog up someone's phone line for 20 minutes or more with a nice picture of a lotus.
- Why does an Order member in Australia need to know about an arts event at a Centre in England? Because it's too much trouble to extract all the non-local addresses? That's spam!
- Target your recipients reasonably, but don't address messages using your To: field. The To: field displays all the addressees publicly and this is impolitic for three reasons:

- It's a breach of each addressees privacy
- It is in itself a ready-made spam list. There's nothing stopping me clicking Reply All, or Copy and Pasting the whole lot into a new message
- It makes it easy for a virus in your mailbox to collect all the addresses.

Always Bcc: (Blind Carbon Copy) recipient lists.

Talking about Search Engines

This section summarizes the main topics you need to understand in order to market your website effectively on the Internet.

Google are not the only search engine, but they are the most important one. They also offer a large amount of free advice on search engine marketing and page optimization, much of which can safely be considered universally applicable. These should be considered essential for any webmaster:

- Google Webmaster Central Blog http://googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com/
- Google Webmaster Guidelines http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=35769
- Sign up for:
    - Google Webmaster Tools http://www.google.com/webmasters/
    - Google Analytics http://www.google.com/analytics/

Vocabulary

When we use a search engine to investigate a particular term, the list of results we get back is known as a **SERP**, or Search engine Results Page. Search Engine Optimisation (**SEO**) is the practice of developing a website with Search Engine Marketing (**SEM**) in mind.

There are, broadly, three forms of SEM worth considering.

Organic listings

Search engine software (called 'robots' or 'spiders') continuously request Web pages. The robot picks apart the text content in each page. It adds the results of this examination to an extremely large database of cross-referenced words.

When a human searches for a term (say 'Buddhism') the search engine queries it's database and returns a list of pages that mention that term. The order we see the list is calculated according to what the search engine deems the most *relevant* pages on that topic.

Thus the process is 'organic'.

Results are purely down to the relevancy calculations by search engine software. We can influence the calculation to some extent by optimizing our website, but the software cannot understand the content (it can't actually see, much less read) and can't infer meaning by context. So a key job for a webmaster is ensuring that website is transparent to visiting robots. One of the ways to check this is by using Google Webmaster Tools.

Freshness is another important quality. A Search Engine will take into consideration how recently text content was added, and conclude that 'more recent' equals 'more relevant' to the search query. To help in this endeavour, your site should be updated periodically— add the new Centre program, mention upcoming special events, Centre news and so on. Its a good idea to use your homepage for news updates, ideally having each item should link onto a special page about that topic (e.g. your programme page):

Autumn/winter Buddhism and meditation events, classed and courses

We're delighted to announce our new programme. We have a new beginners meditation course starting on 1 November, Astanga Yoga on November 2, and a course on Buddhist ethics starting on November 3. See our monthly programme page for an overview or download a copy of the Ourtown Centre programme.

Directories

A directory is a list of websites sorted by topic. It is managed by human editors who decide what to include based on their own judgements about quality. This makes them extremely important! There are some very large ones like the Open Directory www.dmoz.org and signing up to them is generally a good idea. If there are directories for your city or town, then find out about them and get yourself listed.

Paid Inclusion

This is the preferencing of search returns based on the subject having paid a sum of money to be included in a search return for one or more particular terms. In other words an urban Buddhist Centre could chose to pay to have their site included for 'Buddhism' or 'Buddhist meditation' in their area. You will see often these paid listings at the very top or side of a SERP. This is worth doing, but only if you are struggling to compete in organic listings (e.g. it maybe that the competition has a more robust handle on their link strategy, something you couldn't catch up to).

Improving the structure of a website

Improving the structure of a website can be done at any point in a site's life, but the earlier it's considered in the design the process the better. The HTML code behind every page will get cast in stone at the earliest stage, and after that improvement becomes harder.

HTML structures the information on the page into the form of a list of elements: headings, paragraphs, images and so on. The list is there regardless of how the page actually looks to the human visitor and it's this list of elements (and pretty much only that) that

search engines will evaluate. If the HTML code is itself sloppy and error filled, that will hamper the Search Engine evaluation.

Humans are usually only concerned with how the site looks: a good Web designer can make default HTML rendering look very visually exciting. However, a bad Web designer can do this too, but by disregarding code quality in the process. In fact many, many *very* stylish websites are hopelessly Search Engine unfriendly.

