

## How to Stake Out Your Claim in Cyberspace

*No other form of communication lets you reach as many people. Have you carved out your place on the Net?*

BY JP FRENZA

**T**he Earth Pledge Foundation was one of the first nonprofits to venture onto the Internet in early 1994 when it started selling posters and prints created by artist Robert Rauschenberg in support of the United Nations. In three years, its World Wide Web (WWW) site has blossomed from one page to more than 1,000, and its audience has grown from 25 hits a week (the number of times people on the Internet connect to the Web site) to as many as 25,000 in the same period.

It's safe to say that its Web site has become a major part of the Earth Pledge Foundation. Earth Pledge no longer publishes a media kit. Instead, it directs people to its mission statement and organizational history posted on its Web site. Details of its every project can be found online. Earth Pledge has uploaded reports on events as far away as Beijing and Istanbul.

Earth Pledge has developed strong ties to businesses that support the idea of building sustainable cities. Its Web site has expanded its outreach into the computer and telecommunications industry and has been a direct reason for receiving support for its programs and activities. As a result of building its own site, Earth Pledge created a new division with the mission of helping other nonprofits establish their presence on the Internet. Here are answers to some of the most common questions Earth Pledge fields from its nonprofit clients.

### WHY THE INTERNET?

The question nonprofits ask most frequently is: "Why do we need to be on the Internet?" The answer ranges from the purely practical to the soon to be possible.

Estimates indicate there are more than 30 million individuals in the United States on the Internet. No other form of communication lets you reach as many people as does the Internet. For the price of a four-color, full-page ad in a national magazine, you can contact a dramatically larger audience for a full year on the Internet. Connectivity also reduces the cost of communication. Electronic mail (e-mail) is much more cost-effective than the telephone or Federal Express.

But the benefits of being online aren't limited to cost savings. Soon secure electronic transactions will be possible on the Internet, and you'll be able to conduct fundraising activities on your Web site, reaching donors around the world, 24 hours a day. Besides, your potential audience is likely to be on the Internet. Shouldn't you be there too?

### THREE STEPS TO GETTING HOOKED UP: NOT "IF" BUT "WHEN"

By now most nonprofits recognize the potential benefits of being online. An electronic mail and Web site address have become almost as integral as a street address on an organization's letterhead.

But for the technologically uninitiated, getting on the Internet can be a daunting task. Before you think about building a Web site for your organization, it pays to do some simple research. Here are a few easy steps to consider as you get hooked up:

#### Step 1: Understand the Internet.

The Internet is simply a network of computer networks. All these computers are connected by high-speed data transfer and plain old phone lines. All computers on those networks are divided into two categories:

1. *Clients* are computers, such as the one on your desk, that connect to the Internet and request information—the latest stock quotes, the name of an author, and so on. Clients can include students, parents, businesses, etc.
2. *Servers* serve information requested by clients. CNN's servers, for example, serve pages about the news. Servers can come in many flavors. Some, called mail servers, do nothing

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but serve electronic mail. Others let people download text versions of documents. Others have the capacity to deliver text, pictures, sound, and video. These are called Web servers and make up the fastest growing part of the Internet—the World Wide Web. There are more than 200,000 Web servers in operation, with hundreds more added every day. Because all Web servers support what is called “hypertext,” they let their clients click on pictures or underlined words and jump from document to document within one server or across any server on the Internet. This makes it possible for someone to visit a Web server and read an article about how a company is reducing pollution and at the click of a mouse jump from that article to the company’s Web server even if that company happens to be as far away as Germany or Japan.

*Nonprofits’ most  
common Web-site  
mistake is poor  
presentation.*

A good way to learn more about the Internet is to head to your library or bookstore and pick up a basic book about the Internet. One book we particularly like is Adam Engst’s *Internet*

*Starter Kit for Macintosh* published by Hayden Press (don’t worry, there’s one for Windows, too.)

**Step 2: Sign On!**

After you understand what the Internet is, the next step is to get online. To get on the Internet you need a computer, a modem, a phone line, browser software, and an Internet Service Provider, or ISP. ISPs give you a phone number that your computer’s modem dials to access the Internet. The browser (such as Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Internet Explorer) is the software you use to look at Web sites.

