



Improve Media Relations with Your Web Site

Compare your Web site with those in a recent study to see if you are making any of these fatal errors.

BY SUSAN LEWANDOWSKI

When an issue affecting your cause hits the news, how well does your Web site interpret the issue for the media? The Web is a basic research tool for reporters. According to a recent study, journalists start with the Web when working on a story.¹ The study provides some good, inexpensive ways to make your Web site more media-friendly and make sure reporters interpret your cause as you'd like:

Make Your Site Usable

Usability is a Web design principle that focuses on ease of use for the customer of the information. Your Web site may have multiple customers—your members, your funders, the public, elected officials, and government employees, as well as the media. The core principles of good Web site usability are clear and recognizable navigation, easy to use functions, fast download times, relevant search capabilities, and an understanding of the type of content your audience requires.² There is growing evidence that poor usability on an organization's Web site creates a negative perception of the organization in the mind of the audience. Indeed, if journalists can't find the information they are seeking on a site, coverage of that organization is likely to be reduced or eliminated from the story.

Furnish the Facts

On the Web, journalists are looking for facts, basic information, and contact people. Nearly half the Web sites evaluated in this study didn't include the basic content journalists want. Take a look at the most commonly

reported omissions identified in the study and compare them to the content on your Web site:

- **Be sure to include a contact name** and phone number. Reporters on deadline are hesitant to use e-mail addresses because they have no idea how long they'll have to wait for a response to their inquiry. They rarely bother with alias e-mail addresses such as "info" or "press."

- **Provide basic information** such as headquarters location and biographical information on key officers and leadership of the organization. Omission of this very basic information can lead reporters to have a less favorable opinion of the organization, or, even worse, make them think the omission is due to incompetence or purposeful evasion. If included, mission statements should present a clear explanation of the organization's purpose and the cause it serves.

- **Press releases without dates** don't help reporters evaluate the currency of the information contained in the release. For clarity and non-American audiences, spell out the month, as well as date and year. Non-American audiences use a different date formatting method; thus, 9-12-01 is interpreted as December 9 rather than September 12. Reporters use historical archives of press releases to get an impression of the history and progress of the organization.

Journalists on deadline are impatient with long downloads.



List your Web site with the search engines reporters use.

- **Journalists on deadline are impatient** with long downloads or non-html formatted content requiring software beyond the basic Web browser. Many are freelancers or telecommuters working with older computers and dial-up Internet connections.
- **Reporters are accustomed** to finding the type of information they need in the "About Us" or "Media/Press" navigation sections of a Web site.
- **Reporters perceive articles by outside publications** about the organization as more credible than press releases. Sites that provide links to this type of information create a positive impression of the organization in the mind of the reporter.
- **Good graphics, images, photos, and even sound bites** on an organization's Web site that can be used to accompany a reporter's story are highly appreciated.
- **Jargon-free facts and figures** about the organization, the issue or cause it advocates, and the characteristics of its membership are all very useful to reporters on deadline. Applicable financial information is always important.

Team up with Search Engines

To help reporters find your organization, list your Web site with the search engines and directories they use. Be sure you have submitted your site to the most popular search engines and Web directories, such as Yahoo and Google.³ Google, one of the most popular search engines on the Web, does not charge any fee to obtain a listing. Yahoo, the most popular Web directory, does not charge any fees to list nonprofit organizations, but does charge commercial enterprises for listings. Subscription-based Web research services such as Dow Jones Interactive and Lexis/Nexis use a variety of sources such as government data, wire services, regional newspapers, and many others to develop their information. A good public relations plan to get your organization's message in the news is your best strategy for inclusion in these types of directories.

Make Your Site an Effective PR Tool

Public relations is one of the most cost-effective and valuable methods to build awareness of your cause, promote your organization, and affect public opinion. Take advantage of your Web site by providing journalists the information they want and need. ■

Sources

Nielsen/Norman Group
www.nngroup.com

Web Usability
www.useit.com

Google Site Submission
www.google.com/addurl.html

Yahoo Site Submission
<http://docs.yahoo.com/info/suggest/>

Footnotes

¹This study on the media-friendliness of 10 corporate Web sites was conducted by the Nielsen Norman Group with a panel of 20 American and European journalists. Half reported starting their research for a story with the Web search engine Google or the Dow Jones Interactive or Lexis/Nexis Web sites; the other half began with the target company's Web site.

²See "Frenza" in "Resources."

³See Roufa in "Resources."

Resources

Frenza, JP, "Organizing Web Site Content," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 6.

Lauer, Larry, "When Reality Becomes Image: Dealing with the Media," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 12, No. 5.

Roufa, Mike, "Marketing Your Web Site with Search Engines," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 2.

Muehrcke, Jill, *Public Relations and Communications, Leadership Series*.

Salzman, Jason, "Let the World Know: Make Your Cause News," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 15, No. 1.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, www.snpo.org.

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