

PAO Academy Roundtable

Websites: They're not just for IT Geeks anymore

The new CAPR 190-1 says:

Para. 10. The PAO shall have the authority to develop and coordinate the public affairs aspects of electronic communications tools employed by the unit for internal and external communications, **including unit websites** and listservs...The content shall be created in collaboration with appropriate staff members and shall be facilitated by the staff member(s) designated as webmaster, listserv manager and/or information technology officer.

The revised MIO Checklist Guide
(http://cap.gov/documents/ES_Checklist_Guides.doc)
says:

- Post copies of every release at the incident command post, on **your wing website**, and copy each release to your wing and region PAOs concurrently with your distribution to the media. If requested, also copy National HQ.

Websites have become powerful tools for marketing communication, however in CAP they sometimes remain the purview of tech staff members who are not geared to marketing/public relations. In some units, the PA staff has been deliberately excluded, hence the wording in the reg.

Rather, our websites need to present a professional appearance and contained nuanced messages that are well-focused and interesting to the people we expect/want to visit.

Best Practices:

1. Have separate sections of your site for your external and internal audiences. Generally, your "main" web page should be for your external audiences.
2. Use an "Outside-In" strategy in designing your site. Always consider the perspective, values, and knowledge of the people you expect to be viewing the page. For outside audiences, avoid jargon and terminology that only members understand.
3. Know what messages you want to tell.
4. Design your HOME page so that for browsers set to 800x600 pixels, the entire significant content can be seen without scrolling down or sideways.
5. Plan your website with a branching structure that visitors can follow logically to find the information they seek. Do NOT try to put everything all on one page.
6. On your pages for external audiences, always have at least one photograph on every page. Photographs carry unspoken messages, so chose the photograph carefully to illustrate the content of the page.
7. Avoid things like frames, JavaScript, animated graphics, and other things that don't work the same on all browsers, or that are distractions. Animated graphics are often used to hide the fact that there is little real content on a page.

8. Use the same font, font size, and font color throughout your site.
 - Avoid using Times New Roman because it carries a “lack of sophistication” subtext.
 - Avoid using huge letters.
 - Avoid unusual fonts will probably not display right on most computers.
 - Your best bet is Arial 12pt (HTML size 2) for body copy and headlines no more than one or two sizes bigger.
9. Always provide contact information, including e-mail addresses, but beware that posting personal e-mail addresses on open websites.
10. Ideally, make your website a partnership between your Public Affairs staff and Information Technology staff. PAOs often do not have the technical skills to do good web design, but IT people often do not have the writing and public relations background.
11. Scrutinize the subtext of every single elements of every page on your site. Every element should ADD meaning. Get rid of anything that does not add meaning, or sends a contrary signal.
12. Have a structured plan for regular updates of your web content. Do not think of your site as a one-time publication. Plan for daily, weekly or monthly updates, depending on your resources. If you put dated information on your site, have a plan for removing it when it becomes outdated.
13. Have a privacy policy for information and pictures of members of your unit. Remember that young cadets may need parental permission for their picture or name to appear on the website. If you are not sure where to start on such a policy, check the policy used by your local school system for personal information and pictures of minors.
14. Put your website address on all of your communications with your internal and external constituencies -- such as letterhead, business cards, pamphlets and brochures, news releases, handouts. Anyplace you would put a mailing address or phone number, put the website, too.
15. Size your pictures in your photo editing software to be exactly the size you need them on your website. Never use web development software (like FrontPage or DreamWeaver) to make a big picture smaller or change its shape. Doing this does not change the actual size of the image file, making for longer download times.