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THEATRE COMMUNICATIONS GROUP, INC.

## CENTERPIECE

### FOCUS ON: MARKETING

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## LEADING YOUR THEATRE'S WEBSITE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

BY BARBARA GEESON WATSON

As recently as two years ago, the websites of most professional theatre companies were a collective reflection of inconsistent priorities, values and resources. Sites of comparably-sized organizations varied along an incredible continuum, from design-it-yourself hodgepodes to slick and sophisticated marketing machines. In an industry where the art itself is often underfunded and marketing budgets are chronically tight, it was clearly difficult for some theatres to invest their precious time and resources into what was still an emerging technology.

Surf those same theatre sites today, however, and you'll find an increased emphasis on professional design, expanded content and enhanced features—which probably isn't surprising considering the healthy growth of electronic commerce nationwide. In the first nine months of 2003, U.S. online retail sales were up by 24 percent over 2002, for a total of \$37.16 billion, with an additional \$15-\$18 billion projected for the holiday shopping season alone<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps even more significant, January through September 2003 saw a 47 percent increase in the number of online sales *transactions* over that same period, suggesting that those who are buying online are doing more of their shopping there<sup>2</sup>. So, in a time when income pressures on the nonprofit theatre community have never been greater, we're finding that we simply can't afford to risk missing the e-commerce boat.

If you've been handed the task of leading your theatre's web development (or re-development) project, you know the stakes may be great. You know the task ahead of you may be complex. You know the technology is constantly changing. So...what do you do next?

The answer to that question could fill a small textbook and depends equally on the size of your budget and the breadth of your imagination. That said, there are certain procedural steps you can take to lead your organization through a smooth development process that suits its size and budget and that minimizes your risks in a climate of rapid change.

Marketing *Centerpiece* Curator: Barbara Geeson Watson, director of audience development, Center Stage. Copyright © 2004 by Theatre Communications Group, Inc. All articles reproduced by permission of the authors. No portion of this publication may be reproduced in any form, or by any means, including photocopying, without written permission from the publisher or author. Theatre Communications Group, Inc., 520 Eighth Ave., 24th Fl., New York, NY 10018-4156, telephone (212) 609-5900, fax (212) 609-5901, website: [www.tcg.org](http://www.tcg.org). Ben Cameron, executive director; Joan Channick, deputy director; Christopher Shuff, director of management programs; and Rachel Ford, management programs publications associate.

# A CLEAR START

**R**emember, no matter how small and simple you initially envision your site to be, it is so much smarter and more efficient to go into the design phase of the project with a clear and prioritized list of current and future needs than to allow “mission creep” to delay or derail you during the development process. Keeping that in mind, before you begin the design process, be sure to

❖ **Clearly articulate your goals.** The design of your site will be strongly influenced by the scope of the information and services that you choose to provide. A site that is mostly a virtual box office will have different priorities than one with a broader audience development or education objective.

For that reason, before you even begin interviewing designers, *it's a smart idea to write a mission statement for your new website* and to make sure there is cross-departmental buy-in to the project's priorities and scope. Give key stakeholders from all over the organization the chance to comment on the plan before any decisions are made. This is especially important if only one department (information systems, marketing, etc.) will be leading the design project for the entire theatre; better to make one comprehensive web plan—even if it will be rolled out in multiple stages—than to try later to shoehorn new content into an existing site structure. Everything from the navigational layout to the systems for managing content will be impacted by the choices you make at the early stages of the project, and it is possible to construct a layered information architecture that can allow you to roll out new enhancements over time.

