

Mack|Crouse Group is committed to assuring that direct mail is part of an integrated communications program for our clients. There is no question that a campaign needs a web site. Answering the 10 questions below will help you create the right one. (Note – Glossary follows.)

1. Your Goals— What will you use your web site for?

All vendors have different capabilities, technology platforms and cost models. It's important to consider what you want to achieve with your website before choosing a vendor:

- **Simple site** - Create a campaign web presence, allow interested people to register with your campaign, provide the ability for simple input such as collecting contributions and answering web surveys. Even at this level the site must include flexible content management system to allow campaign staff to manage content including page content, photos and multi-media.
- **Intermediate level site** – Simple site plus the ability to easily create email blasts and, if desired, the ability for two-way communication such as a discussion forum. Content management system should allow for campaign staff to prepare email blasts and for distributed content management.
- **Advanced level site** – Intermediate site plus -
 - (1) Advanced social networking capability such as individual fundraising pages, meet-up capability, or the ability for different campaign groups to create their own groups, and/or
 - (2) Integrated data management – all lists acquired via the web site are integrated – including volunteers, donors and other respondents creating a “360° View.”

2. Strategy and Time – How Much Help Will You Need?

How confident are you that your campaign knows how to effectively use the internet as a fundraising, mobilization or persuasion tool? If you decide that your campaign does need strategic consulting for your web operation, don't just choose the first vendor that offers it. As with any type of political communication, there are different philosophies and approaches to internet strategy, and you should assure that your consultant understands this and is good match for how you want to run your campaign.

Campaigns are always fighting against the number of hours in a day, and adding the management of a website to your staff's responsibilities could harm your ability to get other things done. When determining the goals for your campaign web site and choosing your web vendor, carefully consider how much of your staff's time will be needed to keep the site up and running.

3. The Total Cost Picture— What Are the Initial and Ongoing Costs?

Don't just look at what web vendors charge—look at the services offered, and what that means for your campaign. More expensive solutions provide more functionality— allowing the web site to be used for more purposes. Make sure you consider the total cost picture when choosing between a low-cost vendor providing less capability vs. a higher-end vendor offering more capability. The ongoing internal campaign staffing costs of an advanced site are also going to be higher than with a simple site – simply to keep the content up-to-date.

4. Design— How Important Is Your Website to Branding Your Campaign?

Different vendors have different levels of custom design capability. Some have in-house design departments and make a custom design for every client. Others build all of their websites using design templates. If you want a “unique” look for your campaign, you will need to either choose a vendor that offers or supports custom design services. **MCG can also help with the design of your web site as part of our overall design services.**

5. Fundraising— What Are Your Online Fundraising Goals?

Simply having a web site with a contribute button does not assure a torrent of donations, the ability of a campaign to raise money by any means is determined by the overall excitement level associated with the campaign. Setting realistic goals and developing an overall fundraising strategy is critical. Don't choose a web vendor without understanding your goals and asking potential vendors about their fundraising tools. Some low cost vendors only offer pay services that take a nearly 5% service fee off the top while other vendors offer solutions with much lower overhead.

6. Outgoing Email— What Role Is Outgoing Email Going to Play?

Pricing and the ability to easily create email blasts vary greatly among different firms. Some platforms allow campaign staffers to create HTML emails and select recipients. Others require the campaign to go through the vendor to create email blasts. Some vendors provide more information once your e-mails are sent—who reads them, who forwards them, who deletes them, who clicks through to your web site and who contributes to your campaign directly from the email. Finally, the campaign should consider what measures the vendor has in place to assure that outgoing emails are white listed, that is, not treated as SPAM by the large ISPs (AOL, Yahoo, MSN, Google, Comcast, etc.).

7. Content Management— What Can Your Campaign Manage?

Does your campaign have the staff to manage your website content and provide updates? What level of web savvy does your campaign staff have? Are you going to be able to manage keeping the web site up-to-date internally or are you going to have to use external resources to manage content? Is the content management system simple and intuitive? The right content management system, matched to your staff's capability, will make managing your site possible and will have a positive impact on ongoing operating costs.

