

Tips for Local League Web sites

In recent years, Leagues have come a long way in integrating new technology into their practices. Almost half of all League members have an email address in our database, many Leagues send out their monthly newsletters electronically, and more and more Leagues have been creating Web sites. Web sites have vastly increased the visibility and accessibility of local Leagues in their communities. **However, just as imperative as it is to have a Web site, it is important that League Web sites are easy for visitors to find, read, and navigate.**

The information contained on the sites has to be current, and the sites have to be regularly and consistently promoted. This memo provides some basic tips on how to make your Web site as effective and inviting as possible. It also provides detailed suggestions about how to make your League's site a successful membership recruitment tool.

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Domain Name

The name of your Web site is very important! The URL should be short, simple, and memorable. You want people to be able to find your Web site with little or no effort. Here are a few domain name tips:

- A good practice is simply to use your League's name in the URL. For example: www.lwvpsc.org - LWV of Palm Beach County; and www.lwvtexas.org - LWV of Texas.
- Obtaining a simple domain name can cost as little as \$10 per year. Web sites like www.godaddy.com, www.register.com, and www.networksolutions.com offer domain name registration and simple Web site creation.
- When creating your Web site's domain name, *keep it simple!* Avoid using excessive punctuation (/ \ ~ _ -) or prepositions (the, of, etc.) in your domain name. Make it a name that rolls off the tongue so you can tell people easily and they'll remember it.
- While there are free Web site hosting options from community or search engine sites, they do have some down sides. Yes, they are free - but they often make your domain name counterintuitive. For example, LWV of Collier County's (FL)

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old Web address was www.naples.net/presents/lwvcc. They recently upgraded to www.lwvcolliercounty.org, much easier to say and promote.

Web site Readability

Information is powerful. However, too much information is overwhelming and not being able to read the information is just frustrating. When creating your Web site, be choosy about what you say and how you format it. Here are a few tips for making the most out of a few words:

- Your Web site is often the first contact with many potential new members so you must place emphasis on making it as professional looking as your newsletter, signs, or other visibility/communications tools.
- Most League sites are designed primarily for members and therefore unwittingly exclude non-members just by the choice of language and content. Avoid League lingo - especially on the front page.
- Do not place too much information on your home or front page. The front page should briefly describe who/what the League is, a place to Join/Donate and how to navigate the page.
- Make sure the most important information is "above the fold" (the area that appears on the screen that you do not need to scroll down to see). Require the visitor to scroll only when absolutely necessary.
- Keep it simple. Use simple, concise, easy to understand words. Avoid empty descriptive words like "great", "wonderful", etc. They are just not necessary.
- Check your spelling and grammar. It sounds basic but is crucial for credibility.
- Keep it scannable. It is important to have some white space on the site. To minimize eyestrain, keep paragraphs concise and text organized with headers. Also include a visually interesting image or graphic, such as the LWV Logo, a face, something so it's not all just text.
- Font formats like **bold**, *italics*, and underlines draw reader's attention away from the content, so use them sparingly. Underlines are customarily only used for hyperlinks (which direct you to another Web site or page). Underlining a headline or piece of information without a hyperlink can confuse a reader.
- Verdana font was designed for computer monitors and is considered the most easily read. Make sure your font size is not too large, yet is readable.
- Do not use patterned graphic backgrounds behind the body text. Use black font on a white or near white background.

Navigating

Good navigation allows a first-time, non-technical visitor to move around your site easily. If a site is easy to navigate, visitors will return to it. Here are some tips to help ensure that your Web site is easy to navigate:

- Your site need not be large or complex.

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- Every page should display the same overall appearance, with the same navigation options in the same place.
- Do not offer too many links in your navigation menu. Just like too many words, too many links and pages confuse visitors trying to find information. If you have a lot of pages use drop down menus that group them according to main topics.
- Many websites, of all types, fail to be effective because they lack a good intuitive navigation system. Good navigation gives visitors constant clues to answer three basic questions: Where am I? Where have I been? Where can I go?
- Always give your user a way out; don't let him/her navigate to a dead end. The back key is a solution but not a good one - not all users know it even exists!

Testing Your Site

It is important that after you spend time retooling your Web site that you test it out to make sure it meets your goals.

- Test your site from a technical viewpoint in different browsers. Internet Explorer 5+, Mozilla Firefox 1.0, Opera 7.0 and Netscape Navigator 6+ makeup 95% of the worlds browsers.
- Make sure your site can be seen on different screen resolutions. 98% of users have 800x600 and above resolution, thus, 800x600 can be taken as the minimum resolution the site should fit.
- Ensure your pages download quickly. For this you must:
 1. Minimize graphics, flash and scripts: They hugely increase your file size.
 2. Optimize your HTML & script code: Make sure that your site doesn't have any unwanted tags or unused scripts.
 3. Use Server Side Include (SSI) files where ever possible. SSI files once called from the web server reside in its cache so on subsequent requests they load faster.
- Test your site with real first-time users. Remember, you may know your site backwards. They do not.
- After your members test it out, find non-members to critique your site. They are your primary target audience for recruitment after all.