There are other ways to look at Web sites, such as straight text, but why would you want to do that? It’s like asking *National Geographic* to hold your magazine subscription and send black-and-white copies of the text instead.

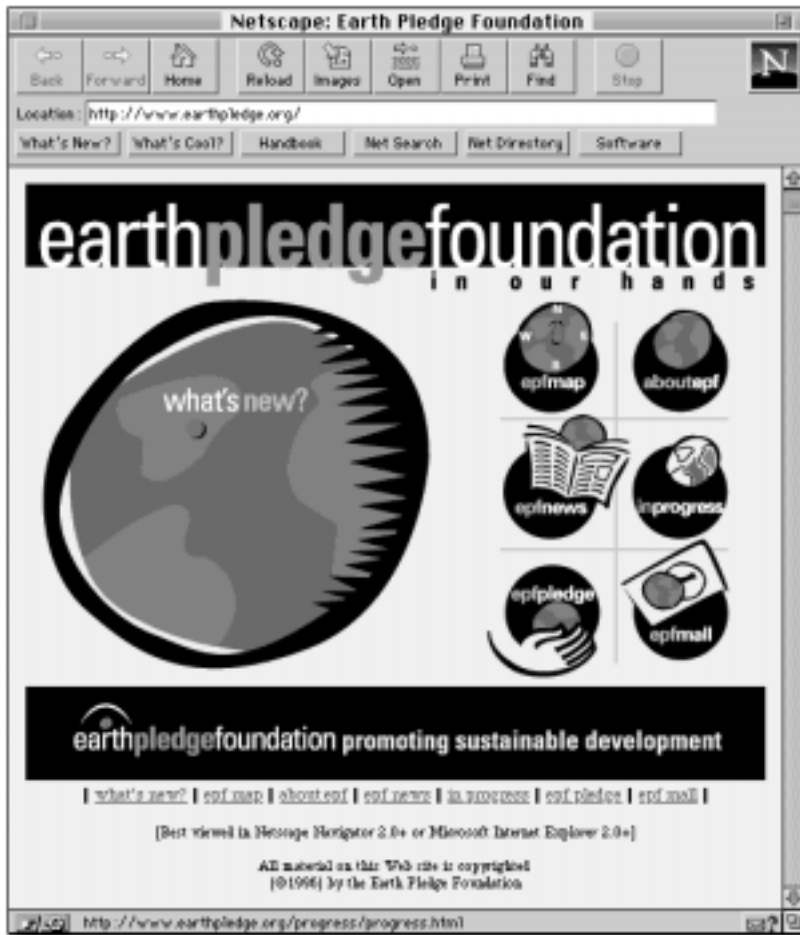
The truth is that connecting to the Internet can be tricky, so be sure to find an ISP who is willing to help you. Many will even give you all the software you need to get online.

Typically, people pay their ISP for Internet access by the hour (generally a few dollars) or a flat fee (\$20 to \$30 per month) for unlimited access. Try to get the flat fee. In the long run it’s a better buy. Most ISPs also include a free electronic mail account so you can get e-mail.

**Step 3: Surf, Surf, Surf!**

Once your Internet connection is working (and the good news is that once you have it running, you rarely have to set it up again) you are ready to surf the net. Surfing (or browsing) is a good way to get an idea of what’s available and how it’s all connected.

Every Web server has a unique address. That address is referred to as the Universal Resource Locator (URL) and is a computer’s address on the Internet. Much as your home address tells the post office where to deliver your mail, the URL tells clients where to find servers. With a little practice, you can easily guess the address of most major companies. Apple Computer, for example, can be found at <http://www.apple.com>. The “http:” is the computer network protocol and is required for every site. The “www” tells clients that what they’re searching for can be



*The home page for the Earth Pledge Foundation’s World Wide Web site.*



found on the World Wide Web. Apple is the name of the company. And “.com” refers to the fact that the Web site is commercial. Nonprofits end in .org, educational institutions in .edu.

