

PR and the Updated Web Site

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It's good PR to have an updated Web site, but it's not much fun to do.

Most PR practitioners do not update Web sites. There are Webmasters who do that. They might be responsible for turning over materials to be mounted on the site, but that is as far as it goes. Because I own, operate and maintain my own Web site, (www.online-pr.com), I've had to learn a few points about maintenance.

Here are 10 tips for web site maintenance that PR practitioners should know, whether or not they update their organizations' Web sites:

- **Tip 1: Your Web site is your business card and brochure combined.** No other communications vehicle has a 24/7 presence like a Web site that reaches every corner of the globe. Hence, your web site should be the repository of any and all information about you that you wish clients, customers, investors and others to know. Modesty is not a virtue. The more you tell about yourself, the greater your credibility will be.
- **Tip 2: Web site maintenance is basic public relations.** No one likes a site with links that don't work, outdated information and absence of facts that should be there. Would you hand out old corporate brochures and business cards with wrong addresses and phone num-

bers? While large Web sites are diligent about maintenance, mid-sized to smaller sites aren't. Many of these belong to PR agencies, which is a shame in itself. Ideally, site maintenance is done daily, but many, if not most, Web sites have low traffic and small amounts of content that they don't need to be updated that often. But, one should not allow a week to go by without updating. One way to remember is to place a date function on the site for yourself and visitors – "This site last updated on X." I have arguments with colleagues who do not believe a site needs to be updated often. I am convinced they are wrong. Freshness dating is a fact in grocery stores and on the Web. Visitors want to have comfort that what they are reading is accurate.

- **Tip 3: Keep it Simple.** Web site architecture can be needlessly complicated, and when it is, it takes lots of time to update. For that reason, I favor simple site design. Since I run everything myself at online-pr.com I don't have time for complicated code or layouts. My site could look prettier, and it has been mocked for its simplicity, but I can do updates quickly. And, notice how other web sites, especially search engines, have moved to simple layouts and presentation.
- **Tip 4: Links die.** It is a fact of Web existence that links go in and

out of existence constantly, and the more links to outside sources that you have, the more you need to update. Online-pr.com has more than 2,000 links and at any one time, two percent of these links are bad. While this is a better average than most commercial sites that have failures of up to four percent, it is not satisfactory. But, there isn't much that one can do about it. External links disappear without notice.

- **Tip 5: People won't tell you.** I have long asked visitors to let me know when a link has died, but for the most part, they don't. The fact is that site visitors believe it is the duty of the site owner/operator to update the site. They shouldn't be expected to do the work for you. They are right, by the way. Why have a site if you don't intend to maintain it? What happens when visitors find dead links is simple: They leave. Whether they come back is another question.
- **Tip 6: Link checkers are not enough.** One essential invention for Web site maintenance is an automatic link checker. This is a software program that travels through your site and clicks on every link then reports if the link is working or not. If you are responsible for a Web site, you need a link checker. But, alas, a link checker is not enough if you have links to outside resources. Because my web site is largely links to outside resources, I have learned one still has to click through links occasionally. The reason is that a link might work but the underlying site may

have changed or even disappeared to be replaced by another, and completely different, site. The only way you find this out is by clicking on the link and looking.

- **Tip 7: Grammar and spell-checking count.** Bad grammar and misspelled words stand out on a Web site. They also say something about you that you don't want spoken. Errors creep into text: We are all human. The key is to get them out of the text and off the Web site as soon as they are detected. Don't let them sit for a week or more until you get to the next update. In that time, your visitors will wonder why you have an obvious error on your site.
- **Tip 8. Get rid of design mistakes quickly.** Sometimes, because of poor initial design or because code goes bad or something has failed, a web page will look bad. Get into it and fix it quickly. There is no point in leaving an obvious error for all to see.
- **Tip 9: Pay attention.** I am guilty of this mistake. A quick story might help explain it. I got a report for months that a number of internal links on my site were no longer working. I had done nothing to cause that error, or so I thought, so I ignored the report. I assumed it had to be wrong. Well, it wasn't, and I had caused the problem. It turns out when I had upgraded my HTML formatting software, it had changed one letter in the index page from "index.htm" to "index.html." That one little letter invalidated more than one hundred

links throughout my web site that take visitors back to the home page. It took me days to wade through and find all the broken links to fix them.

- Tip 10: **It's all connected.** It is easy to fall into an assumption that Web pages are freestanding. For example, you can change something on one page and no worry about how it might affect another page. That's only partly true. For example, whenever you delete a page, you can break links in the site index or menu. Whenever you move a page, you can do the same because they system no longer knows where to look for it. Over the years of running my site, I have deleted and added pages and each time I have broken other links throughout the site. It's not called the Web for nothing.

A Web site is one of the most powerful public relations mediums that an organization has. Treat it that way.

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