



A Ten-Minute Informative Communication of the
International Association of Conference Center Administrators



February 2004

Your Web Site: One User's Perspective

Now that I have put together two issues of the IACCA Membership Directory, I have visited every member center's Web site at least once, usually searching for missing information or trying to reconcile discrepancies in multiple sources of data. It didn't take long before I began to formulate some very clear ideas of what makes a good Web site, based on how easy or hard it was to find what I was looking for. I thought I'd share some of those observations with all of you.

1. Make it easy to find a list of your staff members and how to contact them. The best sites have a button or link on the first page called "Contact Us." The worst have no contact data at all. Intermediate stages include burying the staff contact list under "About Us" or "Who We Are" or some other header which requires your guest to ponder exactly what you mean by those categories and under which one you might have decided to put your staff contact information.
2. Put your center's name, address, telephone number, and e-mail address at the bottom of every single page. Better yet, create a hyperlink for your e-mail address in the footer. At least put this information on the first page – some sites I visited don't have it anywhere in sight (if you'll pardon the pun). Most important, put a street address SOMEWHERE! At least some of the people who visit your site are trying to figure out how to mail something to you, so make it easy for them to get the information they are seeking.
3. Keep your address and telephone number up to date. The most common problem I found was outdated area codes. The phone company changes them so often nowadays that it's hard to keep up. And be sure your phone number includes the area code.
4. Provide your actual e-mail link under "Contact Us," instead of automatically taking your visitor to an information request form with no address on it. They may want to ask you something that a "request for information" form does not allow for.
5. Don't use special effects which require your visitor to have a special plug-in, like Shock-Wave. Things that blink and rotate and fly across the screen are distracting rather than effective in getting your message across. They are cute but that's all, so don't use them unless cute is what you are going for.
6. If you have a "splash page" before your actual home page, make sure that the entry into your site from that page is obvious. Don't assume that your visitor will know to click on the little door or the sunburst in the middle of the graphic. I don't like splash pages at all myself, but at least be explicit about "enter here" if you must use one.

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7. Put a pithy, short summary of your site and facilities somewhere on your web site. Your user needs to know right off if this is the right location for them. A "fast facts" section is very useful: who you are, where you are located, how to get in touch with you.
 8. Label your navigation buttons. Sometimes the cute pictures don't make sense to anyone except the person who designed them. And make sure your visitor can get back to your home page from any other page without having to use the "back" button on their browser.
 9. It is very frustrating to hit a page which is "under construction." If that is the case, just put a pretty picture of your center on your web site, along with the contact information. Forget the cute "men at work" signs and such.
 10. Don't use too many different typefaces and colors just because you can. Settle on a simple thematic color scheme and set of fonts and use them throughout your web site. Otherwise your site looks like something a fourth grader might have designed and does not present a professional face to the world.
 11. Test your web site on a number of different browsers. At least check out Internet Explorer, Netscape, MSN, and AOL. You may have to ask a friend who uses one of these to check things out for you if you don't have access to different types of browsers yourself. But a symbol that looks just fine on one type will not make any sense at all on another, and files will load differently from one to the next.
 12. Speaking of loading files, make sure your photos are in a JPEG or similar compressed format so they don't take too long to load when your visitor first arrives at a page. You don't want them to leave you before they even get into your site because your pictures took too long to appear on their screens.
 13. Check your links periodically. It never ceases to amaze me how many sites I visit where I click on one of the provided links and get a message that says I can't go there for one reason or another.
 14. Test the links TO your site from the most common search engines. When someone who is looking for you types your center name, or a close approximation, into the search window of their browser, does your site come up in the first few hits? Try Google, AltaVista, Dogpile, Ask Jeeves, just to name a few.
 15. Proofread your web pages. I can not stress this strongly enough. Typos and grammatical errors are definite no-no's in a professional-looking site.

You can see that my basic thrust is from a user's perspective. Make it easy and pleasant to visit your web site and people will not only come back to your site, but also be favorably impressed with your center. Your web site is increasingly your main face to the world these days and it deserves a commensurate amount of your attention.



Take Ten is a periodic publication of the International Association of Conference Center Administrators

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