There are circumstances where being Search Engine friendly is neither here or there. For some websites relying on organic listings is too much of a lottery and publicizing a site (e.g. an e-commerce site) through print will be more effective. For FWBO charities, where organic listings are crucial, SEO is a necessary practice and quality coding is a stable foundation on which to proceed.

Valid HTML code follows standardized rules. The simplest way to ensure quality code is to ensure that your designer can edit his/her code to follow the rules laid down for a version of HTML (to some extent it doesn't matter which version). The code created for the designer in Dreamweaver can't be relied on to be completely valid, so it's important that they can actually check it:

http://validator.w3.org/

So: engage a designer who at least understands how to edit HTML by hand.

Tasks

As a matter of routine

- Check your Google Webmaster Tools account for problems
- Read the Google Webmaster Central blog (and do what it suggests!).

Checklist

- All your pages should be reached by a unique URL
- Each page should have:
    - A unique HTML page title (the phrase at the top of your browser window)
    - A comprehensible document name (if possible)
    - Page specific meta description and meta keyword tags.
- There should be global navigation on every page and every page should be included in the navigation structure (no 'orphan' pages).
- Every page should contain substantially unique text content.
- There should be an average of about 500 words per page.
- The first paragraph should summarize the content of the rest of the page and emphasise the page's main keywords.

- Headings should be proper HTML headings (not just a ordinary paragraph in a bigger font).
- **Every link** should be an ordinary HTML link. Many swish, 'drop-down' navigation menus are engineered by JavaScript that Google cannot execute. If your site designer can't ensure that a drop-down menu will work for Search Engines, don't use that navigation strategy.
- Every page should be reached within three clicks of the home page. This means that, if your navigation is a list of the site's pages, then the list shouldn't have more than three levels. For example:
    - Top level item
        - Second level item
        - Second level item
            - Third level item
    - Top level item
        - Second level item
            - Third level item

- Insert 'alt text' into each image tag describing what each image is of. (Don't be tempted to cram alt attributes with keywords: that's a well know spam practice.)
- Do as much as you can to acquire links from other sites.
    - Try and see that links are inserted into running text.
    - Try and see that the link is wrapped around meaningful link text, e.g. Buddhism and meditation in Ourtown not www.ourtownbuddhistcentre.org and certainly **never** click here.
- Do the same in reverse: look for things to link to! Investigate content rich FWBO sites like www.FreeBuddhistAudio.com www.fwbo-buddhist-articles.org. Link to specific articles from your own running text. Try an emulate the linking practice on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page
- Don't rely on a single links page! Single links pages are a very lazy approach and may not even completely work: Google is vague about it's cut off point for links-per-page, but won't take more than 100 links per page into account.

And never, ever…

Get smart. Unless you're a world-class spammer, you'll get caught out and penalized. Don't even think about:

- Duplicate content of any sort (e.g. copying pages from other sites, especially ones you already link to).

- Inserting ‘hidden content’ (e.g. white coloured text on a white background). If a human visitor can’t see it then it will be probably interpreted as spam.
- Hidden links.
- Sneaky redirects that show the human visitor one page and the Search Engine another.

Usability

Usability is a crucial topic because it is about making sure people can easily get at the information you are offering. It's extremely easy to confuse people.

The basic principles are:

- Web users are goal orientated
- They have very, very little patience
- Anything you do that forces people to think will turn visitors away.

Test the site on people before you launch it. Set them some simple tasks (e.g. find out when beginners meditation is; send you an email) and get feedback about how they found the process.

Decide what you really want and need

- Write a 'design specification' before you approach a designer. This only needs to be an informal description of what you want to achieve, *but it's important to be conscious of all your needs and expectations*. If some of them are unachievable and least you will become aware of that.
- Be realistic about project budget. You should be thinking in terms of £500 – £1000.
- Write a work agreement/contract and stick to it, e*specially* if the work is being done by a volunteer. Your website is one of your key publicity tools, so take the same amount of care when engaging a designer as you would any other contractor. Pretty much all designers gain experience through doing pro bono work, but the experience will be more valuable if they are engaged to do a professional job. Don't accept sub-standard work from a volunteer you don't want to offend… and if you can't face saying 'Thanks, but no thanks', then don't engage them.

