

Effective website communication

You've heard the saying, "If you've got it, flaunt it". But are you shouting about the work that your council does or are you relatively unheard of in your local community?

So, you may wonder, where does a website figure in all this? There are many reasons why a website is important.

Firstly, a website is cost effective, paper free communication. It's available when you're in a meeting, tucked up in bed or lying on the beach sunning yourself. It's easy to update regularly – making it a great tool for communicating and engaging with the local community. However, countless websites are dull and barely communicate important information let alone get repeat visitors.

Basic website requirements

It's vital to make your website interesting, up-to-date, easy to navigate, and full of content that is appropriately worded and nicely displayed (with images used where possible). Also, it shouldn't be created in isolation from other forms of communication; it should embrace other publications such as newsletters, which can be added to the website so that they can be viewed long after the bin men have collected the paper version for recycling.

A few key points about the basic requirements needed for a successful website

Interesting

- It shouldn't just be a place to find copies of paperwork such as minutes; it can be used to reach an objective such as gathering reactions to a proposal (such as building a village hall).

Up-to-date

- Although websites are inexpensive to run and keep up-to-date the task of keeping one up-to-date is often neglected. Set dates in your diary to make amendments and stick to them. Keeping your website full of fresh information that's up-to-date will encourage visitors to revisit.

Easy to navigate

- Websites need careful planning from the start to ensure that the layout remains simple, effective and a positive experience for visitors.

Content

- The content that you put into your website is an important and crucial part of building a successful website. Avoid putting lengthy documents onto the home page and concentrate on using headlines that are interesting. Take a look at many news websites to see how they place a paragraph from an article on one page with a link to the rest of the article elsewhere in the website. This way it's possible to place several items of interest on the homepage of a website.
- Content should be interesting and can be light-hearted. For example, the first signs of Spring may make an excellent photographic

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competition to encourage any community member to submit an image of the local area. Everyone that enters will visit your website to view the entries and this in turn may stimulate interest in the community projects that the council is working on.

Good communication

- A website should be at the heart of good communication. Your website is an ideal place to advertise all the forms of communication that you utilise, such as radio interviews (mp3 format), newspaper articles (link to newspaper's online article), press releases, video footage (YouTube / Google etc) and newsletters (pdf format). Conversely, all forms of communication should advertise the website.

Availability

- Information that is available at any time to anyone is vital for excellent communication. With the advent of websites it is now possible, for example, for people that are, for various reasons, unable to attend meetings but are keen to be involved, to gain access to minutes of meetings from the comfort of their own home.

Anonymity

- Removing the stumbling block to someone picking up the 'phone to make enquiries, websites provide information that can be viewed in your own way at your own pace and permit contact in various ways such as email, postal or telephone.

Support

- As well as providing key information for the local parish it is a perfect location to place information for Councillors in an attempt to support the work that they do freely and to inspire others to join this worthy set of volunteers which amount to more than 100,000 throughout England and Wales.

The government is keen to revitalise local democracy and you represent the first tier of local government. If your local parish doesn't know about the services that you provide for the community and how you are representative of their needs you need to address your communication and get communicating.

Author: Jeni Cadman runs a successful business called Electronic Chalk (www.electronic-chalk.co.uk) which specialises in helping communities to communicate more effectively over the Internet. She works with the private, charity and community sectors as a freelance website project manager, editor and writer and enjoys voluntary work in the community as a school governor.