"EVEN MY EIGHT-YEAR-OLD CAN DO IT!"
Issues and Opportunities on the Internet for Jewish Communal Professionals and Agencies—From Surfing the Net to Creating Your Agency's Own Web Site

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As nearly every eight-year-old knows today, the Internet is a vast and exciting place to visit with your personal computer. As technology evolves at a record pace, and as the number of Internet users grows geometrically, we as Jewish communal professionals and agencies must not only remain knowledgeable about the changes being made but must also take advantage of the multitudinous ways in which personal computing and global telecommunications can assist us in our work. Only then can we remain competitive and stay on the cutting edge of our professions and our field. While many professionals and agencies have been using computers and on-line technology for years, this is not yet common practice nor are computers in use consistently across the field. The challenge we all face in today's age of lifelong learning is how to enter and grow within the world of the Internet.

Professionals in positions of Jewish communal service leadership must first recognize the potential that lies in technology. While this will come naturally to some, many will need help in changing their attitudes about and comfort level with, personal computers, the Internet, and new technologies. It is not surprising that the older and more traditional among us are having the hardest time! Once the potential is recognized, concerted effort, thoughtful planning, and money will be needed.

It is ironic that our young children and many of our clients are today much more computer literate than we are. As federal, state, and local governments are investing millions of dollars in technology and training for our public education, workforce education, and employment and training systems, we as Jewish communal lay leaders and executives struggle to raise or reallocate scarce dollars to train ourselves and our professional staff. This is an investment we must make, however, and one that the funding community must realize is necessary or the new advances will pass us by, rendering our services technologically obsolete.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE AS PROFESSIONALS BY SURFING THE NET

Once we develop our understanding, comfort level, and skills as individuals, we can begin to think about how technology can benefit us and our agencies. As individuals, we can use personal computers on our desk to store, retrieve, locate, or transmit information with word processing, spreadsheet, and database applications, as well as connect to other computers around the globe by surfing the Internet or sending e-mail. Using the Jewish Vocational Service of MetroWest as an example, here are only a few of the ways in which the Internet can be put to use by individual professionals:

- Searches can be done of job openings on behalf of unemployed clients on any number of Internet sites, including the "want ads" from newspapers in major cities across the country and such national sites as "America's Job Bank."
- Specific companies can be researched and profiled for their job placement potential by locating their web sites (current job openings can often be found on these sites as well).
- Searches can be done to uncover new grant funding sources and newly announced grant opportunities.

- The latest versions of pending legislation can be read as soon as they are published, thereby enabling advocacy positions to be developed and disseminated almost instantaneously.
- Jewish content sites can be accessed, yielding information ranging from Jewish law and ethics to descriptions of Jewish organizations around the world to today's headline news in Israel. A well-researched and very useful web site that can serve as an "annotated bibliography" and introduction to Jewish content sites on the Internet is at www.mispress.com/judaism.
- E-mail can be sent to colleagues around the corner or around the globe to request information about new programs and trends, to build an advocacy coalition, to problem solve, or just to stay in touch.
- Job-specific chat rooms and newsgroups can be accessed for discussions of timely issues or to request new information.
- Continuing education seminars can be conducted on-line, thereby enabling students and professionals to benefit from the experience and wisdom of experts in the field.

MEETING THE CHALLENGE AS AGENCIES BY CREATING AN AGENCY WEB SITE

Agencies have the same ability as professionals to manipulate information via the Internet. This is done by creating an agency web site, which has many benefits.

An agency web site not only provides a presence for the agency in cyberspace but also serves as a marketing tool to the international and local community and permits an agency to receive and transmit information of all kinds. Using the Jewish Vocational Service as an example, agency web sites (or sites for entire communities or professional groups) can be used to

- publicize or market new employment and training programs and services
- provide information and referral services

- announce upcoming meetings, classes, and agency events
- register participants and even enable them to pay fees for classes and agency events
- disseminate research/grant findings
- forge political alliances with other agencies via (reciprocal) links with their web sites
- sell agency products and services
- post profile descriptions of clients currently seeking employment
- post job openings at the agency
- receive "job orders" from employers seeking qualified candidates
- generate client referrals
- generate new dollars through targeted or broad-based fund-raising appeals
- establish a mechanism for confidential communication within the agency, community or professional group through a "chat room" feature.

In addition to the above in-house applications, by including reciprocal links to beneficiary and related agency web sites on your agency site, *cybercommunities* can be created within federations and between agencies in the United States and those in Israel and around the world. Similar cybercommunities can be created within and between Affiliated Professional Associations of the Jewish Communal Service Association and with colleagues in the World Council of Jewish Communal Service, thereby fostering synergy and mutual benefit to the entire field of Jewish communal service at home and around the world.

DESIGN ELEMENTS AND ISSUES IN CREATING AN AGENCY INTERNET WEB SITE

A web site is a representation of a person or entity in cyberspace. It is essential therefore that it be designed carefully so that it reflects the desired image, identity, and personality the agency wishes to communicate. Its purpose must be clear, along with the goals it is intended to achieve and the target audiences

it is intended to reach. The Jewish Vocational Service of MetroWest, New Jersey has just completed our first web site development project. For this project, we have identified three primary target audiences: the employer and corporate community, potential clients in the general community, and potential clients in the MetroWest Jewish community. In designing our web site, we attempted to create an identity and image appropriate for each of these distinct audiences and included web pages with information specific to each.

