



Tips for Local League Websites

In recent years, Leagues have come a long way in integrating technology into their programmatic work. Most League leaders are regularly communicating via email, many Leagues send out their monthly newsletters electronically, and more and more Leagues have dynamic websites. Websites have vastly increased the visibility and accessibility of local Leagues in their communities.

In this day and age, it is critical that every local League have a website. Any organization that does not have a presence on the web is deemed irrelevant.

However, just as imperative as it is to have a website, it is important that League websites are easy for visitors to find, read, and navigate. The information contained on the sites has to be current, and the sites have to be regularly and consistently promoted. This section provides some basic tips on how to make your website as effective and inviting as possible. It also provides detailed suggestions about how to make your League's site a successful membership recruitment tool.

Domain Name

The name of your website is very important! The URL should be short, **simple**, and memorable. You want people to be able to find your website with little or no effort. Here are a few domain name tips:

- A good practice is simply to use your League's name or abbreviation of your League name in the URL. For example: www.lwvpbc.org - LWV of Palm Beach County; and www.lwvtexas.org - LWV of Texas.
- Obtaining a simple domain name can cost as little as \$10 per year. Websites like www.godaddy.com, www.register.com, and www.networksolutions.com offer domain name registration and simple website creation.
- When creating your website's domain name, *keep it simple!* Avoid using excessive punctuation (/ \ ~ _ -) or prepositions (the, of, etc.) in your domain name. Make it a name that rolls off the tongue so you can tell people easily and they'll remember it.
- While there are free website hosting options from community or search engine sites, they do have some down sides. Yes, they are free - but they often make your domain name counterintuitive. For example, LWV of Collier County's (FL) old web address was www.naples.net/presents/lwvcc. They upgraded to www.lwvcolliercounty.org, much easier to say and promote.



Website Readability

Information is powerful. However, too much information is overwhelming and not being able to read the information is just frustrating. When creating your website, be choosy about what you say and how you format it. Here are a few tips for making the most out of a few words:

- Your website is often the first contact with many potential new members so you must place emphasis on making it as professional looking as your newsletter, signs, or other visibility/communications tools.
- Most League sites are designed primarily for members and therefore unwittingly exclude non-members just by the choice of language and content. Avoid League lingo (i.e. PMP, MAL, ILO)- especially on the front page.
- Do not place too much information on your home or front page. The front page should briefly describe who/what the League is, a place to Join/Donate and how to navigate the page.
- Make sure the most important information is "above the fold" (the area that appears on the screen that you do not need to scroll down to see). Require the visitor to scroll only when absolutely necessary.
- Keep it simple. Use simple, concise, easy to understand words. Avoid empty descriptive words like "great", "wonderful", etc. They are just not necessary.
- Check your spelling and grammar. It sounds basic but is crucial for credibility.
- Keep it scannable. It is important to have some white space on the site. To minimize eyestrain, keep paragraphs concise and text organized with headers. Also include a visually interesting image or graphic, such as the LWV Logo, a face, something so it's not all just text.
- Font formats like bold, italics, and underlines draw reader's attention away from the content, so use them sparingly. Underlines are customarily only used for hyperlinks (which direct you to another Website or page). Underlining a headline or piece of information without a hyperlink can confuse a reader.
- Verdana font was designed for computer monitors and is considered the most easily read. (Note how upper-case I is distinguished from number 1 or lower-case l.) Make sure your font size is not too large, yet is readable.
- Do not use patterned graphic backgrounds behind the body text. Use black font on a white or near white background.



Navigating

Good navigation allows a first-time, non-technical visitor to move around your site easily. If a site is easy to navigate, visitors will return to it. Here are some tips to help ensure that your website is easy to navigate:

- Your site need not be large or complex.
- Every page should display the same overall appearance, with the same navigation options in the same place.
- Do not offer too many links in your navigation menu. Just like too many words, too many links and pages confuse visitors trying to find information. If you have a lot of pages use drop down menus that group them according to main topics.
- Many websites, of all types, fail to be effective because they lack a good intuitive navigation system. Good navigation gives visitors constant clues to answer three basic questions: Where am I? Where have I been? Where can I go?
- Always give your user a way out; don't let him/her navigate to a dead end. The back key is a solution but not a good one - not all users know it even exists!

Testing Your Site

It is important that after you spend time retooling your website that you test it out to make sure it meets your goals.

