

A well-designed user-friendly Web site has become an expected standard for today's benefit funds. The essential building blocks are (1) Web site ergonomics, (2) basic content selection and (3) hosting. Having a state-of-the-art site will allow funds to keep pace with the evolving technology and self-service expectations of their participants as well as to reap financial, administrative and legal benefits. In addition, such a site can increase the level of administrative services and attention that members receive and improve their awareness and the value of the various benefits the fund provides.

Is Your Fund's Web Site Ready for the 21st Century?

by Kevin Wolfe

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Once a mark of distinction for benefit administrators and other service organizations, a well-designed, feature-rich, dynamic, transactional Web site has become an expected standard. Offering anything less indicates that a plan is behind the times and unresponsive to the needs of its participants. While some older retirees may still prefer—or even insist on—interacting with benefit administrators via more traditional means, they are a shrinking minority. Most of today's benefit plan participants want interactive electronic communications.

While satisfying participant expectations may be reason enough for adminis-

trators to develop a first-class, multifunctional, self-service Web site, other benefits include:

- High-quality and rapid-response customer service, thanks to enhanced tools for customer service representatives
- Streamlined administrative processes that leverage technology to reduce administrative costs
- Increased operational capabilities, such as the ability to generate statements, manage records and respond to participant, employer and trustee issues and needs
- Improved accuracy and consistency in participant communications

- Better accuracy for reporting (via electronic data exchange), processing and maintaining employer contributions.

Web Usage Today

Before taking a closer look at how fund administrators can harness the World Wide Web (WWW) to achieve these benefits, here's a little perspective on who uses the Internet and how.

More than 75% of adult Americans (aged 18 and over) now access the Internet. The top ten things they do are: Send or read e-mail; use a search engine to find information; search for a map or driving directions; look for information on a hobby or interest; look for health/medical information; look for information about a service or product they are thinking of buying; check the weather; get travel information; and get news.¹ During the month of March 2008, the average Web user who accessed the Internet from home had 36 separate sessions during which he or she visited 66 different domains.²

Usage, however, drops significantly with age. While the Internet is used by 92% of those aged 18 to 29, 85% of those aged 30 to 49 and 72% of those aged 50 to 64, only 37% of those aged 65 and older go online.³

On the other hand, usage rises sharply with household income. While only 61% of those with annual household incomes less than \$30,000 use the Internet, that rises to 78% for those with household incomes between \$30,000 and \$49,999, 90% for those with household incomes between \$50,000 and \$74,999 and 90% for those with household incomes of \$75,000 and more.⁴

Behind the Curve?

Many benefit fund administrative offices appear to have a long way to go to catch up with their participants' Internet usage and expectations. According to a recent survey,⁵ only half of the 230 funds surveyed had a Web site. Of those funds, about three-fourths of them had implemented only basic *informational* Web sites displaying static information. Only 20% had advanced to the next level with *knowledge-based* sites that allow members to access some personalized data. A mere 5% had *transactional* capabilities, sites that enable participants or employers to transmit and change data. For a

look at the key features that distinguish the three basic levels of Web site functionality, see the table on the next page.

The Benefits of a Better Web Site

Sophisticated self-service Web sites offer many advantages. They can:

- Expand the fund office's "administrative footprint" by extending its customer service hours to 24/7/365
- Free staff from performing routine tasks so they can focus on delivering high-touch service when it is really needed
- Improve member satisfaction by increasing the possibility that they will receive accurate information
- Enable the fund to vividly demonstrate the value of the benefits they provide
- Reduce the need to print, warehouse and distribute paper documents. As a side benefit, the use of electronic communications is "green"; it aids the environment.

Who Benefits?

In addition to active plan participants, Web sites can be designed to be used by dependents, beneficiaries and retirees, all of whom may need access to information about benefit eligibility, retirement benefits, accrued benefits, account balances for annuity or vacation plans, health claims, demographics and work history (i.e., hours and contributions). An easy-to-access section, such as *Frequently Asked Questions*, can provide information about benefits or impact-of-life events, such as the birth of a child, a change in marital status or a disability.

Contributing employers can use the Web site to access contribution reports, electronic remittance of contributions, late report and discrepancy information, reports on amounts owed and other information. Union managers or business agents can have easy access to employer remittance data and other information, such as whether an employer has remitted payment, whether a particular member was remitted on, which employers (if any) are late in reporting work and contribution information and so on.

Finally, databases and search tools that are useful to members, trustees, employers and union leaders and organizers may also help the plan's administrative staff in the day-to-day performance of their duties.

Key Design Considerations

There are many issues that need to be addressed in designing and managing an effective "full-strength" Web site. These include:

- Web site deployment strategy
- Content development, layout and maintenance
- Appropriate levels of security
- Integration with back end administrative systems and workflow/processes
- Initial launching and ongoing Web site promotion to increase awareness and usage
- Information technology/hardware requirements
- End user support for administrative (clarification of administrative process, plan of benefits, etc.) and technical (site access, browser issues, etc.) questions
- Web site hosting.

