

E-TOASTMASTERS

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Introduction

According to toastmasters who are webmasters of club and District websites, over 80% of new members are now coming from people searching the internet looking for self-improvement courses, public speaking or presentation skills programmes. Sometimes they have a particular event they need to develop skills for, such as a conference or wedding. Sometimes they have a new year's resolution to fulfil! And we all know that Toastmasters is just what they are looking for.

Toastmaster websites therefore have two main purposes:

- to attract new members,
- and to keep current members informed.

So what's involved in setting up and running a club website?

Four-phase approach

Building a club website is a four phase approach:

1. Planning
2. Designing
3. Building
4. Maintaining

1 - Planning your website

The first thing you need to do is decide whether or not a club website is needed. Having decided that some sort of internet presence is desirable, the next thing to do is assemble a web project team of 2-3 people including the President and VP PR who have the skills and time needed. These skills include writing, researching, designing and computer skills. Setting up a club website should be managed as a project with a clearly defined purpose and timeframe and is ideal for the new Competent Leader project.

Types of websites

The web project team should first work out the goals of the club's proposed website, and research the various types of websites available. For example, you could have any of the following free sites:

1. A simple entry in a database on a local Council or community website. This would involve contacting the webmaster and supplying the details required, such as club name and purpose, meeting information, and contact details, plus any introductory or welcoming text. Visitors searching the database may be looking for a club by typing keywords such as "public speaking", "presentation skills", "toastmasters" etc. This type of site is ideal to attract new members.
2. A single or multiple page site on a community website provided by a local council.
3. Using the FreeToastHost website templates specially designed for Toastmasters.

Domain names

If the club wishes to have a more sophisticated website with its own domain name, (eg www.spinnakertoastmasters.org.nz) there are costs involved for purchase of the name, setup fees, and annual maintenance fees. You would need to contact an internet service provider or domain registrar to find out what their charges are, and what services they provide. You could do all the setups yourself, or pay the ISP to do it for you. If your club decides to have its own domain name, then you will need to budget for the costs, and seek club approval. Check the back of the latest edition of the NZ NetGuide Magazine for more information and prices.

Researching ideas

Depending on the type of website you have decided to set up, you will need to decide what items you will have on it. This will require research and preparation of the text, usually in a Word document.

There are plenty of resources available to use:

- Club members
- Club Officer Manuals
- Toastmasters International and TM NZ website
www.toastmasters.org www.toastmasters.org.nz
- Toastmaster magazines
- Toastmaster publications & manuals
- Other NZ and international Toastmaster club websites

A list of potential web page content can be found in Appendix 1.

Toastmaster rules

It's also important to know what the Toastmaster International guidelines are about club websites. You can find this out by looking at the Internet Guidelines on the Toastmasters International website www.toastmasters.org and in your club officer manuals.

This is a summary of the rules and guidelines:

YOU CAN

- Use the Toastmasters emblem
- Use the word "Toastmasters"
- Have links to TMI and other clubs
- Include Club officer details (with permission)
- Sell advertising space to offset costs
- Publish in donated space and acknowledge the donation

YOU MUST

- Include TM Trademark acknowledgement statement

YOU CANNOT

- Pay a member of your Toastmasters club privately to create, maintain or host web pages for your club
- Use TMI copyright information

RESPONSIBILITY

- Publisher and responsibility for content – President
- Creator and maintainer – Club Webmaster or VP PR

The Toastmasters trademark policy statement below will need to be included if your website is more than a database entry.

The names "Toastmasters International, "Toastmasters" and the Toastmasters International trademarks are protected in the United States, Canada and other countries where Toastmasters clubs exist. Unauthorised use is strictly prohibited.

Project plan

When you have researched your ideas, and made your decisions, document these in a project plan, with a timeline, for presentation to your club's committee, and the club. You need to make sure you have answered all the questions: how, when, where, why, who and what!

2 - Designing your website

The following notes concentrate on how to design a multi-page website which has a home page, and sub-pages.

The first thing to do when you start the design phase of your club website project, is to work out the structure of your site and what content will be in it.

Home page

The basic and most important items to include on the home page are:

- Your club name
- The Toastmasters International logo and slogan
- Your meeting days, times and location
- Club contact information
- Headlines and an opening sentence with a link to the full article
- The Toastmasters trademark statement
- When the page was last updated

You need to arrange this information in a structured, logical layout, so that when a visitor arrives on your home page, the most important information is clearly visible in the top centre of the screen.