8. Social Networking – Are Volunteers/Activists Going to Have a Home?

If your campaign is considering offering “Web 2.0” functionality like personal web pages, blogs, self-directed discussion groups, self-contained event planning, etc. you need to make sure that the web platform chosen affordably supports such functionality. Whether to have a Web 2.0 enabled web site is a key strategic consideration for the campaign web site – both in how the campaign faces the public and what web firm is chosen for the project.

9. Data— How Do You Plan to Use Your Website to Build and Manage Your Campaign's Lists?

Before choosing a vendor, consider what your campaign needs in terms of data management capabilities. Will you want to access donor histories in order to send targeted e-mails to supporters who haven't yet maxed out this quarter? Do you want to append external data to your lists or add to your lists with purchased data? Do you have the staff and systems to manage financial reporting requirements?

10. Hosting and Security— How Secure and Reliable Will Your Site Be?

Where is your system going to be hosted? Does the hosting site offer redundancy? Is there adequate bandwidth to assure your site does not get bogged down? How does the hosting get charged? Is there robust security to assure your site is not easily hacked?

11. Commitment— Is your web vendor committed to your campaign?

Do you want your web firm to be a part of your strategy team or simply a technology provider? Some web firms want to have it both ways – to offer strategic consulting about how to use the web to win AND to be able to fall back on the label – “technology provider” in cases where they want to provide services to competing campaigns. If you believe the information you are sharing with your web vendor is strategic in nature or you want your web firm to help determine your online strategy, make sure the firm is COMMITTED to your campaign before signing them up! This is especially important in competitive primaries.

Glossary to Web Terminology

Content Management System (“CMS”) – The system “behind” the web site that allows content to be managed and updated. A good content management system allows web content to be easily updated by a trained campaign staffer via a web accessible tool. It is generally not a good idea to create a website where only the web vendor can update content.

Constituent Relationship Management (“CRM”) – The ability of the web technology platform to record information about campaign volunteers, donors and activists. Such information might include: how much money donated, interests, volunteer activities and response to blast emails. The key to CRM is for the information gathering to be dynamic, not static. The more a constituent interacts with the campaign, the more that information should be recorded in the CRM system. The CRM system also has to allow users to easily extract data about the campaign’s constituents from the system.

Data Integration – The extent to which data recorded from individuals is collected in a single, linked database system and available for selection and extract using simple tools. A well integrated system allows all the data captured from an individual to be accessed from a single point. If data is captured in unlinked databases, the data must first be extracted and manipulated if there is a need to combine data attributes to create a single view.

Technology Platform – This is the nuts and bolts of what makes a web site work. A good technology platform is based on a solid software platform and has the following characteristics:

- **Usability** – the platform is easy to use for visitors to the site, for campaign staffers responsible for managing content and for system administrators responsible for keeping the system up and running.
- **Functionality** – the platform offers comprehensive functionality, limiting the number of additional vendors required to deliver what the desired functionality.
- **Scalability** – the platform is able to grow with the campaign.
- **Reliability** – the platform actually works as promised.

WEB 2.0 – This phrase refers to any web site that allows two-way communication between the campaign and campaign’s online community. “Social Networking” is another phrase used to communicate the same concepts. For campaign web sites, this means such features as: online chat rooms, individual blogs, personal fund raising pages, volunteer driven event organizing, ability to post videos/photos the web site and external links to MySpace, Flickr, YouTube and other interactive web sites.

White List – Being on the “White List” means that the email address from which bulk email is sent is acceptable to recipient Internet Service Providers (ISPs). This is extremely important when sending out mass email blasts to assure the message is not being bounced as SPAM.

360° View – A “360° View” is the concept that all the known attributes of a constituent donor, volunteer or activist are contained in one relational database and that this information is easily accessible allowing the campaign to make informed decisions about how to engage with campaign constituents.