Also, no matter how much you believe you know and can anticipate another department's needs, your bases will be better covered—and the collective buy-in of your colleagues more readily assured—if you open the early planning process as widely as possible. That said, don't count on each department to have fully anticipated its own potential uses for your new site. As the project leader, your planning process should include conducting your own research of how others in the industry are making innovative use of the Internet, and where the online community as a whole is heading. Actively pose questions to your management team and peers to encourage them to be forward-thinking about the impact of the new website on their operation. Some examples of considerations to keep in mind:

◆ *If you plan to sell tickets online, will your site interface with your ticketing database?* Many larger ticketing software vendors have added a direct web interface to their packages, some of which offer the same features patrons have come to expect from other online transactions (real-time inventory verification, shopping carts for multiple purchases, automatic email confirmations, etc). Patrons are also more comfortable

buying tickets online if they know their exact seating locations. If this is impossible or impractical with your ticketing software, there are other low-tech solutions that will still allow you to accept online ticket sales. Many of them, however, may put additional demands on your box office staff, whether by forcing them to manage a separate ticket allocation or by increasing the chances of having to follow up with customers who request sold out sections or performances. Have you checked with your software vendor about the features of your existing ticketing system?

- ◆ *Will you be using your website to manage your email contact lists?* If so, those systems can be designed to give your patrons direct control over their own email preferences, minimizing the time your staff will have to spend maintaining the lists manually. Have you created an email marketing strategy that anticipates your needs?
- ◆ *Do you plan to accept online donations?* If so, perhaps it's time to reevaluate your donor levels and benefits to encourage the maximum donation—particularly if web-based gifts might begin to supplant your telefunding campaign, by which a live caller can often motivate a patron to increase his or her annual gift. Consider the potential for matching gifts, custom-designed benefits packages and other incentives that may be more easily implemented online.

Also, if you plan on creating a content-rich site that shows off your artistry and patron programs to their best advantage, could you simultaneously be using those pages to make the case for increased annual support?

- ◆ *Will your education staff use the website as a classroom teaching tool?* Developing young audiences is a critical goal for most theatres, and many teachers are working web-based learning into their curricula. Could your organization increase ticket sales to local schools by providing enhanced online content for students and teachers? What impact would the creation of that content have on your staff resources?
- ◆ *Could your new site be used for other kinds of information sharing?* Your web design plan might also include an “Extranet,” a private web address housed on your site's server that is designed to facilitate the sharing of information between your technical staff and artistic team or your administrative staff and your board. These discretely linked pages could include everything from an inventory of lighting instruments and sound equipment to blueprints of your grid and house to talking points for a donor solicitation—all available for download by key offsite collaborators.

◆ *Are there other processes that could be done more economically and efficiently online?* At many theatres, printed press releases are going the way of the audit stub, as emailed teasers with links to electronic releases take their place. And last year's innovation of slipping a photo CD into each press packet is rapidly being replaced by online archiving of high-resolution production photography that your local newspaper can download at its convenience. There may be potential for this kind of evolution in other areas as well—but be sure to anticipate the impact that online archiving might have on your site's storage space requirements and performance.

❖ **Create and commit to an approval chain in advance.** While your website will benefit from the involvement and input of the institution at large, it is completely impractical to manage the project collectively. Decide in advance who will be included in actual design decisions, who will sign off on the various developmental benchmarks, and how the broader universe of constituents will participate in the approval process. *Then get the theatre's leadership to commit to the plan.* This should minimize last-minute design or scope changes—and the amount of gray hair you'll grow as you try to manage internal expectations, the design process and your budget simultaneously.

❖ **Evaluate your resources not only for designing the site, but for supporting it.** Once everyone is clear about the mission and scope of your website development project, it is critical to determine if your budget and existing staff can support the complexity of your ideal design.

The very best way to undercut the impact of your brand new site is to allow it to get out of date regularly. For that reason, it's important that you be realistic and don't overreach. Identify an update schedule for every piece of content that you hope to add to the site and create a process that allows for last-minute news or additions. You should also be clear about who will be responsible for doing the work of maintaining the site and how much time you can reasonably allocate for web maintenance duties. Knowing this information in advance will help your designer recommend the features and functions that can best be supported with your available resources.