Navigation structure

The next thing to do is work out your navigation structure. To do this, you need to find a large piece of paper, and write a list of all the information you want to put on your website, and arrange these in logical chunks, like an organisation chart, with each top level box being the main navigation item. You need to think carefully about your folder structure, and your filenames, so that they are easy to recognise and find in your website later on. Try to keep each page focussed on one piece of information only. This helps keep each page short, quick to download and easy to print.

An example organisational structure could be:

About us:

- ❑ What is Toastmasters?
- ❑ District and Club Mission and Values Statements
- ❑ History of the club
- ❑ Club Executive details and roles
- ❑ How District 72 is organised
- ❑ Map showing location of club meetings
- ❑ Club Distinguished Club goals progress
- ❑ Club Calendar or forward programme
- ❑ How to join Toastmasters
- ❑ Frequently asked questions (and answers)

News:

- ❑ Important news and information for club members
- ❑ Club newsletter
- ❑ Interesting information about your club
- ❑ Area, Division and District Competitions, Awards etc and results

Events:

- ❑ Visiting speakers/educationals
- ❑ Club speechcraft courses
- ❑ Club officer training
- ❑ Club social events

Resources:

- ❑ Interesting up-to-date relevant articles about Toastmasters
- ❑ Links to other useful websites
- ❑ Membership promotion ideas
- ❑ Sample club meeting agenda

Contact us:

- ❑ A list of the main contact methods (0800, postal, email, phone)
- ❑ Ask a Toastmaster email link
- ❑ An information request form

More ideas are listed in Appendix 1.

Optimising for searching

Another thing you need to know about is meta tags. Meta tags are extremely important in determining what information search engines will display in search results, and must be very carefully composed and compiled. They are not displayed in a web page, but are embedded in the header code of the web page (and can be viewed by choosing View, Source on a web page). Search engines use these tags and various key

words in your web page to sort, filter and rank your web pages in their databases. This may determine whether your website turns up in the top 10 search results, or is buried deep in the list of thousands of results, and therefore may never be found by a prospective club member.

In search results, people usually see the keywords, or Page Title and Description.

The Description helps determine the page's position in search results, and is the main way to attract your target audience.

Therefore, the description must be

- ❑ an accurate guide to what's on the web page
- ❑ something worth reading – ie, be irresistible

and be in two places:

- ❑ In the META description tag in the source code
- ❑ And as the first paragraph in the body text on the web page

The simplest procedure is to put the same (perfect) description in both places. A perfect description is:

- ❑ Rigidly structured
- ❑ Packed with keywords
- ❑ Fun to read

In other words, half engineering, half creativity! A good website to visit to find out all about search engines and how they work is www.searchenginewatch.com.

3 Building your website

When the planning is finished, the building begins. You need to assemble all your tools and learn how to use them. The tools you will need include an internet connected computer and software which makes web pages and uploads them to the net. You could use free web page creation software which you can download from the internet such as FirstPage2006. Just search in www.google.com for “free html editors”. Or you could purchase expensive specialised software such as FrontPage or Dreamweaver.

You will also need to learn the lingo – www, http, html, isp, jpg, gif, IE, cgi, and much more. A great terminology website to check out is www.whatis.com, and there are hundreds of free tutorials on the internet. Just search for “free website tutorials” etc. All you need is time to work through them!

Navigation structure

The navigation structure should reflect what visitors to your website are most likely to want to know. Therefore the navigation structure needs to answer three questions:

- ❑ Where am I?
- ❑ Where have I been?
- ❑ Where can I go next?

The navigation structure needs to be consistent on every page within the website, and reflect the tasks visitors want to perform. You will have decided your navigation structure in the planning and design phases of the project, but you may need to make changes once you begin building your website.

Image – the “look and feel”

When you are building your website, you also need to think about the “look and feel” of your site. Your layout should be simple and consistent, with an easily readable font and a pleasing colour scheme (be aware of the 23 million migraine sufferers out there!) Some software programs have built-in templates for you to use.

If you are using photographs, you need to either take them with a digital camera, or scan them, and optimize them for web browser viewing, using an image editing program. There are plenty of resources on the internet with articles and tips on web page design. See Appendix 2 for some tips, and do’s and don’ts.

Linking strategies

Links connect pages on a website. There are three main forms of links:

- **Structural navigation links** – examples of these are links from the home page to subpages, and links from subpages to other pages
- **Associative links** within the content of a page – these are usually underlined words in text and point to pages with more information about the anchor text
- **See Also lists** of additional references – these links are provided to help viewers find what they want if the current page isn't the right one.

