

The Band Website Journey

Your band's presence on the World Wide Web, and more tips on building better band web pages.

by Andrew T. Lenz, Jr.

The Summer issue's article "Master Your Band's Website" by Jeff Meade offered some solutions to several issues that crop-up on band websites: bloated pages, frames, superfluous splash pages, poor text legibility, sites with a preponderance of distracting "bells and whistles." Here, Andrew Lenz keeps the discussion rolling by offering suggestions to enhance the content of your band's website.

Images and Identity

Original Content People want to see original content specific to your band, not the same overused thing they've seen on a bunch of other sites. Avoid clip art like the plague. In this day and age of cheap digital cameras, there's no reason that you can't easily add some decent photos of your band in action on your site. At least one photo or graphic on each page is a good rule-of-thumb.

Photographs Crop your photos down to the action. (I know you think that Port-a-Potty on the left is interesting, but yuck!) If you are going to include large photos (over 40K) on your site, create a "thumbnail" image (a small file, less than 10K) so the user can decide whether they are willing to spend their time downloading a big image file. But don't make your thumbnail so small that the subject matter is unrecognizable!

Captions Include a description with your photos. People are curious: "Where were these taken?" "Who are these people?" "What are they doing?" Though I don't recommend going overboard with photos on your site, if you do want to post lots of photos on an ongoing basis, you

might consider automating it to save yourself sometime. If you have PHP support on your server (check with your web hosting service), a simple to use freeware program, such as Gallery is useful (<http://gallery.sourceforge.net/>) Gallery is used by lots of folks and can be customized pretty easily. A real-life example of its use is here: <http://www.salustro.net/gallery/>

Photo Files Photos should be saved as JPEG files—you'll usually want to use medium or medium-low quality. Diagrams or illustrations that contain only solid colors should be saved as GIF files. Why? These offer the best performance for the file size and quality. Oh, and if you haven't calibrated your monitor using your operating system's monitor controls, do it before you make contrast decisions or go changing the contrast and color in your photos.

Consistency Maintain a consistent identity (same background and text colors) throughout your site. Keep the font choices and color schemes the same and recognizable throughout each of the site's pages. A visitor shouldn't get the idea that they accidentally stumbled onto another site due to a radically different scheme of fonts and/or colors.

Text

Text Style Just like in a magazine, avoid using all capital letters in your text. Don't make text all-caps, bold and enlarged, simply doing just one of these three things will make it stand out. ALL CAPS IS HARDER TO READ. STUDIES SHOW THAT IT IS MUCH EASIER FOR THE HUMAN BRAIN TO RECOGNIZE WORDS

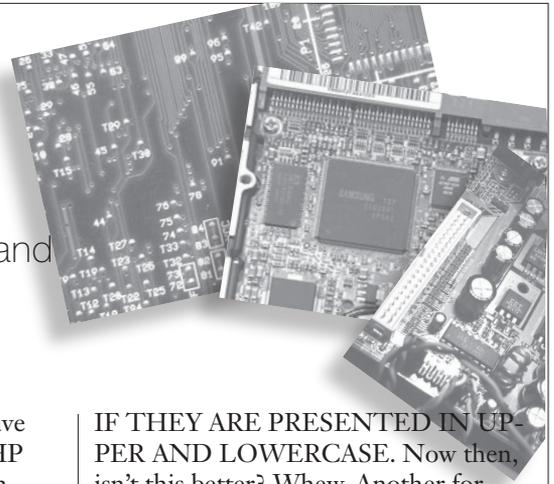
IF THEY ARE PRESENTED IN UPPER AND LOWERCASE. Now then, isn't this better? Whew. Another formatting thing, don't use the underline HTML tag. Most browsers underline links and, if you have underlined text, this will frustrate visitors who won't be getting what they expect, thinking things are a link when they are not.

Proofreading Spelling errors or wrong words can make a site look very unprofessional. No excuse these days. Though oven spell chick can't replace hold-fashioned prove reading. Seems obvious, right? You'd think. Don't neglect this important issue.

Overall Approach

Features Speaking of "bells and whistles," your mantra can be "what would Amazon do?" Amazon.com spends big bucks researching the best way to design their site, and it's very efficient as a result. Granted they are a retailer. We can take some liberties with their model, such as discretely used "OnMouseOver" commands among some other "non-bleeding edge" features. The "OnMouseOver" is like what you'll find on the home page of SantaCruzPipeBand.com, in that an alternate image loads when the user's mouse moves over a designated area, in this case, the navigation. It doesn't have to be a radically different image, it can be a little highlight. (I'm not the webmaster for the band's site, but it's nicely done.)

