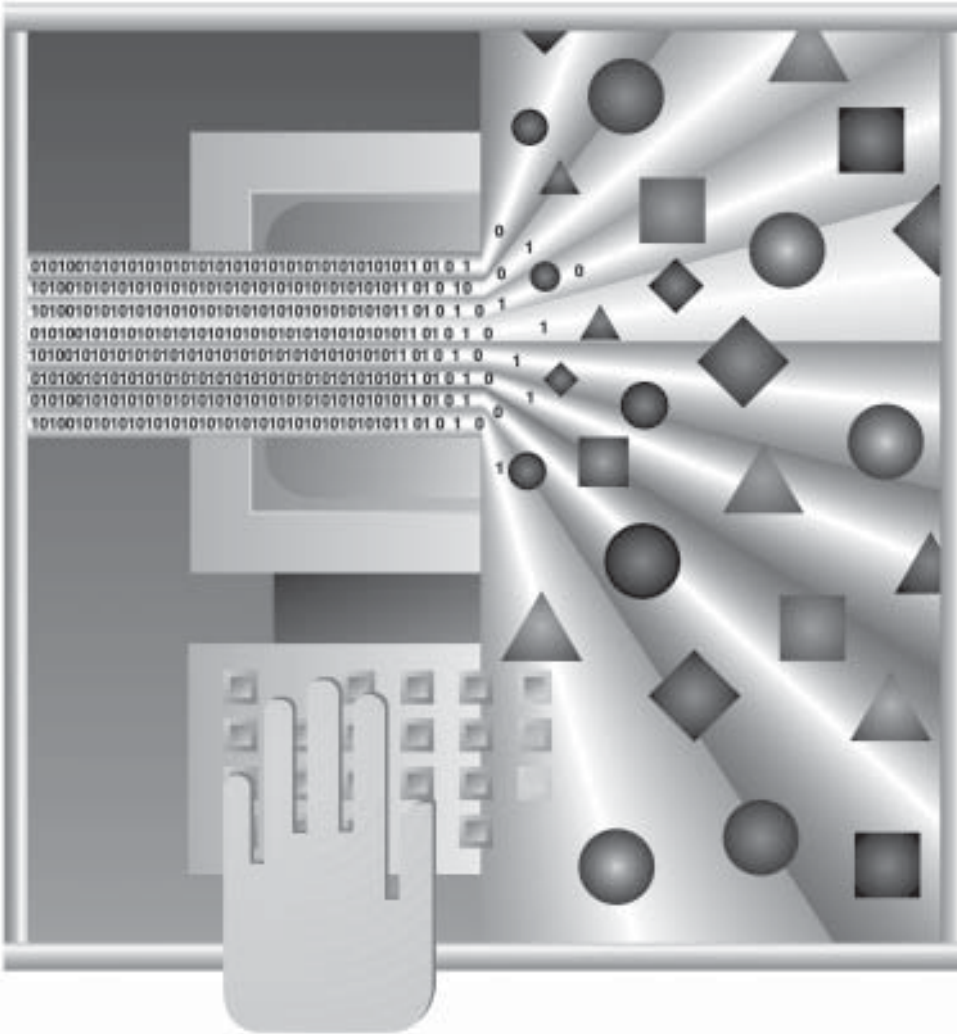


SUCCESSFUL CLUB WEB SITES

by Bill Boothe



What is obvious to most industry observers is that club web sites are becoming increasingly powerful and complex. What is less obvious is what actually makes a club web site successful. In our opinion, it's not just advanced technology. The forgotten ingredient of success is the human factor — in the form of a person or persons to manage the site.

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Everywhere you turn, people in the private club industry are talking about web sites. We estimate that more than 2,000 clubs now have a web site — with hundreds more coming online this year. Our recent reviews of web site products spotted great advancements in sophisticated interactive functionality, including online event reservations, interactive calendars, archiving of important club documents (i.e. board and committee minutes) and online member access to billing account information.

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Clubs that have brought sophisticated web sites online are learning that getting things up and running is just the beginning of the challenge. Keeping the site fresh, timely and targeted is proving to be the true measure of success. How are clubs doing it? Let's start with a quick review of what it takes to maintain an effective web site.