Ergonomics

While ergonomics may conjure images of sleek, adjustable office chairs or the layout of a high-tech automobile's cockpit, the term also applies to Web sites. Broadly defined, *ergonomics* brings together the human and the machine through design, utilization and maintenance. An ergonomically designed Web site puts the user at the center of the design process to provide ease of use and a positive experience. Although *physical* comfort cannot be assured, good ergonomic planning and design can provide a Web site's visitors with a certain level of *emotional* and *functional* comfort.

One way to appreciate what good ergonomics is all about is to recall Web site navigation experiences that have generated confusion, frustration or worse. The following design mistakes are all-too-common examples of *bad* ergonomics:

- Outdated content
- Pop-up advertising

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Self-Service Functionality Continuum

Informational

- Frequently Asked Questions
- Forms (printable)
- Benefits Summaries (Highlights)
- Recruiting (Members/Participants/Employers)
- E-Mail Questions/Answers/Requests
- Who We Are/History/Purpose/Mission
- Other Resources (Phone nos./Web Sites/Books/Locations, etc.)
- Fee Schedules
- Trustees/Contributing Employers
- Reciprocal Funds (Lists and Links)
- What's New
- Link to Providers/Directories
- Retiree Information and Links to Medicare, AARP, services

Personalized/Knowledge Based

- Forms (fill out and submit online)
- Claims (fill out and submit online)
- Eligibility status
- Benefits/Retirement Statements
- Deductible/Out-of-Pocket Status
- Account Balances
- Investment Results
- Retirement Calculator
- Beneficiary Designations/Dependent Information
- Payment Schedule by CPT (Diagnosis Number)
- Request copy of explanation of benefits (EOB)
- Contribution Statement/Accrued Benefit

Transactional

- Forms Submit/Check for Missing Data (edit data)
- Check Claims Payment Status
- Retirement/Financial Modeling with Prefilled Basic Information
- Personal Information Updated
- Retirement Processing
- Investment Election Changes
- Enrollment/Changes
- Self-Payments
- Contribution Accounting
- Retirement Fund Distribution Modeling
- Surveys

Source: The Segal Company.

- Too much scrolling without link menus
- Unstructured or very long pages
- Slow system response time
- Inconsistent navigation design across pages
- Lack of color coordination and/or visually “busy” backgrounds
- Text that is hard to read due to poor contrast, color, font or spelling errors
- Multiple sections of the site are “currently under construction”
- Sites that are mainly a collection of links to other sites
- Browser/HTML version incompatibilities
- Special plug-ins, overuse of annoying flashing and blinking animations and music
- Large sites without a site map or directory
- Confusing end points following a link.

Such flaws are usually rooted in a lack of attention to the needs and wants of Web site visitors.

Key “Needs and Wants”

So, what do visitors most need and

want? Generally speaking, it's one or more of four key elements:

1. To access information (e.g., about claims, pension benefits, etc.)
2. To execute transactions (e.g., make COBRA payments, remit contributions)
3. To be “entertained” (a user-friendly, appealing experience)
4. To be part of a community.

While a fund administrative organization certainly isn't in the entertainment business, that does not preclude paying a little attention to the Web site's visual aesthetics. A site that lacks “sizzle” may bore visitors and, perhaps subconsciously, prompt them to pick up the phone or even come to the fund office the next time they need help. Making the site user-friendly and providing an appealing experience can help promote self-service and keep the user coming back for more.

When it comes to community, remember that a fund's Web site users are first and foremost a community of fund participants. A Web site has the potential, albeit in subtle ways, to enhance (or diminish) the feelings of quality or

pride they associate with that particular community.

The first two needs and wants—*access to information* and *the ability to execute transactions*—are the most crucial. Fundamental to meeting those needs is Web site navigation, the user's ability to find his or her way around the site and to the desired destination. Specifically, sound Web navigation must answer four questions:

1. Where am I?
2. Where have I been?
3. Where can I go next?
4. Where is the home page?

To bring clarity to all these questions, site navigation must be simple and consistent.

Testing Ergonomics

It is possible, indeed essential, to test the “ergo-friendliness” of a Web site design.

Under one approach, test scenarios are developed to carry out specific tasks. For example, do a dry run on locating a particular fact about a plan or the status

of a claim or a member's work history. The next step is a thorough "test" for the data-finding scenario. This involves five variables:

1. Whether the data was indeed retrieved
2. The time it took to carry out the scenario
3. The time spent on the relevant page or section of the Web site
4. Where the data was accessed
5. The total time spent connected to the Web server.

Another way to evaluate Web site ergonomics is to have a few users explore the test site, without any specific instructions or guidelines. Sites should be intuitive; members should be able to log in and navigate without training. The goal of this exercise is to determine where site controls, content and navigation cause difficulties for the user. Ideally, this "free visit" test should be performed in the initial design phase of a new site, to prevent costly redesign.

