



A Web site is an important component of your outreach and marketing initiatives. It's a highly effective, low-cost way to promote your service, not only during EMS Week, but throughout the year.

Winning Web Sites



"Having a Web site today is a matter of credibility for any organization, whether it's non-profit, for-profit or public safety," said Joe Polk, a technology specialist for the Pennsylvania Technical Assistance Program (PennTAP) and president of the Mt. Lebanon Fire Department in Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania.

"The Internet as we know it has been around for over 10 years," Polk noted. "People expect you to have a Web site now. It does not have to be anything spectacular, but at the least, it has to be something that provides basic information."

According to Polk, a well-designed EMS site has six elements that explain:

- Who you are (mission statement, organizational structure, staff)
- Who you provide services to (communities served)
- What you do (list of services you provide to your community)
- How to join (recruitment / hiring information)
- Schedule of events (training, education, parades, fairs, etc.)
- How you can be contacted

Organizations may have someone internally who can create and maintain a site; however, if you outsource, Polk recommends that you do careful research before selecting a vendor. "Like anything else you pay for, look for the list of services the company provides," he advised. "Look at their years of experience, quality of work and fees. Then compare them to multiple vendors. While it's not necessary to hire a company with public safety experience, it's a plus." Expect to pay \$1,500 to \$3,000 for a 10- to 15-page Web site.

TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE EMS WEB SITES

Know your focus

Know what you want and keep your ideas clearly focused. No matter how great your site looks, if visitors can't or don't find what they're looking for, they will leave. "Ask yourself what you want your site to say to your visitors," advised Josh Weiss, PIO for Southwest Ambulance in Arizona. "Determine what the purpose of the site is and why you're building it. What do you want your users to know?"

Provide good content

Use clear, concise copy to get your intended message across. When you provide your visitors with quality information that informs, you're not only gaining their trust, but you're also building your credibility. For instance, during a bad flu season one year, Southwest Ambulance provided information on its Web site informing people where to obtain a flu shot.

"We're in the business of educating the public," Weiss said. "Even though we don't administer flu shots, we knew people might come to our site to find some information about it."

Keep it simple

Make sure that your site is efficient, simple and practical. "It doesn't have to be fancy," said Chris Diede, president of the Argus Interactive Agency, a Web development firm in Orange County, California. "You can build the most incredible site and have the best-looking graphics, but it won't be any good if no one visits it."

Every page should be consistent as far as icons, banners and layout. To make the pages look more organized, divide copy with lines, bold headers and, if possible, format some of the copy with bullets to make the information as easy to read as possible.

Keeping the site simple will also allow it to load faster. Using too many frames, animation, blinking text, fonts and graphics will only frustrate visitors, causing them to leave.

"There's a glitz factor about having something like a spinning logo," Diede said; however, he added, "It just distracts the users. Focus on having good content and people will keep coming back."



Maintain your site

The greatest liability with developing a Web site is not updating it. This can reflect poorly on your organization. Develop internal procedures for posting the latest information and making sure outdated information is removed. Finally, review your Web site periodically for any broken links and missing images, and always check the content for correct spelling and grammar.