

Section 9

E-Communications

Planners in Denton, a city of 80,000 just north of Dallas and Fort Worth, Texas, wanted to ensure a good turnout of citizens when choosing an architectural style for a downtown improvement effort. To get that level of participation, something more than a series of public meetings and workshops was needed. Their solution was to create a web-based visual preference survey.¹ Concurrently, a marketing effort was launched to publicize the survey and promote participation.

Denton's experience underscores the value of e-communications to planners. Internet-based electronic communications open up new ways to inform and engage public officials, developers, and important stakeholders by:

- Providing a forum for planners to make themselves and their work known to the community;
- Reaching constituents not traditionally involved in the planning process;
- Delivering planning messages to interested web visitors.

Developing effective e-communications begins by considering the needs of your planning department. Is one of your goals to increase and strengthen community support for planning? Do you need methods to better gauge public opinion? Do you want to save money and time on the expense of providing printed copies of permits, reports, and requests? Answering these questions before developing an e-communications strategy will help ensure you reach your goals.

9.0.1

When putting together an effective website, ingenuity, commitment, and 'web smarts' are more important than the size of your budget



City of Denton, Texas

To help promote the city's downtown master plan, Denton produced a special newsletter. (For a copy, visit <http://www.cityofdenton.com/pages/downtownmp.cfm?object=2824&folderID=185&action=files>.)

A planning department can spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on an online presence, but as many of the following examples show, ingenuity, commitment, and “web smarts” can be just as effective at a fraction of the cost.

9.1 E-Communication essentials

There is a wealth of expert information offered on the Internet. Opinions vary, but there is general agreement on one point: Before adding to or changing a webpage, consider the website user and how easy it is for him or her to access information. This requires a consistent navigation format and easily readable type. Visitor interest in your site depends on integration of both compelling text and meaningful images. For a more detailed discussion about website how-to, visit the comprehensive and authoritative Yale Web Style guide at <http://www.webstyleguide.com>.

9.2 Being ‘media-savvy’ on the web

9.2.1

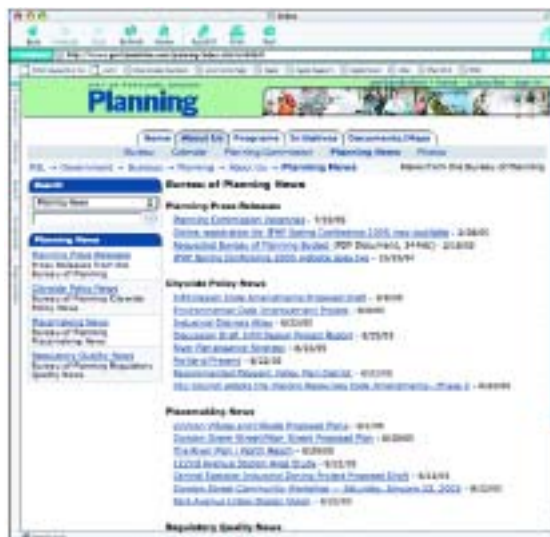
Three quick suggestions for creating a website useful to the media

Among the most important users of a planning department’s electronic presence are the media, because they can rapidly deliver information and sway opinion. You can help the media become better informed about planning by providing clear, pertinent, and well-organized information on your website. Joe Dysart, writing in *Mass Transit*,² notes the importance of:

- Using focused, engaging writing (as discussed at length in Section 2 of this Guide);
- Including pictures or other images (300 dpi resolution or better) with press releases;
- Providing quotable text from a named source within the department, along with his or her contact information.

9.2.2

Maintain an archive of news releases and stories



Portland Bureau of Planning

Materials in Portland, Oregon’s electronic press room are organized by subject, which enables viewers to locate information quickly and easily.

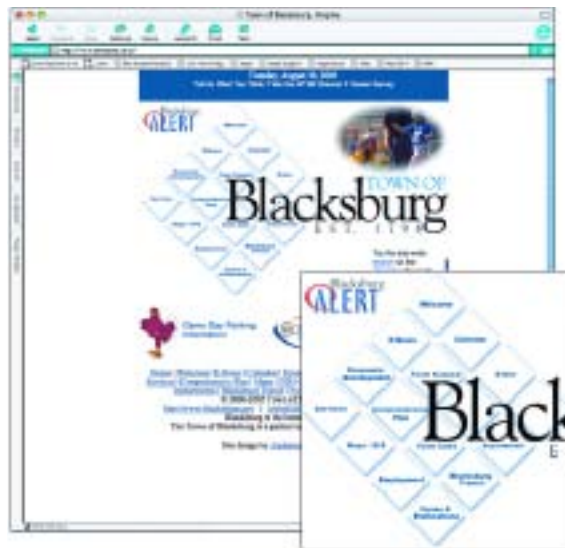
Websites offer overt and subtle communication possibilities. An archive of planning department news releases can be helpful to journalists, especially if organized by topics or issues. It’s also important to provide quotes and attention-getting facts, figures, and statistics, and an online media kit. For an example of what to include in such a kit, see Section 10. If your department is unable to maintain an online pressroom run by employees, be sure to get in contact with the municipal