Don't use Adobe Flash to create a whole website

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with Flash animated content. The issue is how appropriate it is to the context. A whole animated site is a profoundly bad idea: the only person who can edit it will probably be the designer (thereby making it a substantial ongoing expense) and it will be almost invisible to Google (there are ways to help Google evaluate these sorts of sites, but anyone who knew enough to do that wouldn't suggest you had a Flash animated site in the first place!).

A Flash animation is a good idea only if there's no other, simpler way to get your information across. They rely on plugins to work (which can mean the user being forced to download and install things they may not want to) and take extra time to download and run.

Splash pages

'Splash' pages function rather like a magazine or brochure cover. They often feature just a 'welcome' graphic or animated invitation to enter the site. Whilst these are less common than they used to be, there are still a few homepages sporting large, atmospheric images and little else but primary navigation.

A printed magazine cover is trying to grab the attention of a purchaser from amidst a busy magazine rack. On the Web, your visitor made the decision to visit your site before they get to the homepage (they clicked a link from Google or a previous Web page), so they already know they want to enter.

It's unwise to make visitors jump unnecessary hurdles. The only time a splash page makes sense is when the option to enter or not is a framing meaningful question: whether you have permission to login to something private, or whether you *really* want to enter a porn or gambling site.

A homepage is the best place to seed quality information about your site and your Centre. It should feature a lot of well-focused text content, summarising the rest of the site. Use it wisely to promote links to interior pages, to get your user to your top information by the quickest route, to post links to news updates, new pages emphasize an upcoming course and so on.

Images are a Very Good Thing

However, atmospheric images *are* important: they evoke the centre's atmosphere and reassure prospective centre users. There should be at least a couple of images per page, preferably illustrating the text on that page. Generally you should illustrate what goes on at your centre and who goes there. Make sure they:

- Represent the spectrum of people that use your centre (e.g. both genders, young and old)
- Are well composed and show the subject in a flattering light (not caught pulling an odd face!)
- Aren't too close cropped or blurred
- Have an even contrast
- Are of good digital quality (i.e. not patchy with 'jaggy' squares).

Images have a 'tone of voice'. Snapshots, professional iconic images, cartoons and graphics each bear a different tone. When choosing images, bear in mind that they will be seen ask yourself 'What story is the viewer likely to tell themselves about our centre based on this picture?'

Don't forget that there is such a thing as copyright! Other people's paintings, drawings and photographs aren't common property: it's not OK to lift them from another website without asking. *Always* ask the subject of an image for permission to post their photo.

Design 'above the fold'

This is an idea borrowed from print design. The 'fold' is the bottom of the browser window, i.e. the point beyond which you would have to scroll down. Anything above that is the first thing the visitor will see, so make it count. Put your crucial information where people will see it first: don't assume people will scroll down the page. If they're on a mission (and most people are), they'll click on to the first thing that looks like it's heading in the right direction.

Links must be immediately obvious

A link should be immediately visible with a quick scan down the page. Link text (the words you actually click on) should highlight/emphasise a word or phrase that describes what the target page is about, for example: which stands out more clearly in this paragraph? A comment about beginners meditation or an introduction to Buddhism? If you deviate from the convention (underlined blue for unvisited (not clicked) and underlined red or purple for visited (previously clicked)) ensure it's immediately obvious that a link is still a link.

Image buttons look nice, but if badly implemented the user will have to guess what's a button and what's decoration. Image links that are engineered with JavaScript can be completely Search Engine unfriendly. This means that a search engine may never visit and index the target page. If your designer isn't sure what the case is with the images links they've created… then maybe you shouldn't chance it.

Make sure downloads are clearly labelled… and worth downloading

If you offer downloads, clearly label what it is, with a précis. Inform the user what software they need to use/play it, what sort of file it is and how big it is (i.e. how long it will take to download). Make sure it's Mac compatible! There are lot of Mac users in the movement so use one of the very common cross-platform file formats.

Above all: make sure it's good enough quality to be worth downloading! A muffled talk isn't going to show your Centre in its best light. It's better to point a user to a top talk on www.FreeBuddhistAudion.com.

Posting talks and articles is a good idea, because it attracts visitors to your site, especially if the piece is has a distinctive take on a topic, or is an unusual subject. It may be that you acquire links from other sites on the basis that your site is an 'authority' on that topic. And getting links is a Very Good Thing!

Link to other pages in running text

One of the finer arts of site admin is linking to other sites.

Everyone believes that getting links is a 'Good Thing', which is true, it is. But it's a matter of quality, not quantity.