Content Maintenance

Almost all of the content on a web site — basic club information, news, photos, the calendar, events registrations, the member roster — must be maintained by the club. This wouldn't be much of an issue if you could just put information out on the site one time and forget about it. Unfortunately, stale web site information is a turn-off to members. They have come to expect a certain level of timeliness and professionalism in web sites. They have lots of exposure to outstanding sites all over the Internet — sites that are often maintained by a small army of professionals dedicated to making the sites fresh and cool. How can your club meet such high expectations?

For starters, you'll have to satisfy the three basics of successful club web sites:

- Timely
- Targeted
- Professional

Timely sites include information that is no more than a few days (or hours) old.

For example, news and photos of yesterday's golf tournament, today's lunch specials, minutes of this week's board of director's (or various committee) meetings, this week's tennis tip, today's weather and course conditions, etc. Timely information keeps members coming back to the web site on a frequent basis.

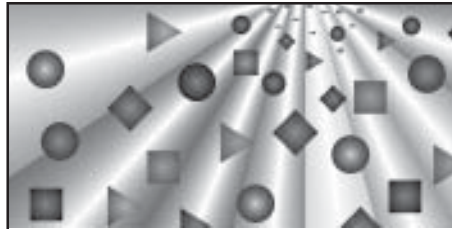
Targeted sites offer information to specific segments of the club's membership — golfers, tennis players, fitness enthusiasts, spouses, children, theatergoers, wine aficionados, bridge players — and a hundred other sub-sets of a club's membership. Targeted information assures that all segments of the club's membership will find something of interest on the web site.

Professional sites make a good impression with members and compare well with the standards set by the top Internet sites. Members expect a stylish site (no getting away with fuzzy photos or poorly-written articles) and they expect the information on the site to be correct and complete.

If you haven't already guessed, meeting these standards takes a lot of work. However, most clubs are not prepared for the talent and time commitments needed to get the job done. Here are some ideas that might help.

What It Takes To Get (And Stay) On Top

First and foremost, it takes dedicated, creative and professional talent. We're not talking about someone with basic word processing skills and an Instamatic. This is a job for a person with proven public relations skills — and a flair for style. A person who is persistent and capable of extracting information from each club department on a regular basis. A person who is articulate and has good attention to detail and accuracy. And finally, a person with the time available to get the job done. Unfortunately, that person is nowhere to be found at most clubs. And there's the rub. You can probably handle the cost of a club web site — but can you really afford to



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keep it timely, targeted and professional? Or more to the point, can you afford not to?

Clubs are increasingly discovering that the mere presence of a sophisticated web site does little to assure its success. The people behind the site make all the difference. Here are some tips we have heard from clubs on making their sites successful.

Departmental Participation

Creating a constant flow of fresh content to your web site is a key success factor. Clubs that have made participation from each department mandatory (i.e. assigned one person in each department to provide information on a regular basis) have dramatically increased their content volume and timeliness.

Member Participation

Members can be a great source of information, and managed properly, can produce a wealth of fresh web content. Some clubs have created web site committees, including members with varying interests charged with providing content targeted to their particular sub-groups. Of course, a designated club employee should always review the information (from members and club staff) for accuracy and appropriateness.

Management Commitment

On-going involvement from the club's manager and department heads can make all the difference — by setting the standard for participation throughout the club and emphasizing the importance of the web site to member communications. Brief content memos, news bites and tips from this group on a regular basis keeps visibility high — and sets the expectation for participation throughout the ranks.

Dedicated Staffing

From four hours to two or more days per week (depending on the expanse of your club's web site), someone on your staff should be dedicated to the job of generating and managing web content. This might be an existing staffer with a flare for creativity, a membership marketing person with some spare time, or an additional part-time person with web site experience. The important success factor is a qualified person who has the time to get the job done — this week, next week, every week.

Keys to Success

A sophisticated, interactive web site can be a great communication tool for your club's members. Timely, targeted and professional content will keep members interested — and coming back to your site. To maintain your momentum, dedicate the people resources necessary to get on top — and stay there. ▀

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