When creating links, the following should be borne in mind:

1. Begin links with an information-carrying word, because visitors often scan through just the first couple of words to see if it is of interest to them. Keep links as specific and brief as possible.
2. Avoid saying “click here” in a link. For example, instead of saying “Click here for more speaking tips” just say “More speaking tips”.
3. Avoid using generic links such as “More ...” at the end of a list of items. Instead, tell visitors specifically what they will get more of, such as “More New Tips”.
4. Use web conventions for hyperlinks, and allow link colours to show visited and unvisited states.

Downloadable files

If a link does anything other than go to another html web page, such as linking to an Adobe Acrobat .pdf file, or launching an application such as email, make sure the link explicitly indicates what will happen. For PDF files, include a link to the Adobe website to allow people to download the free Acrobat Reader (www.adobe.com) if they don't already have it, and indicate the size of the file they are downloading so they can decide whether they wish to proceed or not.

Writing for the web

Developing content for a web page will involve either writing new material or condensing and summarising existing material. Writing web documents is different from writing for print, and if you simply move your print documents onto web pages, you are not using the medium to its best advantage.

Web readers tend to scan text online and read text offline. They typically don't read a page from start to finish on the computer screen. Instead, they scan a site looking for relevant items and then print pages that contain the information they seek. You need to apply a style and method to your web documents that accommodate this type of reading.

The following approach will help ensure that your visitors will find the information they are looking for:

- **Summarize first.** Put the main points in the first paragraph, so that readers scanning your pages will not miss your point.
- **Be concise.** Use lists rather than paragraphs, but only when your prose lends itself to such treatment. Readers can pick out information more easily from a list than from within a paragraph.
- **Write for scanning.** Most web readers scan pages for relevant materials rather than reading through a page word by word. Guide the reader by highlighting the salient points in your page using headings, lists, and typographical emphasis such as bold and italics.

There are many tutorials on the web on how to write for the web, and lots of good books available. See Appendix 5 for a list of some useful resources.

Testing

Once you have built your website, you need to test it. Find as many testers as you can, and get them to check out your website. Ask their opinions. Watch them as they work, because you'll be amazed at how people move around a website, and how they do things you'd never anticipate. Document any problems and make the changes. Then test again! And again! Just one broken link, one missing image, one spelling mistake, can destroy the credibility of your website.

Go Live

When you're satisfied your website is ready to go live, you need to make the arrangements with your ISP, and upload the files from your computer. Then check your website is live for all the world to see.

Then the web project team can have a launch party!

Publicity

Having a website is no use if no-one knows about it! So make sure your website address is printed on all your club business cards, your club brochures and flyers, every meeting agenda, your club newsletter, and tell everyone about it. Include your website address on your email signature blocks. Ask other clubs to include links to your website on their website, and add reciprocal links to theirs.

Another very important thing to do is to submit your website to search engines. Web spiders and robots will visit your site and enter details in their databases, so that when people enter keywords such as "public speaking" in their favourite search engine, your club's website will appear in the search results (hopefully in the top 10). That's the quickest way to be found and catch the interest of a prospective new member.

4 Maintaining your website

You've built your website, and now it's live on the internet. The party is over and the cleaning up has been done. So the next question is, who is going to keep it up to date?

Even if your website is just a static entry or page in a database, someone needs to be responsible for periodically checking it, and getting it updated if necessary.

If your website is more sophisticated, and requires regular updating, then the web project team needs to work out a process for checking pages and updating them. To do this, you need to encourage club members to write articles for you. Your Education VP should provide the forward programme in a suitable format. The club's newsletter needs to be uploaded to your website as soon as it is published, and then you need to think about whether to archive past newsletters, or delete them. Your News page will need updating with current and relevant news items, and you will need to plan a calendar of dates when pages are due to "expire" or be no longer needed. And you need to keep your home page updated with fresh content and links to the most important new information so regular visitors know what's new and what's changed.

Backups

You need a backup plan too. Having another club member who is trained in updating your club's website is very important, so that if the webmaster is sick, out of town or away on holiday, someone else can update the website if necessary.

What about documentation? You must document your website, including the process to change or update pages, and passwords etc.

A plan for the future

Now that your club has a website, what will be your plan for the future? The web project team needs to consider the future development of the website.

You need a new plan!

Summary

Setting up and maintaining a club website is an ideal club project, and a web project team should be appointed to plan, design and build the website. Make sure you check out the costs, and have a plan and the budget for on-going development and maintenance.

Keep your website simple, with plenty of regular new material which is well written, easy to understand, and linked from the home page. Remember the purpose of your website is to attract new members and keep current members informed. Make sure everything on your website achieves this dual purpose.

And don't forget to publicise your website's address on all club stationery and advertising. Soon your club will be attracting most of its new membership from web surfers.

Good luck!