Sometimes you'll want to find Web sites for which you don't know or can't figure out the address. You will then want to use a search engine—a Web site that provides an index or listing of all Web sites on the Internet. The most popular search engine is Yahoo! (<http://www.yahoo.com>). When you get to Yahoo! you type in the subject of interest, and the search engine returns a list of Web sites that match the search criteria you entered. You are then free to track them all down.

Once you've spent some time surfing, you'll want to start thinking about building your own Web site. Does your nonprofit organization have several key contributors? If so, be sure to check out their Web sites. Are there other organizations similar to yours? See what they're doing on the Internet. Chances are you'll be surprised to find out how many are already on the Internet.

### SIX STEPS TO RAMPING UP: CREATING YOUR OWN SITE

Now that you have a lay of the land, it's time to stake out your organization's own claim in cyberspace. Here are a few preliminary steps you'll want to consider:

#### Step 1: Assign Responsibility.

Developing a Web site can be technologically challenging. Right from the beginning, decide who in your organiza-

*If what people see is unprofessional, chances are they won't be back.*

tion will be responsible for overseeing your site. Will it be a special committee? Your marketing expert? The MIS group? No matter who is in charge, remember that the Web site is an extension of your organization. Be sure it reflects your organization's mission and personality.

#### Step 2: In or Out?

Do you have the expertise to create your Web site, or do you need some help? After your site is built, can you host it on a server at your organization, or is it more cost-effective to host it on the server of an ISP?

In either case, be honest when assessing your organization's expertise. Your Web site will be viewed by hundreds, maybe thousands, of tough Internet surfers and you'll want to put your best foot forward. If what people see when they visit your Web site is unprofessional, chances are they won't be back.



On Yahoo! you can search the Internet by subject matter.

#### Step 3: Register Your Internet Address.

Your ISP can help you register your Internet address with Internic, the naming authority (and they will charge you to do it). It's worth it. Register the name you want as soon as possible so that someone else doesn't take it. For example, if your nonprofit focuses on oceans, you may want to register as ocean.org, but you may find the name already taken. Better to decide what you want and reserve it immediately even if you don't plan on getting on the Internet soon. Any basic book on the Internet will provide you with details.

#### Step 4: It's About Content, Content, Content. . . .

When businesses get on the Internet, they come up with as many tricks as they can to lure visitors to their site. They have lots of sales material but little content. Most nonprofits have content and



*Updated regularly, the Earth Pledge newspaper informs visitors of recent happenings at the foundation.*

lots of it. And good old-fashioned content draws people to a Web site. Review all the material your organization has produced. Pulling that information together is one of the best things you can do to build your site.

**Step 5: Organize It.**

The structure of your site, referred to as site architecture, is critical to a viewer's ability to navigate your site. Surfing the Web is like walking into a library without a decimal system. After

you've pulled together your content, make sure you organize it in a way that makes sense. Create an outline of your content, and show it to a few people who don't work at your organization. Ask them if it's clear to them. If they can understand it, chances are you're on the right track in structuring your Web site.

**Step 6: Look and Feel.**

While content is critical, context provides meaning. Spend some time working with a graphic designer who has experi-

ence in creating a professional visual look. Nonprofits' most common Web-site mistake is poor presentation. It's worth the time and expense to work with a professional who can make your site look good.

**AND THE BIG QUESTION ...**

The big question everyone wants to know is: "How much will a Web site cost?" The answer: It depends. If you have a small nonprofit organization and you want to put up a few sections of your Web site (and you want it to look good), you will probably end up paying a minimum of \$3,000 to \$5,000. Medium sites range from \$5,000 to \$15,000, and larger sites can cost anywhere in the range of \$15,000 to \$50,000. It all depends on the size of the site and the complexity of your needs. The best advice is to start small, and grow your site as you need to.

Earth Pledge has built sites in all three price ranges for nonprofit organizations. Every one of its clients has ended up saying, "I don't know how we got along without a Web site!"

If you're considering building a Web site for your nonprofit, remember that the Internet isn't a permanent medium. Unlike print, which can be costly to reproduce, Web site changes are easy and cost-effective. Thus, your big costs will be up-front. After that, you'll be able to maintain your site with a minimum of expense. ■

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