In addition to gauging the user experience from an organizational and content perspective, consideration must be given to the end user's technology constraints. For example, the site should be tested for use by alternative browsers, especially the most popular: Internet Explorer, Firefox, Netscape and Safari.

Other technical considerations include the user's minimum connection speed. For example, does the site need to function adequately for users without broadband access? Another key consideration is graphics capability: Does the site require advanced graphics chips that some users with older computers may lack?

The Content Factor

You can have the most "ergonomic" Web site on the World Wide Web, but the actual content on or available through the site must be adequate and appropriate. It must provide the information being sought or fulfill the information need that draws each visitor to the site. Similarly, it must match visitors' expectations, which may differ from those of the site's architects.

As a result, the process of building or overhauling a Web site and determining the content to load it with requires, at the outset, a clear articulation of the site's

purpose and a keen understanding of the information needs of the target audience. In addition, site content should be robust enough to cause visitors to return on a regular basis. Otherwise, the investment is difficult to justify. The key question to ask is: What content do I have that would cause someone to visit the site a second, third or fourth time?

Assuming such content is available, it's important to meet these goals:

- **The content is technically correct.** While this is probably obvious, the point is to establish quality control systems that assure accuracy.
- **Prospective visitors actually need the information.** It may be tempting to

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load the site with all kinds of data, but "information overload" hurts the user experience.

- **Content is current and updated frequently.** A stale Web site can raise questions about the accuracy of the content.
- **Visitors can easily find the content they are looking for.** What good is "good" information if poor site navigation prevents site visitors from finding it?

The Hosting Decision

At the same time that strategic and tactical decisions are being made about the Web site's purpose, functionality and content, another key issue must be addressed. Will the Web site be hosted by the fund office or outsourced? (*Hosting* simply refers to maintaining the Web site on a computer.)

As with any "buy-or-rent" choice, the hosting decision revolves around internal capacity and economics. A decision to host the Web site internally generally implies that the fund administrative office has information technology (IT) resources in place or wants to invest in such resources.

It is important, however, when thinking about how to address Web site users' needs, to distinguish between technical IT capacity and administrative resources. The administrative capacity issue relates to addressing questions about, for example, plan benefits. Technical capacity pertains to users' questions about passwords, problems logging into the site and dealing with the site when it is "down."

Typically, a fund will opt to use internal resources to handle the administrative issues and outsource the hosting to get out from under all the technical issues that can arise. In that case, choosing a hosting service and carefully negotiating a comprehensive agreement is critical.

If a fund's Web site is to have transactional capabilities (in which participant data is provided and presented), the prospective hosting company will need to show that it can implement appropriate safeguards to ensure that members' data is protected. As a "business associate," the hosting company will be subject to specific legal requirements to protect the fund's data, requirements that need to be delineated in the service agreement.

Hosting Contract Provisions

The following are just a few (of the many) additional considerations that funds should weigh and build into their agreements with their Web hosting company.

- **Performance guarantees:** Any hosting agreement must address *uptime* (i.e., when the Web site is in operation). Uptime standards will be dictated by the degree of importance assigned to the information being provided. For example, if the Web site is just informational (i.e., site content describes plan benefits, has Q&A information and offers forms and links to other sites), then uptime requirements may be somewhat less stringent than if the Web site is transac-

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tional. Web sites that provide critical personal information, such as a member's eligibility for benefits, accrued or projected pension/retirement benefits, work history and claims history, should have a more stringent uptime guarantee.

- **Uptime measurement and reporting:** The agreement should be clear on how uptime is measured. It should also be noted that these contracts contain provisions for regular system maintenance when the site will not be available for use.
- **Rebates and fee credits:** A penalty should be assessed if the hosting company fails to meet the performance guarantees. The fund should receive a fee credit or rebate related to the time the site is not available.
- **Confidentiality:** This key issue should be addressed in the hosting agreement. The fund will need to make sure that as a business associate, the hosting company agrees to meet the security requirements under the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability

Act (HIPAA). This is extremely important for transactional sites that contain member data.

Conclusion

While there are many factors involved in building and maintaining a first-rate Web site, the three areas reviewed in this article—Web site ergonomics, basic content selection and hosting—are the essential building blocks. A state-of-the-art Web site will allow funds to keep pace with the evolving online information access needs of their participants as well as to reap financial, administrative and legal benefits.

In addition, a well-designed and maintained Web site can increase the level of administrative services and attention that members receive and improve their awareness and the value of the various benefits the fund provides. Moreover, it will enable the fund to meet the ever-growing technology and self-service expectations set by today's business practices and high-tech world. **B&C**

Endnotes

1. Pew Internet & American Life Project, October 24–December 2, 2007 Tracking Survey.
2. Nielsen Online, a service of The Nielsen Company.
3. See note 1.
4. See note 1.
5. *Survey of Multiemployer Fund Office Administration, Technology and Staffing* (www.segalco.com/publications/surveysandstudies/fundoffice_survey.pdf), published by The Segal Company, winter 2007.

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