Of course, this doesn't mean you will need to hire a full-time, technically savvy website developer in order to maintain a decent site. On the contrary, an easy-to-use content management system integrated into the site's design can allow even a novice user to add and remove information in a simple and straightforward way. These systems range from custom-built programs to off-the-shelf applications, so the more you have anticipated your own needs, the better your designer will be at recommending the appropriate software for your project.

❖ **Come up with a preliminary budget.** If you've never developed a professional website before, start by finding other sites of a similar scale and do some investigation into

their cost. You will find that design expenses can vary widely based on everything from the time of year to the size of the "dot-com" job market in your area. Your site's custom features will also have a big impact on the overall price of the project.

Getting a detailed bid on the individual bells and whistles you're hoping to incorporate into your site may help you determine how to prioritize your spending—and to see where a design firm places its priorities. Two different bids totaling the same overall amount might show those resources allocated in very different ways. For instance, is the money going into backend programming or graphic design? How sophisticated is the content management system? What features are being custom created rather than integrated from existing software? The answers to these questions could reveal your designer's level of familiarity with the latest standards in web design—and could hint at his or her interest in keeping you tethered to his or her firm for future enhancements.

❖ **Choose your designer carefully.** Your budget will almost certainly dictate your options when selecting a design firm, and the complex variables involved will make a one-size-fits-all strategy impossible to recommend. The most important factor to remember, however, is to match the proven skills of your designer to the scope of your project—and vice versa. Functional, efficient sites can be developed in house or by web design students at a very reasonable cost and may be preferable to having no web presence at all. Ironically, it should be noted, it is often the cheaply-created sites that are among the most expensive to maintain; since they often lack a user-friendly interface, and many require someone with website programming experience to make more than incidental updates.

If your budget does allow for a professional design firm, the choices are still challenging to make. For instance, while the availability of talented web designers has never been greater, not every theatre can afford to plunk down \$25–\$75,000 or more to hire an experienced firm with a proven track record. There are also few set standards for everything from scripting languages to end-user web browsers, and designing a site that can work equally well on a brand new Centrino laptop and a gasping old Windows 95 machine is next to impossible. Knowing where to make trade-offs can be the test of a designer's mettle. At a certain point, you'll be making a leap of faith.

Beyond the standard reference checks, you should surf active website sites created by your design candidates, make observations about their ease of use, performance speed and depth of content, as well as see if they have held up over time. One other recommendation: since staff turnover can be high at Internet technology firms, be sure to ask for the names of the principal designers and programmers who worked on the sites you like best and make sure the same people will be available to work on your project.

# THE DESIGN PROCESS

**W**hen it comes time to design, think usability. More than the latest e-commerce buzz word, usability is the sociology of website use, encompassing everything from “human/machine interface” studies to techniques to keep your site accessible to the blind. As the word itself suggests, usability focuses your project on creating a functional site that your patrons can easily navigate, and it forces you to subject your ideas—and your designer’s—to the test of function over form.

Usability considers how easy it is to navigate your site, the speed at which basic tasks can be accomplished, how quickly a patron can learn the logic of its navigation scheme, and how enjoyable it is for them to visit. With that in mind, there are several steps you can take to ensure that your new site is serving its visitors well:

- ❖ **Design for your demographic.** Identifying the target “audience” for your site—and how that demographic best uses the Internet—should be key to developing its design and features.

For instance, the websites of theatres catering to an aging audience may have different design considerations than those aimed at college students and young adults—not so much for aesthetic reasons as for practical ones. Recent studies of older web users have shown that, while the fastest growing online population is age 65 and over<sup>3</sup>, seniors often find it more challenging to access some websites younger users can navigate without difficulty<sup>4</sup>. Their diminished vision, motor control and lack of experience with some key web navigation concepts can make it hard for them to do such basic tasks as accurately click a pull-down navigation menu or tell the difference between a site’s search function and the browser’s URL box. Generally speaking, they are less likely to stay on top of the technology curve, and therefore may use older computers with less processing power or outdated versions of web browsing software—all key considerations when designing a senior-friendly site.