It's unlikely that your own site will cover more than a couple of elementary themes on the topics of Buddhism and meditation, so if you want to expand on a topic the sensible thing is to link to a page on another site that already covers that. Places to look include www.fwbo-buddhist-articles.org and www.FreeBuddhistAudio.com

Note: a *specific* page on another site. Don't just drop someone off carelessly at the other site's homepage. In terms of building rankings in Google and other search engines, direct linking can add up a lot, because an incoming link is counted as a vote of quality for the target page. That vote may even reflect well on your originating page, so it's extremely worthwhile doing it with care.

A long, long links/resources page is *probably* better than nothing, but it offers a dubious service and in some cases is indicative of lazy administration. Few humans will read the list — most will scan it, see there's a list of Centres around the world and move on. Centre sites aren't so interesting that they will sustain the interest of random surfers! If all the most broadly interesting sites (www.FreeBuddhistAudio.com, www.karuna.org etc) are at the bottom of your links page, they'll rarely get noticed. So if you do have such a page, *emphasize the most content rich sites over sheer volume of links*. To make sure all the Centre sites are accessible, then all you need to do is link to www.fwbo.org's contacts pages.

JavaScript: with great power comes great responsibility

It's very easy to create funky 'behaviours' — things that move, appear in context, change or activate only when you click on or mouse over a page element. It's really, really easy to do this with snippets of code inserted by Dreamweaver, found on the Internet etc without really knowing how the code works.

If a behaviour does anything mission critical, then you need to have a fallback plan.

JavaScript behaviours can be very useful, but they're incredibly easy to implement badly. One of the main problems is that they can be completely search engine unfriendly: Search Engines can't execute JavaScript programmes. So anything that's generated by the script won't be visited or indexed by Google. Unless you actually understand JavaScript, it's not obvious what the situation is and even more difficult to fix.

This doesn't just affect search engines: JavaScript can also be turned off manually. Why would anyone want to do that? Whilst JavaScript is theoretically benign, behaviours can be annoying (pop-up windows are powered by JavaScript) and used as part of attempt to breach your security. There's no easy way of knowing how many users do elect to turn

JavaScript off, so again, if there's any mission critical process run by JavaScript you need to have a fall back plan.

If your designer doesn't know how to do evaluate the situation, then there's an open question about whether the proposed behaviour is a good design strategy.

Google Webmaster Tools and Analytics

Tracking what your visitors actually do when they visit the site is an obviously useful thing to do. There are two powerful, free tools to start you off.

Google Webmaster Central www.google.com/webmasters/

A free service that gives a lot of feedback about exactly what information Google has collected about your site. Once you've demonstrated that you're the legitimate webmaster, you can see pages that indicate how often Google is 'crawling' your site, what errors or hindrances it encountered, use some diagnostic tools and examine who is linking to your site.

Google Analytics www.google.com/analytics/

Another free tool. Insert a piece of JavaScript at the bottom of each web page and every time the page is loaded into a Web browser, information is sent back to Google about what pages were visited, for how long, in what order… and much, much more.

Note that the although the information being gathered is relatively benign, it is polite and reasonable to make mention that you're using the tool in a Privacy Statement somewhere on your website. In this statement you should let the user know how to disable the reporting. Note also that everything said previously about JavaScript applies here: it can be turned off and where it is turned off there'll be no statistics returned by that visitor.

Further Reading

Don't make me think! By Steve Krug is a well-respected introductory text on this topic.

Designing Web Usability: The Practice of Simplicity by Jakob Nielsen is based on considerable observation testing — watching and recording how real people use real websites. Whilst much of Nielsen's work focuses around e-commerce (and whilst he has a demonstrable lack of interest in the aesthetic dimension), many of the principles he discusses are valid to FWBO websites. His website has a number of useful articles:

- Usability 101: Introduction to Usability http://www.useit.com/alertbox/20030825.html
- How Little Do Users Read? http://www.useit.com/alertbox/percent-text-read.html
- Top Ten Mistakes in Web Design http://www.useit.com/alertbox/9605.html

- Top Ten Web Design Mistakes of 2005
  http://www.useit.com/alertbox/designmistakes.html

  I have written a parallel article summarizing the main principles of writing copy for a website, Web friendly Text, available from the www.fwbo-centre-support.org website.

Registering services: Contacts, control panels, billing

Your website services are a crucial asset, but it's easy to loose them by administrative mistake. When registering or purchasing a new service be prepared for the following questions.