Maintaining League Web sites

Your League Web site is a living document. It is not something that can be put up and ignored. It must be maintained. Content must be current/fresh. Here are a few tips to keep you on top of Web site maintenance.

- A League webmaster or team needs a clear job description. The League should state clearly what is expected of them. If the webmaster/web team leader is not a member of your League's leadership team, then there should be a clear line of communication/responsibility to the League leaders. Communication with your

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webmaster should be two-way; leaders who do not have experience with web design should especially be open to ideas brought forward by those providing the technical assistance of creating and maintaining the site.

- If there is no one technical in your League to take on the webmaster role to you can use a pre-designed template system. Consider finding an intern or making an investment in your League's future by paying someone.
- Some Leagues can benefit from 'CMS' – Content Management Systems – is a system whereby different people have permission to update content within a site, without reference to the webmaster. It enables different departments to post their latest news and activities online, using only a browser interface, accessed via a password – which enables multiple users to keep the site updated.
- Most importantly, **don't leave out-of-date content online!** It is crucial for credibility and clarity. You can keep it in an "archive" or note that information is there for "background" purposes or "history".

The "Join Us" Message

What is the tone of your League's Web site? It should be welcoming! Your League Web site is a great vehicle for recruiting new members. Here are some additional tips for making membership recruitment a seamless function of your Web site.

- Pepper a recruitment message throughout the Web site and use it prominently on the home/front page. Visitors should know after leaving the site that the League of Women Voters is where hands-on work to safeguard democracy leads to civic improvement!
- Visitors should also be frequently reminded to join. "Join Us" links should be placed on *every* page and prominently placed on the home/front page. It should link to a page specifically dedicated to League membership. A "Join Us" Web page example template is located at the end of this memo.
- Use Stories! Personalize your Web site by using your members' stories. Stories can personalize a membership ask or show a new side to an important issue that your League is working on. Stories build personal connections, and your Web site is the ideal place to connect with potential new members.
- One page of your Web site should be dedicated to membership and should include:
 - Brief overview of the League and its mission.
 - Membership requirement information
 - Cost of membership
 - A downloadable or printable membership form for visitors to print out and send in.
 - Contact information in case of questions
- A Membership Message! - "LWV is the organization where your hands-on work to safeguard democracy leads to civic improvement! Join LWV and be directly involved in shaping the important issues to keep our community strong." Feel

free to use this or your own membership message. Just be sure to say at the end "Join Us".

- **Continuous promotion of your Web site with a membership message is important.** Include references to your League Web site in speeches, one-on-one communications, press releases, and in all other League communications.

We hope that this information is useful to make your League Web site as effective as possible. There are several additional tools available to assist Leagues in developing their site including [Web site templates](#), [League logo and usage guidelines](#), and [League Easy Web \(LEW\)](#). These are available in Tools for Leaders in the For Members section and at <http://lwwnet.org/>.

Sample "Join Us" Web page Template

Join the League of Women Voters of (LEAGUE NAME)

The League of Women Voters is the organization where hands-on work to safeguard democracy leads to civic improvement. Add your voice to over 100,000 League members and supporters across the country in making democracy work.

Join the League of Women Voters, a respected national grassroots organization, where individuals like you are actively engaged in creating positive change on the local, state, and national levels. Become a member and serve as a leader in your community, and work to shape the important issues that keep our communities strong.

We are -

- *Acting as a force to create positive, lasting change in our communities*
- *Empowering millions of voters to protect their right to vote.*
- *Educating citizens and fostering dialogue on pertinent issues - from healthcare and climate change to openness in government.*
- *Working to ensure that ALL votes are counted and ALL voices are heard.*
- *Preserving our constitutional rights.*
- *Working together to make democracy work!*

We believe that sensible, responsible civil discourse and action based on substance rather than partisanship is essential for civic improvement. We believe that with leaders like you, we can make democracy work.

Currently LWVof (LEAGUE NAME) is working on -

- *(INSERT LOCAL ISSUE OR STUDY)*
- *(INSERT LOCAL ISSUE OR STUDY)*
- *(INSERT LOCAL ISSUE OR STUDY)*

Membership is open to men and women 18 years or older. Annual dues are \$(SINGLE PERSON RATE) per person, \$(HOUSEHOLD RATE) for two people in the same household, and \$(ANY OTHER MEMBERSHIP TYPE - ASSOCIATE, STUDENT, ETC.). Membership in the League of Women Voters of (LEAGUE NAME) includes membership in the LWV United States and LWV (STATE). Dues are not tax-deductible.

Join us (LINK TO LEAGUE MEMBERSHIP FORM) and be part of the solution! Our community needs leaders like you to help ensure that our community is a strong, safe and vibrant place to live. Become a member and start receiving benefits today. Contact (NAME) at (PHONE NUMBER) or (EMAIL ADDRESS) for more information about League membership.