In the course of addressing the issues of web site design, an agency will have to go through a process of (re)defining itself. Needless to say, if this process has never been done or has not been done recently, sufficient time should be allocated for this task to be completed (an exercise itself with its own intrinsic benefits). Further, as the process unfolds it will become increasingly clear that the web site development project requires the commitment and full support of the agency executive and lay leadership. The project will very likely fail and therefore should not even be initiated if this commitment and support are absent.

For purposes of initial planning, here are some of the questions an agency will want to answer before the design is initiated:

- What is the essence of the agency? This is the question that leads directly into the process of agency definition, as indicated above.
- What services/programs best represent the work of the agency, and which of these should be included/emphasized in the web site?
- How should these services/programs be depicted or "packaged" on the site?
- Who will be responsible for overseeing the project and ensuring its completion?
- Should the site be designed by in-house staff or by an outside vendor?
- What process should be used to develop and approve the content of the site?
- Once completed, where and how should the site be publicized?

Every web site should have the following characteristics. It should be attractive, engaging, and user-friendly. It should be able to e downloaded in a limited time while using state-of-the-art technology; for example, graphics; animation and audio and video clips. In addition, the site should provide links to related web sites. Some research time will be necessary to discover these sites and therefore should be planned for in the implementation schedule.

Once the site has been created, it needs to be "hosted" on a computer and made available on the Internet. Typically, an annual expenditure of about $100 is needed to register and maintain your agency's unique web site address (URL) through the *Internic* international registry. In addition, there is a monthly expenditure for hosting your site from an Internet service provider (ISP). Prices for hosting vary greatly and depend upon the size and telecommunications capability of the ISP and the size of your site. Some ISPs exist in a local basement or garage, whereas others are large corporations. From our experience these prices range from as little as $25 to $30 per month to as much as several hundred dollars monthly. In choosing an ISP, it is important to remember that the provider does not have to be in your local community. The Internet is global, and as such, your ISP can literally be located almost anywhere. The larger ISPs have toll-free phone numbers, 24-hour technical staff, and certainly e-mail through which you can communicate all of your questions and problems.

Clearly, the establishment of an agency web site requires a substantial amount of thinking, planning, and implementation time. It also requires someone who knows how to creatively design a site and how to technically create a site. Such experts can be found among your staff or lay leaders, among talented high-school or college students, at other nonprofit agencies, among private Internet consultants, or at ISPs. Although the cost of design and implementation will increase along the above continuum of options, the quality of the result may not. As with any vendor, each

candidate should be screened carefully and selected based upon demonstrated results, quality, time until completion, and price. Web sites can be designed and created for as much as $25,000 or more or for free, from *pro bono* donations. For example, our web site was developed by a very talented graduate student who was attending school in a different state. We communicated by e-mail and fax and designed and developed our site through this long-distance relationship of technology. Our use of e-mail was particularly beneficial in this process, since he liked to work between the hours of midnight and 5:30 AM, while I preferred to work between 6:00 AM and midnight. No matter, though, our messages were only hours (and sometimes seconds) apart from each other—and we could always arrange for a telephone conference when needed!

CONCLUSION

The process of developing our web site has been a learning experience for the agency and for all of the staff involved. It has encouraged a good deal of agency self-examination and has resulted in a stronger, more clearly defined organization. While we believe we have done an outstanding job in designing and carrying out our task, we are more anxious to learn how our target audiences feel about the work we did. After all, the ultimate measure of the success of our efforts will lie in the extent to which the site is (re)visited and the extent to which the information it communicates and seeks to gather is used. And, like every homeowner knows, there is always something more to be done. A web site is, after all, a "work in progress" and must continue to change as the agency evolves and

as technology changes. If you would like to see what we have done, please visit us on the web at www.jvsnj.org.

Let us hope that, one day soon, most of us will be able to say, "Not only can my eight year old do it. I can do it, too!" Happy surfing.

POSTSCRIPT

Before closing, I would like to share an example of how technology is changing and will continue to change the way in which we all use information, along with a personal fantasy. First, the example. Common Internet search engines, software programs that seek out information in response to user-specified keywords, utilize "pull" technology; that is, information is retrieved *once* based on a single set of keywords. It can only be retrieved again if the user repeats the same request. These search engines are being replaced or enhanced by newer "push" technology; that is, information is *automatically and repeatedly* sent to a user on a regular basis, based on specified keywords or user preferences. Now, the fantasy. Imagine asking one of these new search engines to seek out and retrieve all of the information available, in all the computers of the world, in that one area of knowledge that would enable you to achieve your personal or professional goals. Further imagine that your computer would then distill this mountain of information into the *one word* that would make you rich and famous. As I envision this, I can hear my computer grinding away for a few seconds and then, after great anticipation on my part, like Dustin Hoffman in "The Graduate," I can hear my computer whisper that one, solitary, magic word—"plastics."