The name, postal address, phone number and email address of:

- An Owner Contact,
- An Admin Contact,
- A Technical Contact,
- A Billing Contact.

(These can all be the same person.)

Make sure that the Owner Contact is that of the institutional or 'moral' owner. In other words, your charity's Chair or a Trustee. Never, *ever* allow a domain name (or other service) to be registered in the name of a volunteer or contractor! If there's any dispute over your service, they win: they legally own your assets!

If you register a credit/debit card to receive annual payments (a common requirement), make sure it's still valid to receive the *next* payment.

Make sure any contact email address is future-proof i.e. that it won't lapse: if there's any communication about the domain name (like billing reminders), corresponding with the registered email address is one your proofs of possession.

By that token, if your domain name is example.com, it's unwise to set, say, info@example.com as the contact email address because if the domain falls out of registration, you won't be able to use the email address. It will lapse because its parent domain has.

Always note down:

- The Web address (URL) of any login pages
- Your username and password

Registration Admin

- Record who all of your ISPs are (i.e. domain name registrar, website, Internet connection and email providers)
- Make sure your accounts person knows who's invoices they should be paying (note: never, *ever* pay any invoice from the Domain Registry of America! They are a scam outfit.)
- Know why you chose on ISP over someone another.
- Record what you're buying from the ISP (i.e. domain name, website, Internet connection, email)

- Make sure you know who the billing contacts are and that they are reliable (i.e. they won't disappear off into a 'wide orbit')
- Make sure their registered card details are kept up to date (most bills are automatically debited to a credit or debit card)
- Keep this information secure, but easy to find.

Contracts and ownership

When you engage someone to design your new website, make sure you write contracts (a clear work agreement would do) and ensure you maintain legal ownership of your assets.

Don't let a volunteer register or set up services (like a domain name) in their name. A printed flyer will be binned after a few weeks: a website can *theoretically* stay live for years! You could easily find your centre competing against stale versions of it's own website in Google.

Many Web designers start work doing pro bono jobs for local friends and local charities. There is of course nothing wrong with this.

Problems occur when the offer comes from someone who has no feeling for a website as a publicity tool — to them it may well be a live project within which to develop a new skill. People who are excited by computing may well tempt you into arcane solutions that — after they have moved on, lost interest or run out of time — leave you with a site that more or less forces you to spend money on to rectify or back away from. You should turn down any offer that:

- Demonstrably won't make administration easier. Try a working model first: the end result must be operable by someone with only modest computer literacy.
- Hampers Google or any other search engine. Some sites — especially completely animated ones — are all but 100% Google unfriendly.
- Can't easily be picked up by another competent engineer. It's highly likely you won't know HTML from Ruby on Rails; ask for advice from competent people in the Order. If they think the solution is arcane, don't agree to it!

The Website Admin Team

When I took the job of Internet Worker on, I was party to an assumption that the person to contact at a Centre was their 'webmaster'. Over time it became pretty clear to me that this is a frustratingly false assumption. In reality, the situation is varied and occasionally even Byzantine (where responsibility is shared amongst several people for historical and / or territorial reasons).

In May 2008 I did a round of interviews: I got in touch with about ten Centres and asked to speak to whoever it was that had the administrative overview of the Centre website.

From experience, I imagined that this might not be a straightforward request. As I suspected, in a couple of cases the Centre team needed to think about it. The person I ended up speaking to was in most cases a Centre Manager, but the responsible relationship with the website varied significantly.

At many Centre's the 'webmaster' is actually just responsible for implementing changes (what I've called an 'upload controller', below): they are the person who knows how to use Dreamweaver (or whatever editing tool the Centre site uses). Beyond that, they may or may not have been the original designer, they may or may not be the Centre's resident 'techie', but only rarely do they have the editorial control sufficient to edit or commission content.

My conclusion is that administrating a website is in almost all cases a collective endeavour. Key tasks are distributed amongst a nebulous and fluid bunch of people, often in an ad hoc manner. Most of these people don't operate within a clear distribution of responsibility and within that, some key people don't realize how important their task is (or why).

Further, there are some important tasks that rarely seem to get done because they don't naturally fall to a designated person, so in terms of passing on useful information — from a consultant to the Centre Team — it can be a no-hoper. No one knows what to do with the information they get.