public information section or whomever is responsible for the city news webpage. They should be aware of your activities and vice versa. Establish a system of reciprocal memos so that you know what the media people are saying about planning and they know what planners want to say to the press. A good online pressroom is all about organization. Journalists want to spend their time writing their stories, not navigating a clumsy website. The Portland, Oregon, Planning Department sorts press releases by subject area and offers a search function (<http://www.portlandonline.com/planning/index.cfm>).

That said, you can take advantage of opportunities to expose reporters to other content as they are navigating to information for a specific story. To do this, consider:

- Building and linking to a comprehensive plan web section or its own website;
- Placing your mission statement on your website's front page;
- Building and linking to project-specific websites;
- Linking to pertinent agencies, allied organizations, and online content;
- Providing information on planning success stories with planning department involvement.

Your website also presents a variety of opportunities to showcase comprehensive plans and illustrate their importance to important stakeholders. A link to the comprehensive plan from the planning department's homepage is essential, but even better is a link to the plan from the city's homepage. For an example of this, visit the Blacksburg, Virginia, website (http://www.blacksburg.va.us/comp_plan/). The site further educates audiences by including a separate section on the importance of the comprehensive plan to the lives and work of residents.



Town of Blacksburg

Blacksburg, Virginia, prominently displays the town's comprehensive plan by including a link to the plan from the city's home page.

9.2.3

Comprehensive plans merit a separate website—Blacksburg, Va., is a good example

Blacksburg's comprehensive plan also includes a section on strategic technology planning. This section of the plan presents a vision of the Blacksburg area successfully competing with northern Virginia in attracting high-tech companies. The community's efforts towards this goal are paying off; between 1989 and 1999, Blacksburg and surrounding Montgomery County enjoyed a 10 percent employment growth rate, mostly in services and technology sectors.³

Other important elements of a website that supports clear and effective communications with targeted audiences include:

A mission statement. This succinctly communicates to the visitor your department's goals and sets the context for everything else included within the site. Make this one of the first pieces of information a visitor sees. The Planning and Building Department for Jackson, Wyoming (<http://www.ci.jackson.wy.us/buldplan1.htm>), illustrates this approach.

9.2.4

Be sure to include your mission statement on your website

Links to useful information. The Kansas City, Missouri, Department of Planning website (<http://www.kcmo.org/planning.nsf/planning/home>) offers an inventory of hot links to other pertinent government agencies and allied agencies. These links include gateways to other municipal departments, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Mid America Regional Council, and APA. The inventory of links on your website affords an opportunity to place your planning department at the center of a network of organizations. The organizations you list should help you convey a pro-planning message, so choose carefully. It is also important to include links from your website to other city web pages (and vice versa) that contain information about planning.

9.2.5

Links to other organizations are informative and advance a pro-planning message

The Springfield, Missouri, Infonet site (<http://www.ci.springfield.mo.us/community/tv23/index.html>) offers an informative and attractive television program documenting the importance of the comprehensive plan in everyday life. When other organizations offer planning-related content on the web, you can benefit at little cost by linking to them.

High-impact examples. While it is important to tell people about the importance of planning, examples are more engaging. The Seattle Department of Planning (<http://www.seattle.gov/dpd/>) highlights its contributions and achievements with a twofold strategy. A side menu on its website, called “What’s Hot,” contains a list of ongoing revitalization and development projects. These entries describe the benefits of each project to local residents as well as to the entire city. The link “How We’re Helping” takes viewers to information about how the department is contributing to the mayor’s vision for the city.

9.2.6

Using examples is important for clear communications, whether on the Internet or somewhere else



Seattle Department of Planning and Development

Seattle's “What’s Hot” website side menu helps draw viewer attention to new and topical items.

9.3 Accuracy, appropriateness, and innovation

In many instances, municipal departments hand over responsibility for their e-communication to a city webmaster. This practice ensures an Internet presence while saving planning department time and resources. It also leaves the responsibility of communication with stakeholders up to a department that likely has little or no understanding of planning issues.