- Test your site from a technical viewpoint in different browsers. Internet Explorer 5+, Mozilla Firefox 1.0, Opera 7.0 and Netscape Navigator 6+ make up 95% of the world's browsers.
- Make sure your site can be seen on different screen resolutions. 98% of users have 800x600 and above resolution, thus, 800x600 can be taken as the minimum resolution the site should fit.
- Ensure your pages download quickly. For this you must:
 - Minimize graphics, flash and scripts: They hugely increase your file size.
 - Optimize your HTML & script code: Make sure that your site doesn't have any unwanted tags or unused scripts.
 - Use Server Side Include (SSI) files wherever possible. SSI files once called from the web server reside in its cache so on subsequent requests they load faster.



Chapter 3: Outreach Best Practices

- Test your site with real first-time users. Remember, you may know your site backwards. They do not.
- After your members test it out, find non-members to critique your site. They are your primary audience for recruitment after all!

Maintaining League Websites

Your League website is a living document. It is not something that can be put up and ignored. It must be maintained. Content must be current/fresh. Here are a few tips to keep you on top of website maintenance:

- A League webmaster or team needs a clear job description. The League should state clearly what is expected of them. (See the Streamlining materials on www.lwv.org for a sample job description.) If the webmaster/web team leader is not a member of your League’s leadership team, then there should be a clear line of communication/responsibility to the League leaders. Communication with your webmaster should be two-way; leaders who do not have experience with web design should especially be open to ideas brought forward by those providing the technical assistance of creating and maintaining the site.
- If there is no one technical in your League to take on the webmaster role, you can use a pre-designed template system (see below). Consider finding an intern or making an investment in your League's future by paying someone.
- Some Leagues can benefit from ‘CMS’ – Content Management System – it is a system whereby different people have permission to update content within a site, without reference to the webmaster. It enables different departments to post their latest news and activities online, using only a browser interface, accessed via a password – which enables multiple users to keep the site updated. Remember to clearly state what each individual or department is responsible for updating to ensure there are no pieces left out. NB: This software can be expensive to purchase.
- Most importantly, **don’t leave out-of-date content online!** It is crucial for credibility and clarity. You can keep it in an “archive” or note that information is there for “background” purposes or “history” only.

Want your League’s site to look like www.lwv.org?

Templates for local Leagues to use to make their website look and feel like the newly redesigned LWVUS site will soon be available. Check with your state coach!

Isn’t there an easier way?

Yes! **League Easy Web (LEW)** was developed in 2001 for Leagues in California to assist Leagues in building their web sites, and it is now offered for a fee to Leagues across the country. As of 2009, there are 163 Leagues using LEW in more than 30 states. LWV California owns and operates the product, and more information is available at support@lwvnet.org. LEW enables Leagues to have a complete, branded and customized website (that includes unlimited content pages) using a system that is easy to use. According to their materials, “Anyone who can browse the Web has the skills to update LEW!”





The "Join Us" Message

What is the tone of your League's website? It should be welcoming! Your League website is a great vehicle for recruiting new members. Here are some additional tips for making membership recruitment a seamless function of your website:

- Pepper a recruitment message throughout the website and use it prominently on the home/front page. Visitors should know after leaving the site that the League of Women Voters is where hands-on work to safeguard democracy leads to civic improvement!
- Visitors should also be frequently reminded to join. "Join Us" links should be placed on *every* page and prominently placed on the home/front page. It should link to a page specifically dedicated to League membership. A "Join Us" Web page example template is located at the end of this section.
- Use Stories! Personalize your website by using your members' stories. Stories can personalize a membership ask or show a new side to an important issue that your League is working on. Stories build personal connections, and your website is the ideal place to connect with potential new members.
- One page of your website should be dedicated to membership and should include:
 - Brief overview of the League and its mission.
 - Membership requirement information
 - Cost of membership
 - A downloadable or printable membership form for visitors to print out and send in.
 - Contact information in case of questions
 - **A MEMBERSHIP MESSAGE!** - "LWV is the organization where your hands-on work to safeguard democracy leads to civic improvement! Join LWV and be directly involved in shaping the important issues to keep our community strong." Feel free to use this or your own membership message. Just be sure to include "Join Us".
- Continuous promotion of your website with a membership message is important. Include references to your League website in speeches, one-on-one communications, press releases, and in all other League communications.

Additional tools are available to assist Leagues in developing their site including website templates, League logo and usage guidelines, and information about League Easy Web (LEW) on www.lwv.org.



Check out the “Tools You Can Use” section at the back of the manual for a sample “Join Us” Web page template!