Where this came to light for me was over copywriting. When asked what can be done to improve any given website, my response is often about improving text content. I don't think there's any website that wouldn't benefit from improving its approach to copy. In theory it's a routine admin task and an art rather than a science — something a literate person might even enjoy. In practice it's done last minute and as the outcome of a certain amount of hassle [1].

Most of us agree that Google rankings are a vital marketing issue. Not enough people realize that good copy is one of the primary things that acquires and maintains high Google rankings. That being the case, then delegating the job of copywriting down to the first person actually willing to do it (reluctantly or otherwise) is a questionable decision. How likely is the author going to be aware of web-copywriting principles? How willing will they be to take these ideas on? And who is going to train them anyway?

Suggested roles

I gave this problem some thought and came up with a model that describes all the routine jobs, without being prescriptive about who does them. All of them can be done by the same person (although usually that's impractical), but however the labour is distributed, the model at least it flags which tasks need covering.

Try figuring out who actually does what at your Centre.

Editorial Review Team

The formality of this depends on quite how significant a website is to Centre publicity. Major changes to a site will likely as not be discussed by the Centre Council (or an equivalent body) in an agenda point: in this event they are acting informally as the 'Editorial Team'. It could also fall to a 'Publicity kula' if your Centre has such a body. I suggest that an Editorial Review Team periodically checks whether the jobs I describe below are being done, by whom and how well.

Even if it's the same person covering all of these jobs, it would seem wise to at least formally acknowledge this. Otherwise the Editorial Team might want to consider convening an ongoing 'website kula' featuring an Editor and Webmaster.

It's in the event of a new website being commissioned that an Editorial Team comes into it's own. They will need to take broader issues into consideration: feedback about aesthetic appeal, budget, commissioning a designer and so forth. They should also periodically be presented with a report based on their website statistics and some sort of feedback (i.e. a head count) on how many centre users (especially newcomers) arrived at the centre door as a result of the website.

Editor

This needs to be someone who can routinely oversee the site, which means periodically looking through (and reading) it, quality checking structure and noting dead pages and links. Skills needed include:

- A good standard of written language.
- A working understanding of copywriting for a website.
- An ability to organise information logically.
- An eye for images.
- An eye for inserting a 'call to action'. [2]
- An ability to delegate appropriately (i.e. approach contributors).
- An ability to train someone to be an effective contributor.
- An ability to work with the information they actually get, rather than what they'd ideally like!

  The editor should

Contributors

Asking a contributor to write about an upcoming course, event or class they are running makes sense. However, the contributor probably won't welcome a lesson in Web copywriting.

It's almost inevitable that the Editor will have to take what s/he receives and massage the best they can out of it (this being the reason for having an Editor in the first place!).

They *can* be asked to help pin down appropriate, searchable keywords for their service. They may have a feeling (conscious or not) for the kind of terms and phrases that people searching the Web might use to find their service. For example, someone searching for an alternative therapy may use any one of a small number of synonymous terms which should throw up the same result.

I say much more about the specifics in my *Web Friendly Text* article [3].

Webmaster

This role has two dimensions: it could reasonably become a modest job for a couple of people.

Upload Controller

This is the person who actually implements and uploads changes, often referred to as the 'webmaster'. They will be the person who is trained (at least sufficiently) to use Dreamweaver, the website's online control panel system or whatever tools upload pages to the webserver.

The Upload Controller needs to have a good grasp of HTML. In order to implement the more subtle Search Engine marketing strategies, they need to be comfortable with editing the HTML code directly. HTML is not — by any stretch of the imagination — a complex computer language, but it underpins the Web so knowledge of its rules should be seen as pretty much essential.

(That said, if you're using some model of Content Management System (CMS), it may be that that your website doesn't allow this level of editing: that's sometimes just the way it is.)

Ideally they should have a reasonable grasp of Internet IT; at the very least they should know where to go for answers.

Website Marketer

This role implies a fair amount of ongoing research and strategic thinking.

It should also be seen as the Website Marketer's job to keep up with relevant online news (there are several Google news feeds that are must-reads) and tools (a Google Webmaster Tools account should be a must-have) in order to recommend modifications to strategy. [4]

A task that often gets overlooked — since it's a genuinely technical realm — is a website's statistical tools. Some of these tools — notably Google Analytics — provide very useful information, the *least* interesting of which is how many visitors your site gets (traditionally the figure that excites people). It can help you see what pages visitors read and in what order, how long they stayed on a page, what search terms they used to find your site

at all… and much more. The website Marketer should be able to submit a summary report to the Editorial Team (i.e. submit a report as an agenda point to the Centre Council) a couple of times a year.

