



# DEVELOPING A SUCCESSFUL AND RELEVANT WEBSITE FOR YOUR SHOW CHOIR

*by Aaron Olson,  
David Wesbecker  
and Keith Griffin*

In today's world of technology, it is important to utilize the new tools that are available to us in a way that helps us to organize, communicate, advertise and promote our programs. As families become more accustomed to using technology, it is in our best interest to stay ahead of the curve. With careful planning, using these tools can help free up valuable time that can now be used to continue to build, grow, and promote our programs.

Our program has just poured a great deal of resources into building our website which will serve as the foundation for all of our technological tools. We will be able to use our website for contact management, email, group texting, student accounting, social media, video and picture content, ticket sales, and branding—just to name a few.

Building a website that is useful, visually appealing and easy to navigate is essential if it is going to be utilized on a regular basis. Not only should the site be user friendly for your families, friends and fans, but also for whomever is going to be providing the updates for the site. Unless you are tech savvy, this can be a whole different environment to work in. However, with careful planning and a small amount of training, basic computer knowledge should be enough to keep your site up-to-date and serving its purpose for several years.

## **FIRST ATTEMPT AT A WEBSITE**

Our first attempt at a website, while ambitious, fell far short of our goals. Updates were a challenge, and we simply did not put enough thought into the design and layout. This not only left



us with outdated and broken links, but also created more work than it was worth. This attempt, however, was not in vain, as we learned a great deal from our mistakes and created a large library of content that we are using in our website today.

## SECOND ATTEMPT AT A WEBSITE

For our second attempt at a website, we realized that it was important to work with a professional web developer. In Waconia, we were fortunate to call upon the expertise of a parent that was able to help us build a website that was professional in appearance, yet easy enough for me to make any necessary updates. (If you are not so fortunate to have a parent in the business, I strongly encourage you to seek out professionals. It can be an expensive up-front cost to you, but it will pay dividends to you in the end.)

According to Keith Griffin, the parent volunteer that helped us put the site together, here are the essential elements to help us design a website that is easy to navigate and a site that meets the needs of the organization.

“As parents we wanted to see the website function great, but we also wanted the website to look friendly and become a place that people would want to come to for information. We took a very professional and tactical approach to creating the WaconiaChoirs.org website. We feel that we got superior results because of our attention to detail and creating a site that truly reflects the brand and essence of what we do as a music program. Our process of creating a choir website was a very linear process and went as follows:

### 1. STRATEGY: Build a Strategy around the needs of your program.

One of the first steps that we went through was to gather as much information as possible from the Director of the music programs. We wanted to make sure the website incorporated the vision and objectives of the entire vocal music program including the curricular and co-curricular show choirs. The Director wanted to make sure the website reflected the passion of the program.

We had many discussions about who the audience for the site is and how the site needed to satisfy the needs of many groups. We asked questions that would generate either answers or more questions that would help us put together a comprehensive site that does as much as we can for our website users.

We then gathered Booster input from a select group of parents (who would be the largest users of the website). We wanted to make sure that we were meeting the needs of the parents, as well as the leadership team. We asked, “What would you like to be able to do on a website as a parent?”

In addition to parents we wanted input from a select group of student choir members, as we really wanted the kids as much as the program leadership to be proud of their website. The information-gathering process included asking questions like this: “What information do you wish you could get to on the current site?”

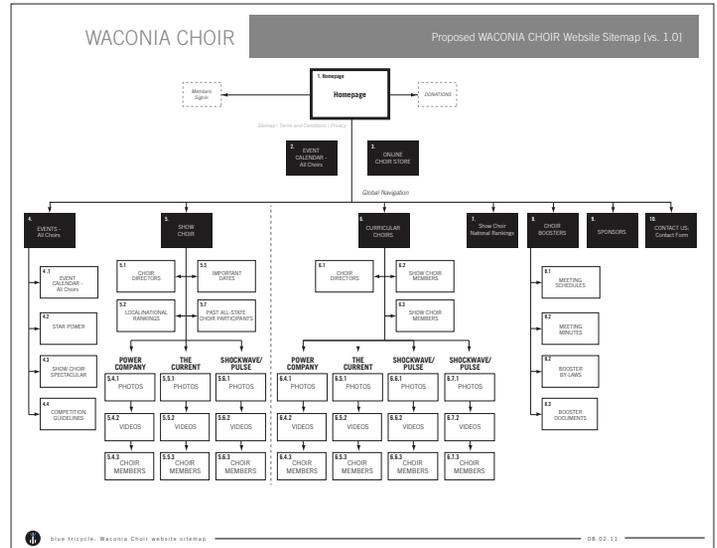
We were then able to prioritize based on how much time and effort we were able to put into creating the site. We knew that we could not include everything, so we set out to create a website that would include those items highest on our wish list immediately but was also scalable to meet the future needs as well.

