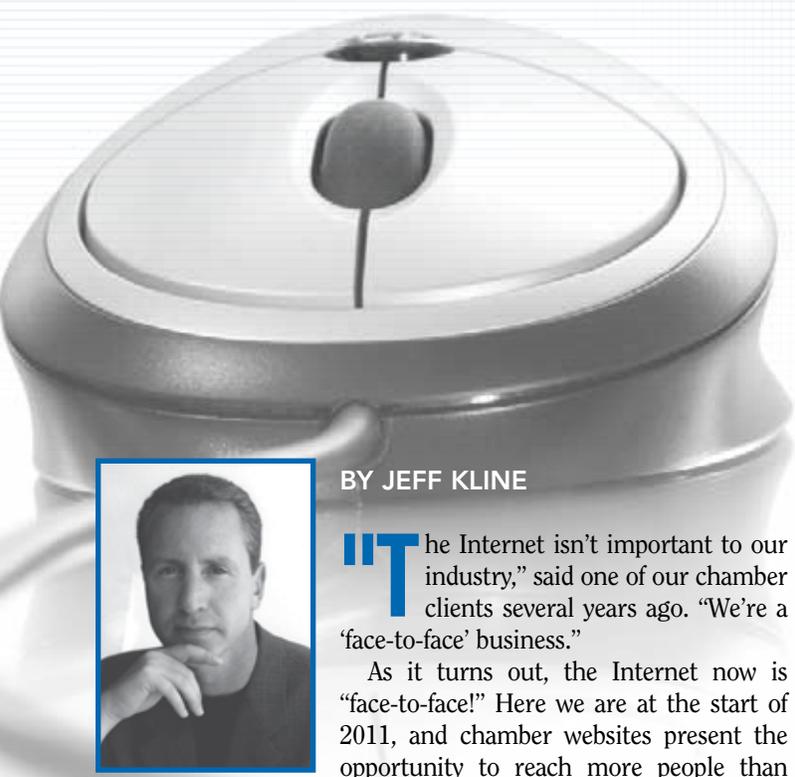


11 Must-Do WEBSITE ACTIONS FOR 2011



BY JEFF KLINE

"The Internet isn't important to our industry," said one of our chamber clients several years ago. "We're a 'face-to-face' business."

As it turns out, the Internet now is "face-to-face!" Here we are at the start of 2011, and chamber websites present the opportunity to reach more people than

ever before. Your website can serve as a vital resource for members and potential members. Additionally, it extends your reach across your region and around the world, showcasing your organization and your community.

An effective chamber of commerce website reflects positively on the chamber and its region as a whole. It sends a strong message to potential members, tourists, investors, and people considering moving to the region. It also provides critical services to members, increasing the value of membership and helping them grow their business.

With this in mind, here are 11 website improvements for you to accomplish in 2011 to ensure that you leverage the power of the Internet to strengthen your organization:

1. Update your design. Have you updated your website design to reflect the current look and feel of other modern,

dynamic sites — or does your site still look like a cheap brochure with your logo stuck on top? Imagine walking into a job interview wearing a suit from the '70s. No matter how strong your resume, you won't be making a very good first impression.

The first thing your visitors notice about your website is its design. If yours isn't professional and modern, it will reflect poorly on your chamber. It's worth investing money in good design and taking care of the mundane but critical details: making sure that the site's navigation is effective, that content is legible, and that there are no broken links. ACCE's website (www.acce.org), shown here in the "before" and "after" photographs, is the perfect example of the power of a redesign; in 2010, the site got a sleek new makeover that modernized its look, taking it from pretty good to great.

2. Update your content. If you're updating content just once every few months, why would you expect anyone to visit your site more often than that? What you need on your site is fresh content that's geared toward your target audiences. Are you addressing your community partners by communicating the services you offer? Are you reaching out to potential investors by demonstrating your city's strengths? Are you attracting new members by effectively explaining the benefits of membership? Update your content to address each important audience.

At Accrisoft, we've found that clients value website content management systems (CMS) because they allow people in the organization without technical skills to keep the site updated with fresh content. If you find that you have to call an



expensive webmaster every time you want to add information to your site, you'll get great benefits in moving to a CMS.