Obviously they should be actively involved in Search Engine Marketing, [5] which should include cooperating with the Editor about the quality of copy. It also includes trying to collate information about people arriving at your Centre: in what way was the website a factor in getting them through the door?

If you were to consider joining a paid advertising program like Google AdWords, the Search Engineer Marketer would manage this.

Designer/engineer/programmer

The person who created or installed the website initially. Depending upon the sophistication of the website, the layout designer, programmer or installing engineer may be the same or different people.

Whatever the case, this person should be interviewed and their previous work reviewed. A review should focus on how easy their work is to navigate. Aesthetic appeal is important, but not as important as the visitor being able to get appropriate information from a site. An FWBO site could be beautiful… but it would be useless if you couldn't find current programme information within a couple of obvious clicks.

The website Kula

In an ideal world the website kula would be able to combine experience to write a design specification to present to the Editorial Team. After due consideration, they in turn should be able to present this to a prospective designer. This is where an understanding of your website statistics can be very important — knowing sufficient information about your visitors to commission what you need from a new website. [6]

Conclusion

I've tried to cover the basic roles without getting tied up in details and all possible permutations. It is in reality, however, a basis for a discussion rather than an out-of-the-box solution.

Nevertheless, the advantages to adopting a recognizable pattern of jobs include:

- Clarity about what needs to be done to effectively manage a website
- Knowing to whom a task has been delegated and therefore the ability to monitor how well it's being done
- Being able to receive advice in a specific arena and see it targeted to the right person

- Being able to direct feedback and enquiries to the person most likely to respond effectively.

Notes on the Website Admin Team

[1]

This isn't a uniquely FWBO issue: see Pepi Ronalds , "The Cure for Content-Delay Syndrome", *A List Apart no. 259* (May 2008), http://alistapart.com/articles/thecureforcontent-delaysyndrome

[2]

A 'call to action' is a prompt or encouragement for a visitor to do something (with the implication that they will spend money) vis-à-vis whatever the website is 'selling'. If you're 'selling' a one off event latter in the month, inserting one or more calls to action in running text increases the likelihood that a random visitor will take up the suggestion.

[3]

http://fwbo-centre-support.org/internet/web-friendly-text

[4]

We can *reasonably* assume that anything Google says has general applicability, but remember that Google is not the only search engine. It *is* the most popular *and* the most helpful in terms of technical support. The starting point for Google tips is the Google Webmaster Central page www.google.com/webmasters/ I would also recommend regular reading of the Google Webmaster Central Blog at googlewebmastercentral.blogspot.com

In terms of direct feedback about your own site, sign up for the following:

- Google Webmaster Tools www.google.com/webmasters/tools/
- Google Analytics www.google.com/analytics/

[5]

Search Engine Marketing (SEM) is the practice of promoting a website by increasing it's visibility in Search Engine Return Pages (SERPS). Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is the practice of improving the content of a website (text and HTML structure) for the benefit of Search Engines and therefore the Web searching public.

SEO is therefore something a Search Engine Marketer does.

[6]

See Halvorsen, Kristina; " The Discipline of Content Strategy"; *A List Apart No.274;* http://www.alistapart.com/articles/thedisciplineofcontentstrategy (16 December 2008) Halvoresen outlines a set of 'content-related disciplines' that expand and refine on my proposed set, going into somewhat more detail than is probably necessary for most FWBO Centres.

Further Reading

Simmons, Amber; "Reviving Anorexic Web Writing", *A List Apart no. 242*, http://www.alistapart.com/articles/revivinganorexicwebwriting (July 31, 2007)

Kissane, Erin. "Writing Content that Works for a Living", *A List Apart no. 271,* http://www.alistapart.com/articles/writingcontentthatworksforaliving (November 04, 2008)

Nielsen, Jakob; "How Little Do Users Read?" *Alertbox*, http://www.useit.com/alertbox/percent-text-read.html, (May 6, 2008)

Nielsen, Jakob; "Long vs. Short Articles as Content Strategy", *Alertbox*, http://www.useit.com/alertbox/content-strategy.html (November 12, 2007)

Google Webmaster Guidelines: http://www.google.com/support/webmasters/bin/answer.py?answer=35769