APPENDIX 1 – Suggestions for web page content

This list was compiled from a study of international district and club websites, and New Zealand club websites.

- Features and benefits of Toastmasters membership
- Membership promotion ideas
- Club calendar and forward programme
- Club newsletter
- Member information
- Educational topics and articles
- Explanation of TM programme
- Post-a-speech
- Online TM forms
- Club member photo gallery
- Links to Speech Resources
- Links to Toastmaster Resources
- Personal quotes and endorsements
- Free offers
- Upcoming events
- Speech contest information
- Map and directions to meeting venue
- Toastmaster FAQ
- Member Goal Book
- Member progress cards
- History of TM and Club
- Club brochures and pamphlets
- List of club resources/library
- Member recognition /achievements
- Quotes of the day/week/month
- Club meeting reports
- Club committee meeting minutes
- Sample meeting agendas
- Weekly email – using e-groups
- Ask a Toastmaster – “TalkLine” – email a toastmaster for help or to ask a question
- Links to other club websites in area
- Information Request Form
- A Toastmasters Glossary
- Various Toastmaster logos
- Post-a-speech
- Organisation charts
- Guest book – visitor sign-in
- Handy tips on things
- Archive section

Appendix 2 – Tips and things to avoid – for serious webmasters only

Home page design guidelines

- The homepage should be a maximum of 2 screens long
- If any images are used, ALternative text must describe the image for people viewing the page with images turned off
- All links should be hypertext, not images because people don't know to click on the image to jump to another page
- Rollovers should apply to all links, or none.
- Framesets must not show scroll bars, no matter what the screen resolution and size is
- Frames must be a fixed pixel width, not a %age of screen

Things to avoid on a website's home page

1. Under construction images – instead use “Last Updated: xxx” and place some relevant information
2. Page counters – instead refer to server access logs and analyse these
3. Blinking text – instead use colour, placement and animation to draw attention
4. Awards – link to a separate “Awards” page where you can put any awards logos and descriptions
5. Flash/plug ins – older browsers do not support them
6. Logo/splash pages – unnecessary nuisance and requires an extra click
7. “Best viewed at” notes – design the website correctly for minimum 800 x 600 monitors
8. Background sound – takes too long to download and serves no purpose (also gives you a fright when it begins playing and your computer sound is turned right up loud!)
9. Background graphics – reduces legibility of text on page. Keep the background a plain colour – white with black text works best.

Guidelines for images

1. Use an image editor to set sizes and resolution of images before placing in the page
2. Use small fast loading images sized correctly and saved at 72 dpi resolution
3. Use thumbnails for large images (eg photos – people can click to see the full image if desired)
4. Use height and width attributes for all images, in pixels
5. Always use ALternative text attribute in image tags for those viewing the page with images turned off
6. Set the background of an image to transparent or set the page background the same as the image to hide the squared off look

7. Don't use bevelled edges unless it's a link
8. Save image formats as: interlaced – gif ; progressive – jpg (look up www.whatis.com to find out why)

Text guidelines

1. Use a default plain font which is easily read, eg Arial, Times Roman
2. Use **bold** for emphasis only
3. Use left aligned paragraphs
4. Only use italics for quotes and titles, not paragraph text
5. Don't underline text unless it is a hyperlink
6. Use a left margin
7. Use short paragraphs with information carrying heading text
8. Use 216 non-dithering web colours for text
9. Use the web conventions for link colours
10. Use regular bullet points

How to write for scannability:

- Use the inverted pyramid approach – most important material at the beginning
- Structure articles with 2-3 levels of headings
- Use meaningful rather than cute headings
- Use bulleted lists where possible
- Break up the information into subparagraphs
- Use highlighting and emphasis to catch the eye
- Write one idea per paragraph
- Limit the use of metaphors
- Use humour with caution
- Avoid puns
- Place secondary detailed information on linked subpages

Research shows that reading from computer screens is about 25% slower than reading from paper. People don't want to read a lot of text from computer screens. Therefore, write 50% less text. People like to click, not scroll, so keep pages short. Remember, readers skim pages – scanning for information of interest; they rarely read it word by word on screen!

Appendix 3 - Nine elements for a successful website

(from www.learnthat.com)

1 - Visual Impact

The home page is your billboard – it creates an immediate impression on visitors to your site, so it's got to create the right impression. It should look

- Clean
- Uncluttered
- Professional
- Attractive

2 - Purpose

You have to give people a reason to stay on your site by answering the question “what's in it for me?”

This could be

- Information and resources
- Entertainment
- Advice
- Help with a problem
- Links to useful sites

3 - Loading Time

The home page must load as quickly as possible. It must be kept simple and fast to keep the attention of your web visitor.