Your website will probably be more effective if you can find a way to strike a balance. Exemplary planning department websites, even if maintained by a technology department, involve planning staff in the design and content of the web pages. This means having planners create (or at least review) content and ensuring that photos, imagery, and text are useful and relevant to your key audiences and viewers. Some planning websites surpass these basics and use imaginative and innovative formats to communicate planning messages. Consider using short stories to create “planning trivia” that relates popular aspects about the city to the role planners had in realizing those accomplishments.



City of Denver

Websites are an effective way to show the results of good planning and effective implementation. For instance, by including a sentence or two about the plans and planning that went into the city's park system, Denver's homepage can showcase both its parks (which appear in a rotating box story on left; see inset) and its planning efforts.

Flash stories on the side of your department's website that connect objects of city pride to planning.

The city of Denver rotates stories about city park history across the left side of its website (http://www.denvergov.org/jump_neighborhood.asp). Consider stories about affordable housing, revitalized areas, new parks, and safe neighborhoods—all of which grow out of plans—for your department or city's website.

A project-specific website is an innovative tool for informing and engaging the media and public. Good sites are resource intensive and, if well done, should rival the main planning page in informative power. Use them when your department begins an undertaking that will have far-reaching, long-lasting implications such as comprehensive plan updates and major site developments. It's not required for these websites to have an expiration date when the project or update ends. Use such sites to demonstrate the power of planning in action by highlighting the benefits of the completed

9.3.1

Even when using outside resources, make sure planning staff are involved in the website

9.3.2

A separate website for a comprehensive planning or revitalization effort enhances communications

project as time progresses. Treat these sites as equal to the main planning sites. Consider the following examples:

When a central site in Arlington, Massachusetts, overlooking downtown Boston became available for redevelopment, planners and developers turned to the web. The website for the Symme's Advisory Committee (<http://www.symmesarlington.org/events/index.php>) is a cooperative effort that provides information



Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, Inc.

Project- or plan-specific websites are an effective way to inform target audiences and encourage public participation. Shown here is the website created for the Symme's Hospital redevelopment project in Arlington, Massachusetts.

and solicits feedback. This easily navigable and well-designed website explains the long-lasting implications a major project can have on the character and success of a town.

The Kenai Peninsula (Alaska) Comprehensive Update Plan website (<http://www.kpbcomp-plan.com/>) is as well-organized and informative as the planning department's main website. It informs and solicits participation in an attractive format.

The Internet offers a medium for communicating with targeted audiences using tailored,

innovative content. Effective electronic communication exploits the versatility of the web to make information come alive in ways impossible in printed reports and books.

Truly effective communication takes advantage of the fact that pictures represent “a thousand words,” especially on the Internet where visitors quickly pass over drab sites. Imagery makes the text descriptions more accessible and interesting. Consequently, using the Internet to its full potential involves not only providing clear and pertinent information, but also using images to communicate the planning message. Links under “Active Planning” on the Denver Planning Department website (http://www.denvergov.org/Planning_all/) are a good example of using imagery to enhance text descriptions of current planning projects.

Many maps available on planning websites are not interactive. If you are working with such maps, treat them as you would other imagery, where the key to successful integration is contextualization, with effective static maps supporting and enhancing the rest of the content on the page. The “Better Neighborhoods” page on the San Francisco Planning Department's website (http://www.sfgov.org/site/planning_index/) illustrates this principle, with a map showing a project's extent.

9.3.3

Well-integrated images are crucial on the Internet

9.3.4

Maps capture and communicate a large amount of information—integrate them with your site's content

GIS and citizen empowerment. Interactive maps, supported by mapping servers such as ESRI's ArcIMS, offer the most resource intensive but information-rich mapping option. Since few Internet users have experience with geographic information system (GIS) software, unlocking the power of GIS requires accessible, ready-to-use content. Providing only data layers will leave a lot of confused visitors wondering why they can't open shapefiles in MS-Paint.

If GIS is a stand alone feature of the website, it's not living up to its capabilities. To be useful to citizens and Internet users who are not familiar with GIS, it is important to suggest possible uses for the content, then ask questions such as "What location do you want to know about?" and "What do you want to know?" The GIS is then carried out completely behind the scenes. Here are two examples that demonstrate the elegant simplicity of well-executed, online GIS:

- The Neighborhood Information Page, a pilot project, in Tampa, Florida, puts GIS information at residents' fingertips. When Michelle Bene noticed that pedestrians had a hard time walking certain parts of her neighborhood, she turned to this emerging tool. It helped her identify high traffic areas with no sidewalks and urge the city government to improve pedestrian accessibility (http://www.tampagov.net/dept_strategic_planning_and_technology/planning_management/statistics/neighborhoods).⁴
- "What's Happening in My Neighborhood?" A common question and one easily answered by residents of Overland Park, Kansas, when they use the GIS-based tool of the same name on the city website (http://gis.opkansas.org/website/what_haps/default.asp).