3. Improve your membership management. "I tried to join the chamber," said one retail client when we urged her to join, "but I gave up after spending 30 minutes trying to figure out the process. Then I called them, and no one ever called me back."

How easy it is to become a member of your chamber? Can people fill out a form online, or do they have to mail or fax in a bunch of paperwork? Are the benefits of membership clearly stated on your site? Can members update their information themselves, or do they have to call a member of your staff to do it for them?

An effective chamber of commerce website makes member management simple, saving time for both members and staff.

4. Boost your blog. Blogs inject personality into your web presence, making your organization approachable and real. Readers feel as if they are in an informal conversation with you, not just reading carefully scripted messages crafted by an agency. Many media representatives find blogs to be the best way to keep up with what's happening at your organization.

Blog entries should be brief, focused, and substantive. Update your blog often, and fill it with interesting and relevant content. Set up an RSS feed, and your fans will get a message each time you add a new blog.

5. Highlight your forums. "I check the chamber forum first thing every morning," says one of our manufacturing-industry clients. "I can review critical business issues and make my voice heard in an easy, effective way." Forums are an excellent way for members, potential members, legislators, and other community leaders to communicate. Forums foster debate on a wide variety of topics, and are vital in giving members of your community a voice in current discussions about legislative issues, business ideas, and partnerships.

"Our forum has been getting more hits than everything else on our site combined," another of our clients told me recently. "Once the compelling dialog gets started, people come back again and again."

6. Add multimedia. Multimedia capability lets you bring your website to life. Why not have your CEO welcome visitors to your website and point out the highlights of the site? One of our clients uses an inexpensive Flip video camera to capture video, then immediately posts clips of chamber events to his website. These are some of the most-visited areas of the site, as members and their colleagues click in to see their friends online.

Imagine adding video to your website... what special events could you capture? What regional attractions could you highlight? Adding audio and video can help draw people to your site — and keep them there.

7. Leverage social media. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the Internet is now "face-to-face." Social media gives everyone a voice, and one great way to tell your story goes beyond what you say about yourself and to what others say about you. Potential investors, media representatives, and potential chamber members are likely to be looking for "user reviews" in addition to your own carefully crafted messages.

Why not promote your Facebook fan page as a great way to let your members show their support for your chamber? Send out an email asking your members to "like" your chamber on Facebook, and when potential members or investors look you

up online, they'll see all the support and positive messages you've received. Social media is also a great way to send out messages. "I use Facebook way more than email," says one of our young clients. "It's how I check out what's going on and decide what activities interest me."

8. Strengthen events management. Do you wish you had more people showing up for your events? How often do you find yourself lamenting the low turnout at a chamber affair? Improving your online events management system is a surefire way to improve turnout at events.

Does your site sell tickets online? Are upcoming events adequately highlighted throughout the site? How often are you updating your calendar? Improve the way events are listed on your site, make it easy to sign up, and look for increased attendance at your events.

9. Add online advertising. Take advantage of your traffic! Chamber of commerce websites are excellent places for advertisements by members or by other local companies. On the web, the more specialized the traffic, the more valuable the advertising space. And since most of your traffic is from people in your area, it's a great place for local businesses to advertise.

Be sure you have website analytic capabilities that allow you to keep track of website traffic. That way, advertising can be mutually beneficial for the advertiser and your chamber.

10. Build a private community. Are you really in touch with the people your organization should be attracting? An online private community of members, potential members, investors, and community leaders can serve as an important tool for understanding the needs and interests of your critical constituencies. "We use our online community to test out new ideas and get valuable feedback before launching a new initiative," says one of Accrisoft's chamber clients. "It's a tool for ongoing market research that helps us better serve our members."

11. Start a virtual marketplace. Imagine a thriving online marketplace where members of your chamber can post requests for goods and services, to be filled by other member organizations. Imagine the business your chamber would generate for your members if you offered a virtual marketplace on your site. What business in your community *wouldn't* want to become a member? Providing business to your members is the ultimate value proposition, and you have the power to make it happen.

So it's 2011 — a new year! Imagine your website with new capabilities that make it attractive and compelling. What can you do to improve your website and take advantage of the power of the Internet to strengthen your organization? Get started now, and make it happen this year. ☐

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