

# WEB SIGHTINGS



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## HOW WELL DOES YOUR WEB SITE MEASURE UP? BENCHMARK IT AGAINST THESE 10 CRITERIA FOR EXCELLENCE.

However "new" a form of expression may be, the rules that govern how well it achieves its communication goals remain timeless and classic.

When it comes to determining excellence in Web sites, there are some Internet-specific considerations, such as how quickly graphics display. But, on balance, the barriers to building and retaining an audience in this medium are no different from those of any other: First, can you capture my attention? Then, can you reward my involvement? And, as a result, can you get me to come back?

In the case of association Web sites, success primarily relates to how well you serve the membership by providing practical, accessible information. But the entertainment factor can never be entirely forgotten, just as a serious speech may not get its point across unless it is crafted well and contains memorable passages.

### SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENTS

Over the last five years, we've seen many developments in how associations use Web sites to interact with members and accomplish business. The most advanced sites

enable members to update their own records, sign up for trade shows and other events, purchase items, pay dues, and directly feed the membership database in other ways.

Done correctly, these structures not only reduce the cost of maintaining vital data for the association but also provide more immediate feedback for members. The closer the management of online content is to a database function, the more dynamic and functional the Web site. Database-driven sites come to resemble a living, changing presence, rather than simply an online brochure.

Another significant development is the conscious creation of online communities. In the late 1990s, challenged by purely online entities boldly competing for their audiences, associations took note of how a Web site could be used to foster a greater sense of community among their members. Through this new medium, many associations have returned to their first principles by communicating more efficiently and effectively. That the associations are still

standing and the e-communities have almost all disappeared proves once again the privileged position that associations with solid memberships enjoy.

There is a parallel privileged position that association publishers enjoy over their for-profit counterparts. In print advertising, everything flows from circulation. Most associations have a guaranteed circulation, thanks to their membership.

Web sites and print publications usually have overlapping, slightly different audiences. Ideally, these two publishing formats should complement one another. The general association content on the Web should draw attention to the publication and, in turn, the publication content should continually introduce the association to those who are not currently members. If your association values the revenue potential of its print advertising opportunities, then the Web site should make it easy for potential advertisers to find a rate card, demographic information, and anything else that will help make your print publication an attractive place to run an ad.

Associations and other nonprofit organizations cover a wide range of audience types. In the world of communications, the

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golden rule is “Know thy audience.” After reviewing countless Web sites, I’ve found two remarkable ones that have garnered top awards for their ability to communicate with unique audiences. Both of them underscore the importance of understanding your audience and arranging your content to answer questions, whether personal or professional, which matter to that audience.

## THE PERSONAL APPROACH

I’ve never seen anyone not react with surprise and passion upon encountering [www.ellisland.org](http://www.ellisland.org). Between 1892 and 1924, 25 million people entered the United States through Ellis Island; an estimated 40 percent of Americans trace their roots back to this passage.

This Web site, maintained by the Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Foundation, New York, NY, gets personal right from the start. With only the name of an ancestor, visitors can summon up the name and a photograph of the immigrant’s ship, the ship log in both handwritten and printed form, and other information. This log answers such questions as how much money the immigrant had in his or her pocket upon arrival, who paid for the passage, and which relative was there to meet the boat.

Although this organization has a significant membership base, its true audience is transient, created every day by answering questions of deep emotional significance. In a sense two audiences are being put in touch with each other, one near and one distant, with great efficiency.

Another award-winning Web site, [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org), reflects the understanding that a great number of site visitors will arrive in distress, seeking information either for themselves or for loved ones who have experienced a tragedy. The American Heart Association, Dallas, TX, has arranged the content to be both informative and interactive. For instance, visitors who share the same family medical history can rate their diet and lifestyle choices in terms of potential heart problems.

## MEASURING UP

How well does your association’s Web site achieve its goals? Here are 10 criteria you can use for making that determination.

**1. Immediacy of Overview.** How long does it take to find out what your site is about, what’s on it, and how to get to it all?

**PASSENGER RECORD**  
Here is the record for the passenger. Click the links on the left to see more information about this passenger.

ADD TO YOUR ELLIS ISLAND FILE | VIEW ORIGINAL SHIP MANIFEST | VIEW SHIP

SAVE AND PURCHASE DOCUMENTS  
View both the original image of the ship on which this passenger travelled by clicking on the blue buttons above this Passenger Record.

Name: Iraggi, Giovanni  
Citizenship: Italy, Italian South  
Place of Residence: Polizzi  
Date of Arrival: March 23, 1907  
Age on Arrival: 25y  
Gender: M  
Marital Status: W  
Ship of Travel: Sofia Hoherberg  
Port of Departure: Palermo, Sicily, Italy

**LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE**  
S.S. SOFIA HOBERG sailing from PALERMO ? : MAR

Required by the regulations of the Secretary of Commerce and Labor of the United States, under Act of Congress, Officer of any vessel having such passengers on board

