

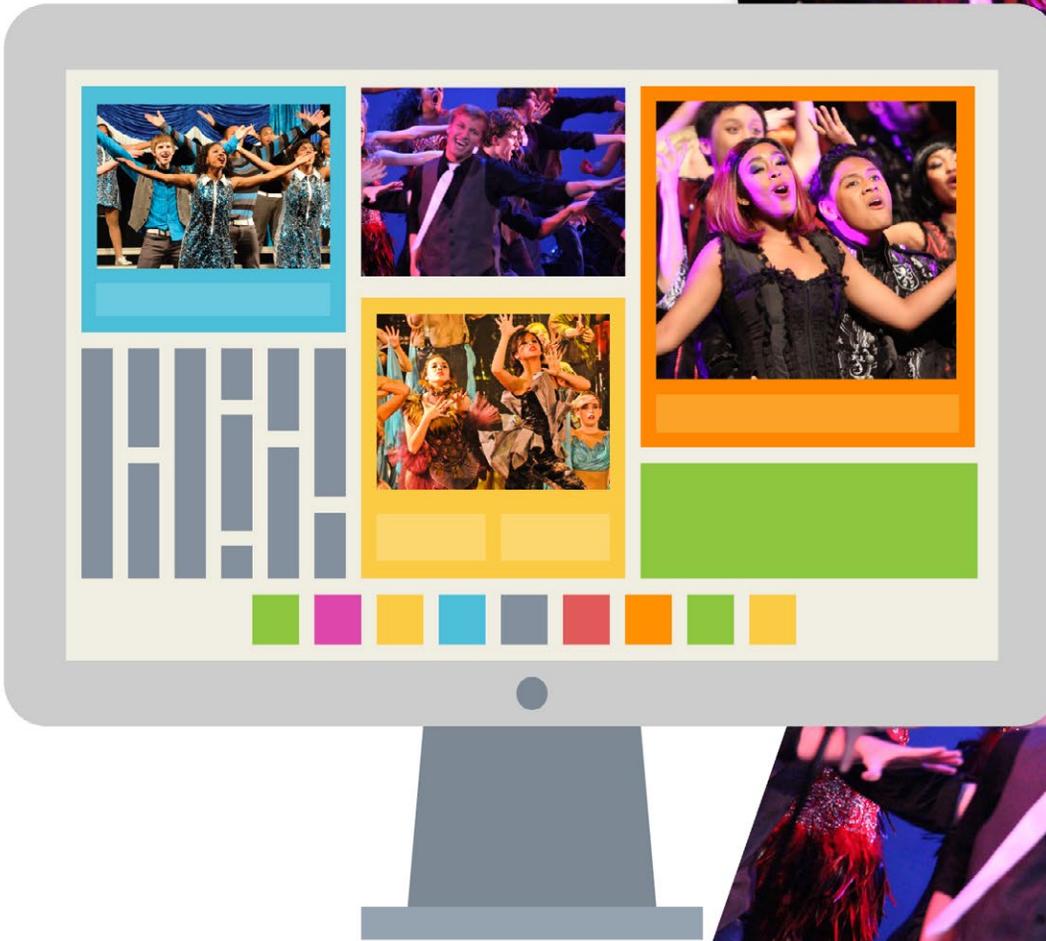
DEVELOPING A SUCCESSFUL AND RELEVANT WEBSITE FOR YOUR SHOW CHOIR



In today's world of technology, organizations must employ the tools that are available in a way that helps to organize, communicate, advertise, and promote their programs. As families rely more and more on technology, organizations must have useful, interactive websites to serve them. With careful planning, these tools can help free up valuable time that can instead be used to continue to build, grow, and promote our programs.

by Aaron Olson,
David Wesbecker,
and Keith Griffin





Our music 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. The website houses 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 consulted 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. For people who are not tech savvy, this domain 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

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 This situation not only left us with outdated and broken links, but also created more work than it was worth.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

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 who was able to help us build a website that was professional in appearance, yet easy enough for us to make any necessary updates. If you are not so fortunate to have a parent in the business, we 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.

Guidance for Building a Website

After going through the website development process twice, we generated the following list of aspects to address in website creation.

Build a Strategic Plan

One of our first steps was to gather as much information as possible from the Director of the music programs to ensure that the website incorporated the vision and objectives of the entire vocal music program, including the curricular and co-curricular show choirs. Additionally, 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 generated both answers and more questions! These questions and answers helped us put together a comprehensive site that does as much as possible for our website users. We then gathered Booster input from a select group of parents, since they 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 students to also 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 could include those items highest on our wish list immediately but was scalable to meet the future needs, as well.

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

- Could be changed by anyone, not just someone trained in HTML
- Was designed to be visually engaging, with clean pages
- Was easy to navigate
- Had lots of video and imagery
- Contained downloadable schedules and important information for our parents and kids
- Included mini pages for each of our 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 PayPal integration
- Could handle contact management along with email and texting integration
- Provided for ticket sales
- Incorporated social media



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

Choose a Platform

With all the input from the different groups, we recommended that we created a Content Managed System (CMS) that could grow, be flexible, and allow multiple people to change things on the site without knowing how to code. There was a toss-up between using WordPress and Joomla. While both are great systems, Joomla was recommended based on its flexibility and endless supply of modules to add functionality in the future.

Design the Site, Using Organizational Branding

Parents, competitors, and your community know your choirs by their names, logos, and colors, all of which make up the brand of your organization. We needed to incorporate our brand 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 plenty of 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.

Coordinate the 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 kids enlisted 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 multi-directional collaboration is one of the most difficult tasks in creating the site, mostly 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 who

has been very good about video capturing events and programs, so we were able to embed the video from *YouTube* as needed.

Proof and Publish

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 and easy way for parents to access their student account balances.

We are just beginning to "wet our toes" in the social media world by starting *Facebook*, *Instagram*, 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* and *Instagram*. I believe



this will become even more valuable as the 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. 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 productionsmag.com

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 platform allows 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*, *Instagram*, 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 followers so that we know that everyone is getting our message right away, every time. This audience development will help us to quickly move the dial when need be.

Second, 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 crowdsourced 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 true repositories. This crowdsourcing 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 Chairs 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.