4 - Colour, layout and graphics

The graphics and layout of the home page contribute to that first impression. Page size should be around 30KB. Images should be optimised for web viewing and be between 6-8 KB in size. Each additional 2KB adds approximately one second to loading time. Consider the effect you wish to create and choose text and page background colours that are appropriate. When placing images of people, faces should 'look' to the centre of the page.

5 - Readability

This refers to the way the words look on the page. Words need to stand out on the page, surrounded with plenty of white space. Dividing text into columns helps readability. Use plain fonts which are easy to read.

6 - Segmenting and signposting

Break up pages into small chunks, dividing horizontally with use of headings and subheadings, using a consistent font type and size. You need to make it easy for your visitors to glance at the page and take in all the key points, so that if they see anything of interest to them, they'll stay and keep reading.

7 - Navigation

Your main navigation bar should run down the left side of the page because we're accustomed to reading from left to right and from top to bottom, and we're accustomed to finding navigation bars on the left of web pages.

- Group items in the navigation area so that similar items are next to each other.
- Don't provide multiple navigation areas for the same type of links.
- Don't include an active link to the home page ON the home page.

8 - Privacy

Ensure that potential customers feel confident dealing with you by telling people exactly what you're doing to safeguard their privacy by having a separate page which details your security policy, especially towards email addresses.

9 - Content - words

Effective content writing is one of the most critical aspects of all web design. Most users scan online content rather than carefully reading, so you must optimise content for scannability and craft it to convey maximum information in few words.

APPENDIX 4 - EXAMPLES OF POOR WEBSITE ELEMENTS AND DESIGNS

This list was compiled from a study of District Toastmaster websites, and various readings.

- A splash page – an opening page
- Slow downloading – huge images downloading
- Failed images, links and timeouts
- Using a poor Frontpage theme with ugly colour schemes
- Out of date content
- Changing page designs – moving out of theme on subpages
- Garish colour schemes
- Spelling/grammar errors
- Poor layout
- Poor quality images – grainy, fuzzy
- Scrolling status line messages and scrolling marquees
- Flashing gifs
- Swivelling words
- Text too large, all in capitals, too many colours
- Busy backgrounds
- Banner advertisements
- Visitor counter numbers
- Poorly formatted tables
- Opening new windows when clicking on a link without warning
- Downloading pdf files without warning on filesize or download time

Appendix 5 – Resources

Websites:

http://www.webpagecontent.com/arc_display/5/

Wellington writer and trainer Rachel McAlpine's website articles on web page writing

www.useit.com

Jakob Nielsen's website packed with articles on usability issues

www.toastmasters.org Information for Members, District websites (spend some time looking around other District websites for ideas). Check out the Internet Guidelines as well.

<http://www.toastmasters-d58.org/resource/present/blbsite/content.htm>
(District 58) has "Build a Club Website" tutorial

<http://www.toastmastersdistrict61.org/eng/members/web.htm> - Short article on the reasons for building a club website

www.homestead.com/toastmasterDan/files/ - Creating club websites for Free! (District 9 club resources)

Essential reading:

Web Site Design Goodies by Joe Burns, published by Que, 2002

Designing Web Usability by Jakob Nielsen, published by New Riders, 1999

HomePage Usability – 50 Homepages deconstructed, by Jakob Nielsen, published by New Riders, 2001

Web Word Wizardry by Rachel McAlpine, published by Corporate Communications, 1999

Better Business Writing on the Web by Rachel McAlpine, published by CC Press, 2007

TOASTMASTER CLUB WEBSITES CHECKLIST

Guidelines from Toastmasters International re “District and Club use of Internet Web pages”

Club websites

Must contain useful information for current and prospective members and club officers including:

- Club name
- Club’s meeting time and location
- Contact telephone number
- Features and benefits of Toastmasters membership
- membership promotion ideas for Club members
- Distinguished Club Program goals and progress
- Calendar for events
- Mission of the club
- Date last updated or published
- Link to Toastmasters International
- Link to the District website
- Club newsletter
- Toastmasters International trademark acknowledgement statement

May include:

- names, addresses, telephone numbers and email addresses of Club officers
- creator/maintainer of the page (requires express written permission)
- Individual member information if in password-protected area

Must not contain material that is not relevant to achieving the mission of the club

Publisher and responsibility for content - Club President

- May publish website in donated space and acknowledge the donation
- May sell advertising space to offset the cost of renting space

- Individual members of Toastmasters may not receive any compensation to create, maintain, or host web pages

- May not include copyrighted information from Toastmasters International or any other source without express written permission from the copyright owner