WEBSITES

More than just a Pretty Face!

by Mike Parry

Websites…seems like everybody has one. Do you? Do you really need one? How do you get started? "Dot com, dot net…dot HELP!" Let's discuss some basic questions to ask and the steps to take to successfully plan and implement a great website.

Start at the End

When it's time to buy an automobile, you already have in mind how you plan to use it. What you purchase would be radically different for hauling trash as opposed to taking long trips. Similarly, you should have in mind what you want your website to accomplish before you begin. You are ready to move forward when you can summarize your website's goal in a single sentence. That is not to say that a website can only accomplish one task. But, as the saying goes, "If you aim at nothing, you'll probably hit it!"

> ***You are ready to move forward when you can summarize your website's goal in a single sentence.***

Maybe the goal of your site would be to create an "online brochure" providing lots of pictures, basic contact information and directions. Many condo owners are very proud of their association and would love a way to show out-of-state family and friends the jaw-dropping beauty that locals often take for granted. Maybe association members who rent out their units might subsidize a portion of the website's cost for a section that promotes the availability of their rental units.

As a communication tool, websites are an excellent way for management and boards to inform association members of upcoming meetings and activities, post meeting minutes, notify and explain new policies, etc. In addition to these "business-as-usual" needs, communication to evacuated and out-of-state residents during natural disasters like hurricanes is a major reason why many associations are considering going online.

What's Your Name?

To be online you need a domain name. Domain names are made up of two parts: the top level domain and a sub-domain separated by a period. In the sample domain name "GrandResortCondo.com" the ".com" is the top level domain and "GrandResortCondo" is a sub-domain of ".com". There are many top level domains (.com, .org, .net, .gov, .tv, .name, etc.), but .com is the most popular and most desirable.

If the .com name you want is already taken, it is recommended that you NOT purchase a domain name ending in one of the other top level domains, especially when the owner of that .com is in the same field of business. For example, if you purchase GrandResortCondo.org while a website already exists for GrandResortCondo.com, there's a 99% chance most of the people trying to remember your website will go to the ".com" version first - which could cause real confusion and frustration.

Adding extra words or using variations of city or state may help. Maybe, TheGrandResortCondo.com, or GrandResortCondoFL.com

is available. Most registrars that sell domain names (like www.GoDaddy.com) also have a "free" search capability to help you discover if a domain name is available or has already been reserved.

Even if you don't plan to build a website yet, your domain name can be useful for email addresses. Mike@GrandResortCondo.com not only looks more professional than Mike1876@hotmail.com, but is much easier for people to remember.

Build It and They Will Come?

They won't come if they can't find you. Search engines like www.google.com and others help people find websites by cataloging millions of website key words and pointing searchers to the corresponding website. So getting your website into the search engines is vital to people finding you on the Internet.

Find a Builder

You may be experiencing two emotions right now - excitement about the possibilities and anxiety over getting it done. Relax, the most important part of this whole process is what only you can do: arrive at a worthy goal for your website and get the consensus and backing to begin it. The domain name purchasing, search engine registration, email address set-up and site construction can and should be done by professionals.

Here are a few issues to keep in mind:

- **Cost** - this is another one of those times when you will be paying for what some- one knows, not necessarily for the volume of work done. Be prepared to pay - but shop around enough to know you're not paying too much.

- **Support/Training** - when it comes to getting help, some don't mind phone support or online training, while others feel better having someone sitting right next to them. Did you purchase your last computer from a big online vendor like Dell or Gateway or did you opt for a local

vendor? Are you one who likes to know that help is only a few minutes away?

- **Updatability** - how easily your website information can be changed is especially critical if you plan to use your website as a communication tool during disasters. Not all vendors can supply this capability. Be sure to talk about it upfront.

- **Ownership** - after your site is completed and online, who owns it? Could you take what you have paid for and move it to a different hosting vendor? If not, be sure you know that ahead of time and are willing to start from scratch if you decide to leave that vendor.

- **Check References** - it should be very easy to see examples of websites created by any vendor. Be sure to talk to recent clients. Keep an open mind. An unknown local entrepreneur may be a better busi- ness partner than a large national com- pany.

Like a bank's ATM machine, a well-planned and implemented website can provide information and services to association members 24 hours a day. And with a little training, you might even be able to get them to check the website before contacting you!

*Mike Parry is President of
Intelligent Data Systems Development, Inc., a New Smyrna Beach, Florida-based company founded to provide state-of-the-art Information Management tools for the condo management community.*

*You can reach him at
386-689-6654 or Mike@IDSDev.com.*

**Reprinted with permission
from Advantage Publishing Co., Inc.**