

District and Club Web Sites ... the Importance of Content and Management

There has been much conversation about district and club Web sites - how they should serve and how best to manage them. This article will condense some points in both discussion areas into an interesting working model.

At the district level, the Web site serves to provide information to the clubs in that district and to others, Lions and non-Lions, worldwide. A district Web site should, at a minimum, provide club information and meeting times, zone and committee chairs, upcoming events, the district governor's visitation schedule, an online version of the district newsletter, contact information and a links section. Ideally, it will also include administrative forms for club use, a photo gallery of district events, and information for club Internet committees.

Much of the material presented on the district Web site is a duplication of the district directory. Recognizing that the printed version may not be available to all members in the directory and is certainly not available to most Lions outside the district, this information helps committees, clubs and members connect. The information provided should conform to the club and/or district privacy policy, which is addressed further in this article.

Including upcoming events is the ideal way to provide up-to-date information on changes, additions, cancellations and amplification. The district Web site should provide contact information for clubs to submit events; the district Webmaster is then responsible for keeping the newsletter editor informed of newly received items.

Providing the district governor's visitation schedule enables that working document to be kept up to date, something that the print version is unable to accomplish. Almost always there are changes in the schedule; these may be published in the printed newsletter, but that is usually a monthly publication and may not be timely enough to be useful. Changes need to be included in the printed newsletter for members who do not have access to the online version, but the latter should be encouraged as the

best source for those who have access to it.

Many districts cannot afford to send the district newsletter to every member. It is hoped that club secretaries provide information and the opportunity for members to read the printed version, but providing an online edition is a great service to members who may not be in attendance or in clubs where the district newsletter may not receive much attention at club meetings.

Contact information at the district level can be as basic as offering an e-mail address to the district Webmaster. On a more sophisticated site, there will often be a contact form which may include choices of recipients. The important thing is that there be adequate opportunity for the Web visitor to get more information and provide feedback or information. If a contact form is provided, it is important to also make available a direct email address and, for those who prefer it, a postal mail address if possible.

A links section should include the Web site of any district clubs with an online presence as well as links to the multi-district Web site (if any) and to the Lions Clubs International Web site.

The ideal district Web site will also include the means for clubs to submit information required by the district. If district officers expect to receive monthly reports of club activities, it is easier for both the clubs and the receiving officers if that form is filled out and submitted from the district Web site. In addition, awards nominations, reservation forms, etc., can be made available if the district uses them. If the district is able to accept credit card payments for cabinet meeting meals and conventions, the ideal form will include a secure payment opportunity. A photo gallery at the district level is provided to share events with those who weren't in attendance, and also to allow those who were to revisit the experience. Suggestions include cabinet meetings and conventions, district governor visitations and club activities that are of interest to the district as a whole.

Finally, the ideal district Web site should provide help for club Webmasters just getting started. A "Web Help" section will present material on how to make a Web site and how to publish it. It can also provide links to other tutorial Web sites on Web production.

The club Web site may be much more individual than the site at the district level. The club Webmaster may not have the time or expertise to put together a sophisticated site; the number of Internet active members may also play a part in how extensive the

club's Web site is to be. The minimum information that should be presented on the club Web site includes meeting time, location and contact information. Just those items alone provide a valuable resource tool for clubs and Lions throughout the world. If possible, event and project information, a club photo gallery and a links section should also be present. If the club has need for it, a forms section may also be included.

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The meeting information should include the location and directions on how to reach it. A map may be included and perhaps a photo of the clubhouse or building will be of assistance. It is important to include the days and times of meetings.

The contact information may be the e-mail address of the club Webmaster. It could also be an e-mail list of officers or a contact form with space for comments. As above, if a contact form is used, an alternative method (i.e., direct email and postal mail) of contact should be offered.

Event and project information will help the club present itself to the world. Other clubs with like interests may then contact the club; new members might be attracted to the type of work in which the club is involved, and the photo gallery expands the club's Web presence.

At the club level, the links should be upward, not lateral. The club should link to the district Web site

and to Lions Clubs International; if possible, it should also link to the multi-district Web site. The club should avoid linking to other clubs because their addresses frequently change with the change of club assignments and providing the wrong information does not serve anyone well. It is the role of the district Webmaster to provide current club links.

If the club has a "forms" section, it might include prospective member forms, committee reporting forms and community contact forms. If the club can accept online payment, a donation form might be included.

With both district and club Web sites, it is imperative to keep the information current. It is worse to provide incorrect information than none at all. Frustrating Web visitors will keep them from coming back and from using the Web site as a resource in the future.

Lions Web sites, at all levels, need to be accessible to all. This includes Internet users with less sophisticated browsers and users who rely on other media for obtaining information from the Web, such as blind users who rely on text browsers or aural readers. In addition to being accessible, the ideal Web site includes an accessibility statement, which specifies how it obtains information.

Another statement that should be included on every Lions Web site is a privacy statement. Not all clubs and districts have developed Internet privacy policies, but it is important that they do so. The statement needs to address how information is provided on that Web site and how information received through the Web site is used.

The concept of district and club Web sites is exciting. The Web sites and the material contained in them are becoming increasingly more important tools of communication -- and should be as effective as possible.

(Editor's Note: Author Noelle Neuwirth serves as District 41-L Internet and Technology Chair and Webmaster.)

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