By Tim Grove

Website Redesign

How does an organization know when it's time to redesign its website? Most history organizations struggle with the decision to make a major investment of financial or staff resources for websites. No matter the size, any organization with a Web presence must maintain it, or eventually it will look dated.

The push for website evolution can come from internal or external sources. New programs, exhibitions, procedures, and staff members call for frequent updates—these are among the internal factors. But external forces are potent too—new technologies and shifting user expectations sometimes catch institutions off guard.

But what about the institution's own goals for the site? These are internal, but more complex than just updating the list of current exhibitions. With the Web now in its teens, many history organizations are on a second, third, or higher iteration of their website. I talked with several people who worked on recent website redesigns for their organization.

The main consideration for staff at the Morrison County Historical Society (MCHS) in Minnesota was developing a website that is easy to maintain. Staff develops and maintains the MCHS site (www.morrisoncountyhistory.org). Mary Warner, the society's manager, completed the redesign herself. "When I built our first website, I took on the challenge because we had been quoted some outrageous price by an outside company," she says.

MCHS first established an online presence in 2002. Four years later, the organization debuted a second version of the website. In 2007 they launched a blog. The original intent of the blog was to have a space that would easily notify members and friends about MCHS news and upcoming events. "Ideally I wanted to have our current blog posts appear on our home page," Warner says, "but I couldn't figure out how to accomplish that." So they found a simpler solution, linking to the blog from the home page.

Warner believed that a successful redesign depended on finding the right content management system. "We decided to switch from a standard HTML site to a WordPress site in the summer of 2009," she says. "I wanted to find an easy way for the rest of the staff to contribute to the website, rather than have to do all the coding and uploading myself."

Before starting the redesign, Warner solicited feedback from users. What she learned from one member was a shock. "She followed our blog exclusively and didn't realize we had an entire static website packed with info available online (even though the blog had a link to the home page of the main site)." That sealed the deal for Warner. "We had to get our blog onto the front page of our website." WordPress offered what they needed.

Warner believes that a dynamic online presence is essential for museums. "There are so many easy-to-use online tools now available, that organizations should pick one that will allow any staff member or volunteer to update their website," she suggests. "Avoid being a hostage to expensive vendors with technical know-how," she warns, "if what you need can be done simply and cheaply by someone onsite."

The staff at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home in Charlottesville, Virginia, had different goals for a new website. One was to extend and broaden their already-substantial audience reach. The organization launched a newly designed website (www.monticello.org) last fall with a new look and feel and a variety of social media elements. It replaced the previous version from 2003.

According to Chad Wollerton, Monticello's webmaster, several factors made this the right time for redesign, including a new president of the organization, a new visitor center, the move of the website management from the development office to the communication side of the organization, and the outdated look of the old site.

But perhaps the most important reason for a change was a new strategy. With declining visitation over several decades,

Monticello's leaders decided that they wanted to use their website to increase engagement with the larger community. They wanted people to understand that a conversation about Jefferson could be so much broader than just his iconic house. And they wanted to continue the dialogue beyond the mountaintop. They call their goal for the Web, "Beyond the destination to the relationship."

To be sure, Monticello's new website can serve as a virtual visitor center to complement the new physical visitor center. But the staff hopes that a new mobile section, a Jefferson encyclopedia (originally a wiki-based website created by Monticello), and other components will help accomplish the new goals as well.

> Before starting the redesign, Warner solicited feedback from users. What she learned from one member was a shock.

Monticello's first website debuted in 1996. Six years later, four staff members revised the site. This latest iteration, fourteen years into Monticello's Web era, involved an advisory group of ten stakeholders. Monticello hired a professional company to complete detailed usability tests, and ultimately they conducted a national search for a company to develop the redesign.

The Oklahoma Territorial Museum in Guthrie launched a new website in January 2011 (www.okterritorialmuseum.org). As a state agency, the museum automatically had a basic, static Web presence under the auspices of the Oklahoma Historical Society. But several years ago, the staff created a separate, more dynamic site. Maintenance and control of that site became issues and it was offline for eighteen months. According to director Nathan Turner, the staff wanted a new

site with a fresh design, easy maintenance, and additional components like a museum store, a donation page to support the site's friends group, and social networking capability.

Having learned hard lessons from their past experience, control was a priority, so the museum hired a small local designer who agreed to work with their three staff members to ensure that the staff could maintain the site. The designer was willing to be available for future pay-as-you-go changes.

Turner recommends looking at many different websites and trying to implement the best features of your favorites. Curator Erin Brown adds, "Approach the website as a summary of your institution, and approach the redesign project like you would an exhibit," she says. Make it simple and organized, with well-defined goals.

The Minnesota Historical Society has collected stories of website redesigns by history organizations around the state. This helpful resource serves as a reminder of the many decisions facing organizations considering revamping their online presence: http://discussions.mnhs.org/MNLocalHistory/2010/11/12/web-development-smackdown/. The Society also offers a helpful checklist and website worksheet to get organizations started with a redesign. Here are their redesign considerations:

Easy maintenance. Many organizations have staff with limited technology skills, so this is essential.

Security. An organization needs to know that its website will not be tampered with.

Control. Most organizations need to ensure control over both updating and the branding.

Social networking components. The popularity of online social networks has allowed organizations to extend their reach.

Reasonable cost. Know your budget, including the price of software, the hosting service, and regular maintenance.[1]

While the above suggestions are based on an organization perspective, it's also critical to consider the user perspective. An organization should be conducting ongoing usability testing to remain aware of challenges its users experience on its website.

Think about the websites you use. What are the elements that keep you going back? My expectations are up-to-date information, personal relevance, easy navigation, and an engaging design. What are yours? ◉

"History Bytes" is a forum for discussing Web issues facing all types of historical institutions. Tim Grove can be reached at grovet@si.edu.

[1] Adapted from http://discussions.mnhs.org/MNLocalHistory/2010/11/12/web-development-smackdown/, Minnesota Local History Weblog, 12 November 2010.