No.	NAME IN FULL	Age	Sex	Marital Status	Single	Occupation	Last Visited	Country of Birth	Place of Birth	Place of Departure	Time of Departure	Time of Arrival	Time of Discharge	Number of Family Members
1	Giuseppe	20	M	Widower		laborer	Italy	Italy	Palermo	Italy	March 23	March 23	March 23	1
2	Mariano	20	M	Widower		laborer	Italy	Italy	Palermo	Italy	March 23	March 23	March 23	1
3	Maria	18	F	Widower		laborer	Italy	Italy	Palermo	Italy	March 23	March 23	March 23	1
4	Anna	15	F	Widower		laborer	Italy	Italy	Palermo	Italy	March 23	March 23	March 23	1
5	Giuseppe	18	M	Widower		laborer	Italy	Italy	Palermo	Italy	March 23	March 23	March 23	1
6	Giuseppe	15	M	Widower		laborer	Italy	Italy	Palermo	Italy	March 23	March 23	March 23	1
7	Giuseppe	12	M	Widower		laborer	Italy	Italy	Palermo	Italy	March 23	March 23	March 23	1
8	Giuseppe	10	M	Widower		laborer	Italy	Italy	Palermo	Italy	March 23	March 23	March 23	1
9	Giovanni	15	M	Widower		laborer	Italy	Italy	Palermo	Italy	March 23	March 23	March 23	1

[ellisland.org](http://ellisland.org): (Top) Passenger record summoned up on the Web by entering the name of an immigrant. (Below) Handwritten manifest for the ship. Line number 9 shows the passage record for my maternal grandfather. It tells you what city he came from, where he was headed, that he was a widower at the time, and that he was a laborer.

In short: *What, where, and how to get there?*

The Internet has sped up many things, including everyone’s expectations about speed. It has created great possibilities and great impatience. If you don’t tell your visitors who you are and what you are all about right away, you will lose them to the next site, which is only a click away.

**2. Ease of Navigation.** How easy is it to move through the site? How logical and apparent is the next step you want to take?

The best Web sites anticipate multiple starting points and paths. If there is more than one audience for a site—such as doctors and patients—lay out a clear path for each. The more intuitive the paths, the more rewarding the experience.

**3. Aesthetics.** How inviting is the site? Does the combination of colors, typeface, and layout make it someplace you want to stay for a while? Or does it leave you feeling neutral, or worse, like you want to flee?

Trust your own instincts. Ask yourself why some rooms or houses are inviting and others are not, why you like the looks of certain cars, but not others. Find the feel-

ings the site inspires in you. Compare it to other sites. The more people find your site pleasing to the eye, the longer they will stay there and the more often they will return.

**4. Consistency.** How consistent is the site from page to page? Does it look like it was designed at different times, by different people, with different intentions in mind?

The Internet makes it easier and less expensive to reach a wider audience than ever before. That’s the opportunity—and the problem, too, because millions of sites are competing for attention. Getting a visitor is like catching a fish. Within the confines of your domain, everything must reinforce the experience of being on your Web site, of having left the wide ocean of the Internet. Inconsistency can be your worst enemy. If the graphics or anything about the site make the visitor suddenly wonder, “Where am I now?” the coherence of the experience will be broken.

Now stop for a moment. The order of these criteria is important. If you fail with the first four, it won’t

matter how well you do with the rest, because your audience will never get that far. No matter how much your site may have to offer, people will not get to know it if they find it unfriendly and unapproachable.

**5. Timeliness of Content.** Is the content dated or timely? Does it make you want to come back soon to see what might have changed between visits?

Next to slow graphics, nothing creates greater dissatisfaction in a Web site visitor than to find outdated content right on the home page—especially if this content is presented as if it is new. On the other hand, a Web site that offers frequently changing information relevant to its audience will succeed in the goal of all broadcast media— attracting repeat visitors.

**6. Internal Search Capabilities.** Does the site have a built-in search engine to find hidden content easily?

Associations are vast repositories of information, but most of that data will not appear on the opening pages of the site. An efficient search engine allows the visitor to enter a key word or two and see a display



If your Web site attracts more than one audience, lay out a clear, intuitive path for each one. Anticipate multiple starting points.

of all results, even from the deepest archived areas of the site. Even better, the search engine will display the found text and highlight within it the key words.

**7. Usefulness.** How well does the site communicate the most basic, practical information?

Whether your group is a professional society, trade association, or “personal” organization, whether it has a longstanding or transitory membership, the Web site should provide answers to common questions, offer useful solutions, and address practical needs. Dynamic sites that create a streamlined passage from membership system to Web site are better equipped to be useful to visitors.

**8. Interact-ability.** Do you have mechanisms for allowing viewers to interact with the site, with your organization, and with each other? How successful are these mechanisms?

More than anything else, interaction builds community. Traditionally, this area includes listserves, forums, real-time Webinars, instant messenger hotlines, and other innovative devices.

**9. Originality.** How different from the usual—in a positive way—are the site’s design and content?

The association world is naturally conservative, so examples of this are hard to come by. Nevertheless, even the most conservative members of your audience will respond to substantive content that is expressed in original ways.

**10. Internet Vision.** How well does your site use the medium? Does it take the medium in a new, positive direction?

Here’s an example: Not many computer users ask for directions anymore. With an address in hand, you can find detailed directions online in a matter of minutes. The introduction of online directions has

changed the way people behave. It was an advance that reflected Internet vision.

Very few sites break this barrier, especially within the association community. However, it remains an ideal to aim for. Consider how you might change the lives of the special and niche audiences you serve by coming up with a feature that uses this medium in a visionary way. If you can do it, you’ll be creating the future. ■



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