

## Web hosting to members of a professional association

As a professional association you want to offer as many perks as possible to your members to gain clientele while still getting a return. Offering Web hosting services to your members is an effective way of not only helping out their online profiles, but improving upon your own. By offering personal sites to your members under a single umbrella domain with your association's name on it, you increase Web presence and gain credibility as a modern, fresh and accessible organization that people will turn to. This could be one of your biggest life-savers when it comes to implementing an e-marketing strategy.

The first thing you need is to decide which type of hosting will suit your organizations needs. It is more than likely that you will need access to multiple server boxes that can 'resell' space as shared hosting to members. The more members you have, the bigger your investment may be.

Secondly, you will want to consider choosing a data center to house your servers in a secure, pampered area. Data centers have been coined by different names such as 'server farms', 'colocation centers', 'hotels' and so on. They have become a standard service in the IT industry, and many organizations use at least one, if not multiple data centers to provide top-notch reliability, speed and ease of use, especially when in-house technical skills are barren. They come in different 'grades', though the most simple are usually sufficient for all but the most top-secret and pertinent data operations. Some offer equipment as 'rentals' (called 'dedicated servers') that come with management services, such as e-mail (so, for example, [yourname@yourcompanyname.com](mailto:yourname@yourcompanyname.com)), file backups, firewall protection, software installation with regular updates and even load balancing between servers to prevent blockages in traffic flow that can slow down connection speeds. Others will let you put in your own equipment (an option called 'colocation') and offer freedom of choice when it comes to designing servers the way you want them. Larger organizations with their own technical gurus might opt for colocation if server boxes are an existing asset, if operating systems and software are particularly built to the company's needs or if other services are already in place and all that is needed is rack space. In either case, a data center will ensure protection against the odds that your office will get broken into, have a major power outage or burn down since they are built with redundancies and multiple power sources in case of failure, not to mention specialized temperature control systems and infrastructure conducive to generating the longest life-span possible for the machines. If you want to manage the server yourself, chose a data center that is either close by or offers 'remote hands' service (i.e. will do things for you provided you give instructions or can offer software that will allow you to control your machine at a distance). If looking for fully-managed services, go for the best deal where you can get it, but keep in mind the distance that information will have to travel (i.e. if you are in Seattle, don't opt for a data center in Europe, even if it is a good deal, since travel time across international fibers will slow down information and make customers unhappy).

Once you have a method of hosting and a data hub of some sort, you need to buy domain names. This might be a come-as-you-need-it investment if you plan to make the hosting an optional charged perk, since you can't be sure which of your members will come under your wing when it comes to creating a personal Web page. So don't waste time and money buying domain names for Suzie agent, Fred agent and Billy-Joe agent if you don't need them yet. If you plan to offer Web hosting as part of your all-

Written by Joyce Grace. All rights reserved, no copyright infringements allowed!

inclusive membership package, you'll have a clearer view of how many and what domain names you'll need. Contact your current domain provider to purchase the right domain extensions (much like having phone extensions in the office – all calls will first enter through the main number, and thereafter be directed to respective persons).

In order to allow members to be able to handle their own content (an advisable option that will save you many headaches and resources), consider making use of a Content Management System (CMS). A CMS is a way of creating Web site content for HTML-dummies. Most allow you to customize what you want to appear on your page (a photo here, a link there, a feature taken out, and so on). You can get a Web developer to create an immovable frame that will flow with the branding of your main site, and allow the users (your members) to upload personal information within that skeleton. This will allow for individualism while staying within the confines of the association's image and marketing, thus keeping it professional and, most importantly, connected to you. With that said, don't allow alterations in colors or fonts as part of the CMS features – the look of the site alone is an automatic indicator to visitors of where they are and who they're dealing with. A CMS can be custom-created by a Web development company or, something simpler, like WordPress (a free, open-source blogging software), can be used in combination with the current coding of the site.

Finally, offer support. If you don't have techies in-house that can help users with their Web account, find a company that can do it for you, preferably the creators of the CMS or Web site. As humans begin playing with the software questions will arise, and quirks in the system will always be found and need to be fixed. To ensure a quality product to your members, don't neglect continuous upkeep and quick help-me responses. Your members are likely depending on the site as part of their income-generation strategies, and revenues can't be toyed with.

Whether or not to go with the idea of offering Web hosting to your members can take you two ways. If you have the resources to put into it, go for it. These days, everyone is on the Web, and potential buyers are doing more and more personal research online before actually being converted into customers. It would be an investment in the future to be on the Web. If you don't offer it to your members, they may find another way to get it, which can mean a loss in revenue for your own interests. However, if the resources are not there, it may better to wait until you can offer the best quality possible. Computers and technology can be frustrating to deal with when one doesn't know the ins and outs of the IT world. Find a way to offer ease of use and reliability before making your members mad, really mad.