



KEEP YOUR WEBSITE FROM BEING OLD NEWS

Mark Twain said it best when

he proclaimed, "Nothing's older than yesterday's newspaper." I wonder what Mark Twain would have thought of the World Wide Web and the seemingly limitless pages of information that populate it. More importantly, what would Mr. Twain think of your community's efforts to speak to its residents in cyberspace?

Have you ever been to a website and been greeted by a stale or outdated message? Have you ever been turned off by the site of a "Page last updated March, 2001" that leads you to believe there is nothing of current interest on that site? If so, you already know that what Mr. Twain said is true. You wouldn't pick up last year's newspaper looking for items of current interest any more than you would spend time at an ineffective or poorly maintained website. Let's consider the symptoms and how best to fix them.

If your community is already on the web, you probably remember the tremendous effort it took to launch your site. If your community is thinking of getting started with a website, you are asking questions right now about what features you will need. Discussions about technology, cost and effort seem to drive the discussion. There is an array of vendors

two vital issues, all of the technology in the world won't help your community website to flourish.

You can take a cue from the most popular commercial websites to see what it takes to maintain a dynamic presence on the web. On the leading websites, you'll find current events, stories of interest, graphics, photos, surveys and much more. Your community's current newsletter is a great item to promote on your home page, as it is always timely and should be updated often.

Web marketers use terms like usability (the ease of use for your site) and stickiness (the amount of time a user stays at your site) to describe the user experience at a website. If you haven't already done so, ask a few community members to keep an eye on your website and describe their experiences while using it. These volunteers should let you know what they like and dislike, which will allow you to make corrections as necessary.

Of course, there are some things to avoid as well. If you aren't going to maintain your community website, it will be little more than a novelty. Avoid outdated pages, dull graphics and links that don't work properly. These items kill the user friendliness of a website and will alienate your audience.

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to meet the needs of communities that want to go online.

Unfortunately, two very important questions often get overlooked in the frenzy of getting online. First, how are you going to keep your website full of useful and current information that will entice users to come back again and again? Second, who will be responsible for the task? Without answering those

The best community websites often mimic the communities they represent. They are vibrant, interactive and ever changing. They grab their user's interest and keep them coming back for more. A website like that might even impress Mr. Twain.

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