### We began to create our wish list. We wanted/needed a site that met the following criteria:

- Could be changed by anyone (not just someone trained in HTML)
- Was designed to be cool looking, but clean for the parents

- Was easy to navigate
- Had lots of video and imagery (Content)
- Contained downloadable schedules and important information for our parents and kids
- Included mini pages for each of our choirs. (As we grow, the kids want to be able to identify with each choir as THEIR choirs.)
- Allowed us to add information about the leadership and the program, so parents and kids new to the program would be able to understand the processes and commitment to the choirs
- Provided information on fundraising activities
- Promoted concerts
- Had branding
- Had Pay Pal integration
- Could handle contact management along with email and texting integration
- Provided for ticket sales
- Incorporated Social Media

Once the input was taken from the various groups, we were able to create a sitemap with recommended navigation and pages laid out in a visual format. The sitemap was approved before any design or production began on the website. See chart:



## 2. CHOOSE A PLATFORM: To have a scalable site, we needed to find the right tools.

With all the input from the different groups, we recommended that we created a Content Managed System (CMS) that would could grow, be flexible, and allow multiple people to change things on the site without knowing code. There was a toss up between using Wordpress and Joomla. (While both are great

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systems, Joomla was recommended based on its flexibility and endless supply of modules to add functionality in the future.)

**3. DESIGN: Your choirs' brand is just as important as how it functions.**

Parents, competitors, and your community know your choirs by

their names, logos and colors, all of which becomes an important part of who you are. This is your brand.

This is something that we needed to incorporate into the site to make it look and feel like our Choirs. The approach we took was to capitalize on the stars, purples and gold colors, and images, images, images! We really wanted to have the kids' images reflected in the design. We left the background white, so the vibrant colors of the performances could pop visually. We also added large hero images on the individual choir pages and made the homepage a kind of Billboard for information about all choirs and events, so it was user friendly to the parents and the kids to find what they were looking for quickly.

**4. PRODUCTION: We had to have a good process to make sure we got all the images and information from the right people while the site was being created.**

As the site framework was being created, the task of the Directors, the Boosters and many enlisted kids from the program was to find imagery and content for the site. While the Choir Director was busy writing the content for the pages, many parents were enlisted to gather and organize imagery for each of the events, and the choirs needed to fill in the site pages. This is one of the most difficult tasks in creating the site, mostly

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because all the assets are spread out over so many people. This part should be well planned and organized. Luckily we have a wonderful videographer parent that has been very good about video capturing events and programs, so we were able to embed the video from YouTube as needed.

#### 5. PROOFING AND GOING LIVE: We were almost there!

Parent volunteers and Booster members did the proofing. Once all the proofing was done and we were ready, the site went live and has been used by both parents and students alike."

As with most websites, ours continues to evolve. Our next big move will be to incorporate a contact management and student

account module into our website. We have looked at a number of options but will most likely transition into using the Charms Office Assistant. By using Charms, we can easily put students into groups and target our communication specifically to groups or to the entire musical organization. Charms will also provide a secure way for parents to access their student account balances easily.

We are just beginning to "wet our toes" in the social media world by starting Facebook and Twitter accounts. I have sent out a few teaser emails encouraging families to "like" our Facebook page and to sign up to follow us on Twitter. I believe this will become even more valuable as the season progresses and we begin the competitive season.

#### According to Dave Weisbecker (another parent with extensive experience with social media and branding).

"We are taking a multi-step approach to our use of social media on the web site. First we wanted to establish the channels and get people familiar with the fact that we had content available for them to enjoy and share. Next we looked to leverage that awareness into a real time communication vehicle. And as we evolve the process we hope to be able to use the power of our performers and our community to crowd source content, quickly communicate and bring our performances to life.

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We started out by working first to engage our students and parents with photos and videos on YouTube and Flickr. We posted original videos and photos of student camps, clinics and exhibitions, as well as parent videos of performances. This had the immediate benefit of allowing the students and family members that could not make the trips to enjoy the experience. As we have built awareness and followers, we have also started to build our site contributors.

Earlier this year we started a Facebook page to engage our students and parents on a more real time scale than email allows us to do. We posted pictures and video links from competitions and events, sometimes within hours of the performance. This allowed us to share news and highlights with both our student performers and family and friends.

This summer we added a Twitter account to the mix to help expand our reach. Between the two platforms, we can now communicate to most of our performers and many of the parents. By linking our Facebook and Twitter accounts together, we can now have a singular post reach almost all of our show choir community. With the ever-present smart phone today we can get news, highlights, updates or changes to everyone almost immediately.

**As we go forward this season, we have three main goals in mind.**

First we want to continue to increase our likes and follows so that we know that everyone is getting our message right away, every time. This will help us to quickly move the dial when need be.

Secondly we want to increase our real time engagement at events and competitions. One of the great things about social media is the ability to build upon the moment of any given occasion. Using Facebook and Twitter to share the excitement, from both in front of and behind the scenes, can help to give everyone a true feeling for the experience.

And finally we hope to turn all of our sites into true crowd-sourced platforms. With all the cell phones, cameras and video equipment at any given event, we hope to have many members of our community using our various sites as a true repository. This will serve the dual task of giving us multiple images and experiences for every event while at the same time building a great photo and video archive for years to come."

It will be interesting to track our usage of these tools as the season progresses. Only time will tell where we go from here, but we hope to continue to use these tools to better communicate, promote and grow our programs well into the future. 

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Aaron R. Olson has served as the director of vocal music at Waconia High School in Waconia, MN since 1998. He is the Executive Director of the Power Company Family of Show Choirs encompassing nearly three hundred student participants in four show choirs as well as a summer show choir camp for aspiring show choir serving over 100 Waconia kids.

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