Extras An example of superfluous stuff: don't put clocks on your pages, unless for some really good reason I really need to know what time it is where



you are. I have a clock in the room and on my computer. I don't need another clock. The only clock I ever liked was one that counted down to the "Worlds" It gave me several bits of information: the band was a competition band; and how long it was until their most important performance.

Navigation

Dividing Information Obvious navigation is extremely important. Make sure your visitor can find their way around easily. What good is a fancy bathroom if you can't find it when you need it? Create a page for each logical "chunk" of information on your site. Band member biographies on one page, awards on another, practice information on another, etc. If a page starts getting really big and clumsy to navigate, consider breaking it up into several smaller pages.

Site Naming When a page is bookmarked (or added to a user's "favorites"), the page title becomes the name of that bookmark unless the user changes it manually. On your browser, right now, you could have ten bookmarks for "Home Page" each taking you to a different site! Title your pages so that the bookmarks/favorites titles make sense out of context. If you have a links page, title it something like "Imaginary Pipe Band's Links" not just "Links," and not just "Imaginary Pipe Band." Remember, as pointed out in last issue's article, if you are using frames, a user can only bookmark your home page—a good reason not to use them.

Searching Speaking of names, also include your band's name in text on your home page. Search engines can't read a spiffy masthead image with your band's name in it. But, they can read the page title and the text on your page. If you want to make it easier on those poor lil' ol' search engines (and blind visitors), include your band name in both. Use the "alt" (alternate description) text on images and use the H1, H2,

H3 tags. It is not only good HTML, accessible to disabled users, but helps search engines recognize important headers from regular page text.

Content

Text Content Some pages to consider having on your band site in addition to a home page: history, instruction, practice, contact information, music, how to join, calendar, book the band, past events, photo album, links, roster, and perhaps a site map if you site is big (or as alternative navigation if your main method of navigating pages is something other than HTML based links). Don't forget to link back to your home page and, if you have a big band logo image at the top of each page, link that back to your home page as well.

Location Remember to include where your band is located on your home page, that means more than just city or county, that means state/province and/or country as necessary—the more, the better. Sure, if you are in Los Angeles, that's probably enough. But if you are in Yreka—or any other place that a foreigner couldn't easily point out on a map—you better tell them at least the state! It is the World Wide Web after all. You should also let your visitor know what kind of band you are: street band, competition band, any band associations or organizations to which you belong or any organizations with which you are associated (school, charity group, fire department, etc.).

Contacts A means for a visitor to contact your band should be easy to find and complete. Offer them as many options as your feel comfortable: email, mailing address, phone number. Give them the name of the appropriate contact person. A photo would be a pleasant personal touch.

Sound It's 11:30 p.m. and your spouse is asleep. You click on a link, up comes a band's site, and WHAM!! Your computer blares Scotland the Brave

at 500dB! Your spouse screams, the neighbors call the police, the kids wet their beds, windows break! Is this really what you want your visitor to experience? Don't get me wrong, sound files are great—just don't force-feed them. Be polite, and ask first. Plus, sound files slow down your page load—bad. Create a page dedicated to sound bites of your band's performance or CD. Remember to check with your web hosting service to make sure that you won't exceed your bandwidth allotment (amount of data that you can transfer) by posting big sound files. If you overdo it, your site might be shutdown and be temporarily unavailable to anyone.

Calendar Your calendar should be current. It's disheartening to discover an exciting band only to find that their upcoming events are in 2002. Updating goes for members, repertoire, practice time/location or anything else that changes with time.

Personnel Short biographies of players with a photo are a nice addition to a band site. If a member wants a long one, have them go find a book publisher. A hundred words less usually gets the job done—perhaps a bit longer for the chief muckety-mucks, like the pipe major. A benefit of such an online roster is the ability for new band members to acclimate faster, that is, having an easier time putting names to faces and getting comfortable with bandmates. The downsides of online bios are a lack of privacy, easier poaching by any nearby bands (if that's a concern), plus the maintenance required to keep the roster updated. If the band decides against a public roster, a private one in a protected "members only" section is a possibility.