Tampa Department of Strategic Planning and Technology

Downtown Tampa, Florida. The city's website includes tools that make it easy for residents to access information about their neighborhoods.

Making your site interactive. The Internet enables your customers to download forms and do business with your department online. These are the types of services most closely associated with the larger e-government movement, which was accelerated by the E-Government Act of 2002. While this bill focuses on the federal government, local governments are just as much involved. The Washington, D.C., e-government services page (<http://src.dc.gov/ccc/ccclgin.asp>) and Boulder, Colorado, "Skip-a-Trip" site (<http://www.ci.boulder.buildingservices/skipatrip.html>) show how two jurisdictions are delivering government services via the Internet.

In May 2004, APA's Planning Advisory Service published a report on e-government that surveyed all U.S. cities with populations greater than 100,000. The report identifies the types of services government websites deliver,

9.3.5

A GIS component is powerful but must be easy to use and understand

9.3.6

Interactivity is informative and cost-effective



American Planning Association

E-Government, a Planning Advisory Service Report, discusses a wide range of online tools and products to improve citizen participation.

including descriptions and examples from planning-related websites. The findings underscore the advantages to citizens and cities alike in getting government online.⁵ Another helpful resource is *Planners Use of Information* by Hemalata C. Dandekar (Planners Press, 2005). To increase public participation in creating its City Plan 2025, planners in Fayetteville, Arkansas, created a new website, <http://cityplan2025.accessfayetteville.org/>. The site enables residents to access information, submit comments, and send in photos of their favorite spots in the city or places needing attention.⁶

9.4 Final considerations

Check that your website is accessible to people with disabilities and to non- or limited-English speakers. The Bobby tool (<http://webxact.watchfire.com/>) makes suggestions for improving sites' accessibility to those with disabilities. Different options allow access in languages other than English. You can link to the Babelfish translation service (<http://www.babelfish.altavista.com/>), which roughly translates content into numerous languages. Other planning departments simply provide a number at which a Spanish-speaking employee is immediately available to answer questions.

9.4.1 Smaller communities can support impressive web presences

Many of the best planning websites belong to larger jurisdictions, although there are planning departments in smaller communities with fewer resources that have creative and innovative Internet homepages. Websites for Cheyenne, Wyoming (<http://www.cheyenne-city.org/planning.htm>), Steamboat Springs, Colorado (<http://www.ci.steamboat.co.us/planning/>), and Olathe, Kansas (http://www.olatheks.org/Business/business_planningcommission.cfm) all offer large amounts of well-organized information

and, where necessary, context for that information.



Steamboat Springs Planning Department

Homepage of the Steamboat Springs, Colorado, Planning Department. Putting together a well-thought-out website doesn't have to depend on a large budget or extensive staff resources.

The key to an effective electronic presence for your planning organization is not the latest bells and whistles, but useful and relevant information. By considering what your website visitors want to know, how you can aid in their understanding of that information, and how to engagingly communicate your key planning messages, you can create a successful web presence for your planning program.

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- 1 Constantine, James, and Tom Phillips. 2001. "Tapping the Internet to Communicate with Citizens." *PAS Memo*, July, p. 2.
 - 2 Dysart, Joe. 2004. "Building and Online Press Center." *Mass Transit*, February/March, pp. 20, 22.
 - 3 Blacksburg, Town of. 2001. Blacksburg 2046 Comprehensive Plan. Web page (accessed May 17, 2005). Available at http://www.blacksburg.va.us/comp_plan/.
 - 4 Allen, Eliot, and Randy Goers. 2002. "Beyond Maps: The Next Generation of GIS." *Planning*, September, p. 29.
 - 5 Evans-Cowley, Jennifer, and Maria Manta Conroy. 2004. *E-Government*. Planning Advisory Service Report No. 525. Chicago: American Planning Association, p. 2.
 - 6 Melnichak, Marsha. 2006. "Website gives residents chance to help with long-range planning." *Northwest Arkansas Times*, January 4. Web page (accessed January 5, 2006). Available at <http://nwanews.com/nwat/News/36058/>.