

# City websites have common mistakes with simple solutions

The Internet is a wonderful tool that has revolutionized the way we conduct our daily lives. Municipalities have also embraced this new technology, and it has proven to be an effective way to communication with citizens, visitors and prospective businesses. Cities have invested thousands of taxpayer dollars in developing city websites, and the successful ones are reaping the rewards of increased efficiency, better communication and wider exposure. Unfortunately, poorly designed and managed city websites litter the Internet and frustrate citizens and visitors alike. These are five of the most common mistakes on city websites.

## Failure of City Leaders to Monitor the Site

As I speak around the country, I often mention something I saw on a city website, and I get a blank stare from the mayor or council members. Many will admit that they very seldom visit their own city's site. In the digital world, this is as bad as failing to see a tree lying in the middle of your busiest street. The municipal website is often the first stop for many people who are visiting or doing business in your city; therefore, you need to visit often and note items that need attention. After all, you would never allow a police cruiser to be parked in front of City Hall with four flat tires. However, each day millions of people visit city websites with dead links and outdated information.

## Having Technical People Solely Responsible for the Content

This is surely not a knock on the information technology department, but leaving decision on content to the technical gurus can be a fatal mistake for your city website. The website should reflect the character and direction of the leadership and management of the city. I recommend forming a diverse committee to meet on a monthly basis to suggest ideas and improvements for the city website. Things are changing at a rapid pace, and we need to stay current and provide the best content to keep the city website updated and relevant. Can we video stream the Parking Authority Meetings or add a searchable compliant system?

These are things that can better communicate and inform the public. The information technology department can tell us if it's possible; leadership can make it happen.

## Failure to Realize Why It's Called the World Wide Web

While I doubt many people will confuse Paris, Texas with Paris, France, you would be surprised at how many city websites seem to think that the only visitors will be from within their state

or country. Most site-selection companies use the Internet as their primary information outlet. A company from Oregon looking for a plant site should not need to get out an atlas to find out about a community. We need to think big. When you are in Richmond, tell the visitor whether it is Indiana or Virginia! In this global economy, most visitors or companies will not be "driving into town." Give them the information they need and make it easy to find.

## Out-of-Date Information

The worst thing on a city website is to look at the calendar of events and see a listing for the 2002 Spring Fling. There is no excuse for having a stale website. The Internet is a dynamic, fast-changing tool, and we need to reflect that in our city websites. New technology makes it possible for easy updating of content. Citizens, visitors and business prospects need relevant, up-to-date information. A business will not survive with outdated price lists and inaccurate contact information, and neither can we.

## Fuzzy Contact Information

I was looking for a mailing address to send a proposal to a city recently, and I felt sure that I could get the mailing information on their city website. Wrong!! I spent about five minutes (an eternity on the web) and finally gave up. Not everyone is dealing in e-mail. We need to make it easy to communicate. E-mail addresses, phone numbers, fax numbers, and street addresses are all a necessity and cost us nothing to add to our site.

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