



# UNTANGLING THE WEB

THE THOUGHT OF DEVELOPING A NEW SCHOOL WEBSITE IS ENOUGH TO HAVE EVEN THE MOST TECH-SAVVY PRINCIPAL RUNNING TO THE HILLS – BUT IT’S A TASK THAT’S WORTH TACKLING PROPERLY, SAYS RUTH SPARKES...

**T**hese days a school’s online presence is more important than ever. There are lots of companies like mine who would love to sell you a beautifully designed new website... but that’s only part of the solution. You need to be clear in your own mind why you need it, and what you want it to achieve. Think of it a bit like a lesson plan – what are the aims and objectives? So, for example, you might decide on something like this:

“The key aim of the new website is to make it attractive and accessible to its target

audiences, so that it works as an effective marketing and recruitment tool. The website needs to be part of our PR and marketing strategy.”

Some schools take what they reckon to be the ‘safe’ option, and keep their website in-house – built and maintained by the IT department. This can work well – but is not necessarily always the best decision. Is your IT department expert in the fields of design, communications and marketing? Is someone available 24/7? Is the school’s website hosting at the mercy of your region’s ‘Grid for Learning’ or Local

Authority? In short – have you got the control and reliability you thought you’d have?

There are a few more questions you need to bear in mind, too...

**Is it inclusive?**

In order to ensure that any new website is user-friendly and inclusive, it will need to be carefully developed with a focus on good, ‘user-centred design’.

Ask your web designer to give you a choice of three design options; one of which will be

chosen by you for further refinement and agreement (sign-off) before the development process begins.

Make sure that any website you're agreeing to is viewable on mobile phones and tablets, as well as desktop computers. In addition, you might want to consider 'responsive' front-end design; this ensures that the website provides an optimal viewing experience to its users, across a wide range of devices – desktop, tablets, mobile phones. This means that elements such as the main navigation are displayed in ways (e.g., as a drop-down menu) that are more appropriate to the size of device – rather than simply as a smaller version of what is displayed when viewed on a desktop computer.

You also need to make sure that the website is viewable across browsers – will it work using Safari, Firefox, Internet Explorer (IE) or Chrome? And, will it be effectively supported by older versions of current operating systems?

## What's the aesthetic vision?

Design for a school website needs to be clean, simple, and user-friendly; the logo must be incorporated and any brand guidelines and colourways followed – it is an extension of your facilities that's actually open 24/7.

Your homepage is where your viewer will start to make judgements about your school, so that page in particular ought to be dynamic and have maximum visual impact. It could contain bold or rotating imagery, and current news/events items that should be frequently updated to ensure the site appears fresh, and disseminates up-to-date information. This page should also contain clear and compelling calls-to-action to direct visitors to relevant sections of the website.

Your school website should also follow the best-practice guidelines in the Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), that relate to issues such as font size, colour and contrast, layout, use of images, links, etc. Ask whoever is designing your site about these.

## Who's in charge?

I remember two years ago, I was hired by an FE college where the website was managed in-house. I was there with them for A-level results day and we were feverishly working to get out positive news stories about their fantastic results – they'd managed 100 per cent pass rate in all subjects. However, the only person who had access to the college's website was web guy 'Steve'. And, it being mid-August, Steve was off on his holidays...

The message is clear. Don't let just one person have access to your website, no matter how much your own 'Steve' may protest at the notion of sharing his power. You'll need to have a good handful of trusted staff who are properly trained to manage and update content; and if you're using an outside company or learning platform make sure that, as part of the brief, your chosen staff can directly maintain and update the new website. Ensure that you are



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provided with a user-friendly, content management system (CMS) covering all of the new website's editorial copy, news and event items. And make sure that the CMS will allow for the addition of an unlimited number of new pages to the main sections of the website. You never know when you'll need more space...

It's not as scary as it might sound – staff don't need to have access to the whole website, and prior knowledge about websites or code shouldn't be required. Staff who have a working understanding of a programme like MSWord should be able to edit existing material, or publish new and updated information to the website quickly and easily via a What You See is What You Get (WYSIWYG) interface; and with the assurance of previewing any changes before they are published.

## Can everyone find you?

How many emails do you get a day promising to get your website to the top of Google? Although the spam is irritating, SEO (search engine optimisation) is important, especially if there are lots of schools with the same name as yours – try typing "All Saints school" into Google; you'll get quite a few offerings.

It's best to get SEO sorted from the onset – so make sure that whoever builds your website has a keen eye for good search engine

placement. Ask about incorporating user-friendly or 'clean' URLs throughout. A clean URL is basically a straightforward page address, for example:

<http://empra.co.uk/client-news>

instead of a clumsy (unclean url) like this:

<http://empra.co.uk/index.php?page=client-news>.

## Some final points...

- Fix your costs; they should be transparent from the start and include all charges, including technical support and hosting.
- Be aware of your position regarding cookies and data collection – all sites need to be clear to users what data they are collecting and what the owners are going to do with it. Some of the data you collect from a school website will be personal – such as the 'Contact Us' form - so you'll need to be explicit.
- General website data can be very useful to schools too and Google offers an analytics tool at no cost – you can see how many visits you get to your site, what is the most popular page, which keywords people are using, and the kinds of devices visitors are using to access your website. So, for instance, if your website is not properly viewable on a mobile phone and through using Google analytics you find out 40% of your visitors are using phones to access your site, you need to do something about it.
- And last of all, don't risk being left to start again from scratch if things change or go wrong. If an outside company is hosting your website, make sure that it is part of the agreement that if the contract is terminated, all files are transferred for you including the website code and database and that this company will advise you of the technical environment required for its further hosting.