- ❖ **Limit your use of “Flash and splash.”** Don’t assume, however, that if you are targeting young audiences, then your site should be filled with Flash movies (animated graphics, logos, etc.) and “splash pages” (those introductory screens, often incorporating Flash, that offer up a quick commercial before taking you to the site’s real home page). In fact, usability testing has shown that these features often cause significant frustration to web users of all ages, who are slowed down in their attempts to get at the information they are searching for in an efficient and direct way. Anything that slows a page’s loading speed or contributes to visual clutter only serves to discourage repeat visits to your site.

This doesn’t mean that you should avoid all streaming media and animation, however. For theatres proud of their artistry, the chance to show snippets of performances on

their websites is too good to ignore. Consider, making most multimedia content “opt-in,” allowing the user to click a link to video clips or slideshows. Be sure, also, to provide scalable alternatives for users with slower dial-up modems versus high-speed broadband connections.

- ❖ **Test before you build.** Getting user feedback before you make a huge investment in site creation will save you time, money and frustration down the road. And while you may wonder how it is even possible to test a piece of technology before it’s built, there is a quick and easy way to kick the tires of your site before you’ve spent a lot of time or money writing code.

Paper prototypes can provide you and your designers important information about your initial concept, navigation scheme and level of content early in the design process, while making changes is still easy and inexpensive. Printouts of web page templates—which can range from crude stick drawings to full graphical representations of a potential site design are placed in front of a small focus group—ideally, one that is demographically similar to your target audience. The users are then led through specific tasks (“Find out how much tickets cost for a Saturday evening,” or “Where would you expect to find information about subscribing to the theatre,” etc.) and their responses are noted as they progress through the site.

This simple and inexpensive research is particularly helpful<sup>5</sup> at testing a website’s

- ◆ **labels and terminology.** Are you using too much industry jargon in describing your ticketing policies (will-call, SRO, etc.)? Is it clear which button will bring up information on becoming a volunteer?
- ◆ **flow of navigation when searching for specific information.** How many clicks does it take to find out the time of tomorrow’s performance or the price of Saturday night balcony tickets for an upcoming production? Does the process of getting to that information seem intuitive or complex?
- ◆ **scope of content.** Would someone expect to find directions to the theatre on your site? What about a list of area restaurants? Are you offering the full range of information the public might come to expect from a professional theatre’s website?
- ◆ **general functionality.** Have you arranged the information in headings that are logical to someone who doesn’t know your organization?

❖ **Test after you build.** What paper prototypes can't do is test a site's technical capabilities, download speed or graphic design. That's why it is also necessary to make the prototype available at a discrete URL once your site design and construction is complete. Get a number of different people with varying degrees of experience involved in testing it. Search for broken or inaccurate links; check the load speed of different pages on different kinds of computers, browsers and connections; make sure all of your images appear as expected; and get some general feedback about the amount and quality of your content—particularly from those not already intimately aware of your operation. Also, while it may sound obvious, you should have an independent set of

eyes proofread all of your text as scrupulously as you would a printed brochure.

If web scripts and databases are a part of your site, now is the time to test them, as well. Have multiple users access your online sales and donation applications to see how they perform, and check the “add” and “remove” functions for your email marketing lists. Do your email confirmation scripts work as expected? What's the response time after clicking the “submit” button for an online order? Does your search function deliver the responses you would expect? Only after you have ensured the quality of your site's construction should you then take it live.

## MARKETING YOUR NEW SITE

Once your site is ready to go, make sure to devote some serious time and energy to its promotion, particularly if it includes the capacity for online ticket sales and donations. Some suggestions, obvious and otherwise:

- ❖ **Master your domain.** In the ideal world, your domain name or URL should be something easy to guess: [www.yourtheatre.org](http://www.yourtheatre.org). The reality, however, is that your theatre—like mine—may be one of dozens of Center Stages scattered across North America, and your preferred name may already be taken. Do what you can to secure the most obvious address for your site—then register a few secondary variations, if possible, redirecting them to the correct homepage. The recognized masters of this technique are the staff of the Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles, who registered every possible iteration of the Mark Taper Forum and Ahmanson Theatre to maximize the chances of being found by a patron attempting to locate their site without a search engine. Also, don't assume that, because you're a nonprofit, your site must end in “.org”. If the “.com” is available for your name, by all means grab it.
- ❖ **Plaster your domain—on everything.** Publish your web address prominently on all of your marketing materials and in your advertising. Wherever your phone number appears, make sure your web address is printed alongside it—perhaps even in larger type. (Chances are your box office isn't open and selling tickets 24 hours a day. Why not direct patrons to your website first?)

- ❖ **Register with the major search engines.** The web robots for Google and Yahoo will probably find you eventually, but why risk Internet obscurity? The major search engines will allow you to register your site directly, taking the guess work out of waiting to be discovered.

- ❖ **Grow your email database.** Collect email addresses as aggressively as possible, including from your subscribers, and develop a coordinated plan for using them. Then use your emailings to refer patrons back to the detailed information on your website by including “deep links” to specific content pages.

*Note:* The standard protocols for collecting and sharing email addresses are different from those we have become accustomed to for postal addresses. While trading and selling mailing addresses is a longstanding practice, the same kinds of behaviors can cost you the trust and confidence of your email members. Consider developing and listing a privacy policy for the use of the information you collect online; it will go a long way in encouraging people to opt in to your list.

- ❖ **Create an online contest.** Base a promotion around the information located on your site. All emailed entries containing the correct answers will be eligible for a special drawing—perhaps one grand prize and dozens of other tchotchkes imprinted with your web address.

# GOOD HOUSEKEEPING FOR YOUR WEBSITE

**W**ith our small budgets and competing priorities, nonprofit theatres aren't likely to be setting any major trends in website innovation. But just as we did when converting from manual to computerized offices, we must acknowledge and embrace the fact that our websites will never be "finished." To serve us, websites must continue to evolve and grow over time. This is why it's important to

- ❖ **Commit to ongoing maintenance.** It may not seem so after the months of planning and programming, but creating your site is the easy part. Keeping it current is the real challenge. Be ruthless about site updates, particularly for your homepage, and devote the necessary resources to its maintenance.

It's helpful to create a listing of each page on your site, the date and purpose for which it was created, and a record of its last update. Then schedule major maintenance for milestone dates (the start or end of a specific production, the announcement of your new season, etc.), with a checklist of things to be updated at that time. The better your content management system, the easier this will be. But more than anything, site maintenance requires the integration of your

website into the fabric of your theatre's information sharing activities. Don't let it be an afterthought.

- ❖ **Stay ahead of the obsolescence curve.** The blessing and curse of computer technology is the speed at which advancements are made, and while the Internet is no longer in its infancy, it's barely out of diapers. But alongside innovation comes standardization, which should help define the rules by which most websites will have to play. Improved browser compatibility, increased research on user preferences and faster computing speed will all help to establish benchmarks for website performance—benchmarks that are currently more of an art than a science.
- ❖ **Review your website's mission statement. Has your mission been accomplished?** Which brings us back to Step 1—the mission statement you created at the beginning of your project. How does your site do in living up to your initial goals and priorities? And what are the potential next phases of its development? Periodically reviewing your website's mission statement will ensure that your site continues to meet your theatre's needs.

— Please note that Center Stage's new [website](#) will launch in late February 2004.

## CENTERPIECE TOPIC CURATORS

If you would like to contribute an idea for a *Centerpiece* topic, please notify the appropriate curator or contact:

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<sup>1</sup> Source: BizRate.com, October 1, 2003

<sup>2</sup> Source: BizRate.com, October 1, 2003

<sup>3</sup> Source: Nielsen/NetRatings, October 2003

<sup>4</sup> Jakob Nielsen's [Alertbox](#) (April 28, 2002)

<sup>5</sup> [Paper Prototyping](#), by [Carolyn Snyder](#), (Snyder Consulting, November 2001)