Article – The Makings of a Great Municipal Website

Many of the articles written about websites are focussed on attracting customers and increasing sales. That is different from the needs of municipalities but there are some similarities. Perhaps you want to attract business, encourage economic development, secure professional services or grow the population. Maybe you want to improve communications and engage citizens in decision making. Most likely you want to improve the delivery of your services and take advantage of new technologies. With that in mind let's examine what makes a great municipal website.

So what makes a great municipal website?

Since many municipalities don't have a functioning website one can assume they either don't see the urgency or a need or if they do they don't have the resources financially or otherwise to get it done. The first step in the design and development process is knowing who your audience is and then what they might be looking for. Once you have addressed that you can begin to move onto exploring the full potential of what the site <u>can</u> do.

What do you want from your website?

The municipality is the local governing authority that oversees, coordinates and manages services and infrastructure and of course collects taxes and other charges. With that in mind, a profile of the municipality, where it is located, some of the geographical and economic advantages, some history, services that are available, contact information and when council meets are some of the common elements of a municipal website. While that information is important there is more that can be done to make it effective. Think about how you can expand and improve services to the public. Think proactively. Do you spend time redirecting calls at the office to other parties? Do you find yourself answering the same questions over and over again? Make a list and discuss these with your staff and council. Alternatively, if you want to jumpstart this process we can help.

If the shoe fits...

Web designers will often suggest to their clients that they make a list of websites that they like and what the like or dislike about them. This is great way to start with the design of the site since it provides you with a sense of what can be done. You may have already done this as you think about what you want from your website. However, making this list of sites and what you like about them will speed up the design and development process. It is better to sort out your preferences early in the design stage as it may affect the structure of the site, navigation and style. A word of caution though, look at sites that are similar to your needs, identify what you like and don't like and work from there. Make sure that what you are pattern your design after your needs.

Proper balance.

They say a picture is worth a 1000 words but that all depends on what you are trying to say. Good graphics can make a huge difference in making the site visually appealing but there needs to be a proper balance between graphics and clear concise information in text form. If you are too lean on content and too heavy on graphics you are probably not delivering all the content and functionality needed. On the other hand, too much text can be overwhelming or just plain boring to the point that no one reads it. You want the site to be visually appealing and deliver the needed information.

Make the visit worthwhile.

 Think about why you want people to visit the website. What can the website provide that you cannot provide with existing means. Visitors to the site should be able to come away with a feeling that they haven't wasted their time and that they have learned something from the experience. There is a lot of information that you have in the municipal office that residents are unaware of. Many don't understand what the administrator does or the business that goes on in the office. Think about it. How many residents know what went on that last council meeting? Do they know what is contained in the policy manual for the municipality? Are they aware of all the bylaws for the municipality? Do they know why their assessed values went up and why? It is important not to overload the site with too much detail and at the same time provide a clear and concise path to the information they are looking for.

Keep them coming back.

Think about ways to get people visiting your website regularly. If you want to deliver timely information to residents such as important reminders, announcements or deadlines, you want to make sure they are checking the website regularly. This can be accomplished a number of ways including notices that are included with mailings such as the tax notices or through voicemail and other means. The most effective way though is to provide valuable and regular updates to the site. Other options such as a subscribe option will ensure that they are made aware of updates to the site.

Update the content regularly!

There are a number of sites that have been launched and over time have become neglected.   I have seen some attractive looking websites launched recently and when I have visited them a year later nothing has changed!   You are not fully utilizing its potential. It is like running a television advertisement without the sound. You are not realizing the full potential of your ad or in this case the website. Planning for the website should go beyond the initial launch. Consider what information will be added in the future, what information is time sensitive and how the website can deliver information more effectively than current methods. Sit down with your staff and council and think about the activities for the upcoming year. What can you do to proactively get information out on the website before it is needed? How can you reduce calls to the office or counter traffic.

Don't forget to reach out to visitors beyond your borders.

Don't overlook the potential of widening your audience. A website provides huge potential to raise the profile of the municipality. Do you want to promote the area as a tourist destination? Make a list of local or nearby attractions. Do you offer incentives to attract business or new residents? They are of little value if no one knows about them. It may be against our nature but don't be afraid to brag about what the area offers, local amenities, lifestyle and accomplishments. Make a list of the things you appreciate about your community. A lot of these things we take for granted and could be very beneficial in attracting new residents and visitors.

So what makes a great municipal website?

 A good municipal website will meet the fundamental goals that you and your council set out. It will provide visitors with a professional look and represent the municipality accurately both in content and style. It will be easy to navigate and meet widely accepted web standards. A great website will go beyond the fundamental basics and will stand out. A great website has a life of its own. It is constantly evolving, growing and adapting. It will be a positive experience for visitors and will leave them with a sense that the information they were looking for or the service they wanted was provided in an efficient, timely and rewarding manner.

Summary

The path to a great municipal website can be summarized as follows:

1. Remember who your audience is and what they are looking for and how they can be better served by offering services on your website.
2. Look at other websites that are successful but be mindful of their audience and needs.   Make sure the design fits your needs.
3. Graphics and dynamic HTML sites provide some life to the site but there needs to be proper balance between text, functionality and graphics. Treat the web pages like valuable real estate and avoid clutter.
4. Don't lose sight of purpose of the site and be sure to leave visitors with a sense of accomplishment. Make the visit worthwhile.
5. Keep them coming back. Provide timely information such as reminders and important notices that will cause your audience to come back to the site regularly to get information.
6. Don't forget to look beyond your borders.   A website provides a great opportunity for you to showcase the people, places and opportunities you have to offer.

If you are interested in learning more please contact us at 306 586-0606 or by email at contactus@nuvuit.com