Guestbooks If you are going to have a guest book, make sure you are ready to commit the resources to monitor it for objectionable material. Swear words, links to obscene sites, jokes in poor taste, Pakistani pipe-makers advertisements, or other content that might pre-

vent your visitor from returning. Are you really ready to turn over a portion of your site to your visitors? Be aware.

A Few Techie Things

Email Addresses If you have an e-mail account, I don't have to tell you about the need to protect your address from spammers. Spammers use harvesting programs to pick off e-mail addresses off of websites so they can send you all those lovely unsolicited advertisements. Means of deterring this unpleasant occurrence include using a contact form (talk to your web hosting service), posting GIF images of each email address (visitor types what they see), or encoding addresses so they look like "%6E%6F%74%61%72%65%61" in the raw HTML source code. A page that encodes addresses for you is this one: <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~trw/spam/spam2.htm>. A nice touch would be to use this encoding method and a GIF image of the e-mail address so people can see the address that will appear when they click on a link to an encoded email address.

File Data Avoid using special characters in your file names. Stick with letters and numbers. If you want to use a space, consider using a hyphen or dash instead (-). Underscores can be read as spaces in linked text. A domain name is not case sensitive, so feel free to use capitals on business cards, programs, etc. to improve readability—i.e., ImaginaryPipeBand.com. However, folders (directories) and filenames in your path can be case sensitive depending on the web server. Take a look at this URL: <http://www.ImaginaryPipeBand.com/sound-files/Amazinghaggis2.mp3> If the file is really "amazinghaggis2.mp3"—note the lowercase letter "a"—their browser might not find it.

Compatibility It's good practice of checking your site on different browsers and different operating systems. One in fifty visitors to your site will be using a Macintosh computer so you should consider checking your site under that

operating system. Some sites include a list of suggested browsers; however, people don't like to be told they should switch browsers to view your site. Make your site work for all of them. Test your site using the latest common browsers. If you know that some feature that you "just have to use" won't be supported by a particular browser, don't use a redirect (a command that automatically sends a user to another page), just have a link on the page that says so.

Visiting Other Sites

Other Ideas If you are looking for ideas on band sites, you can visit the numerous sites found on the links pages of most major piping organizations, or navigate the enormous list at BobDunsire.com/bagpipeweb/.

Stealing A quick word on copyrights: just because something is posted on the web doesn't mean that it's yours for the taking. Maybe that photo on that other piping site would fit perfectly on yours, but hold yourself back. The same goes for articles and music. Don't go posting sheet music on your site unless it's in the public domain. Tunes are only fair game if they are "traditional," have no living composer credit, you create the sheet music yourself, or the tune and/or book from which it came is so old it's out of copyright. Do your homework and ask permission if necessary.

Sharing the Workload

Professional Services If you find that after reading all this website stuff you really don't want to do it by yourself from scratch, consider hiring a professional. I was fortunate enough to have Echo Alley (EchoAlley.com) build the templates for my site, BagpipeJourney.com, using material from my old site. Then I just filled in all the content. While it does cost money, the pros can set up an effective "skeleton" that you can adorn with "flesh" and edit and add pages yourself. There are even hosting companies that can allow you to edit pages using just your web browser.

I was introduced to TechMeridian's Xaviour hosting solution through Echo Alley, which takes a template and allows you to edit the text of a page through a normal web browser. This allows you to delegate responsibility of updating pages. If "Jimmy" keeps complaining that the band schedule is out of date, heck, he literally can do it himself! However you do your site, make sure that more than one person has a copy of the site's source files as well as access information (server, username, password, etc.). When your webmaster leaves for college, or quits in a huff, you'll want to continue and easily make changes to the band's site.

It's Done (For now!)

Sharing Once your band site uploaded to the Web, submit it to Bob Dunsire's Bagpipe Web Directory, Google, Yahoo!, Dmoz.org—and don't forget your home piping and drumming association! Once you have it listed on a few sites, all the search engines will sooner or later pick it up and add it to their database.

Wrapping Up

All right. Hopefully, that gave you some things to integrate into your band's site. If you have any questions, or simply want input on an existing site, feel free to visit the Webmaster & Software forum (of which I'm the moderator) at BobDunsire.com there are lots of hands to offer advice.

And don't forget to pipe! (Or drum!)

Andrew Lenz is the webmaster of the piping reference site BagpipeJourney.com and sent his first email message over 20 years ago, when only his fellow nerdy Computer Science majors had ever heard of the Internet.