

While there's no single right way to get started, here are some general guidelines to follow.

Establish and maintain top-level support

When we asked county, city, and town Web site managers to identify some of the most important factors in the development and launch of their sites, all said that getting top-level support was critical to their success.

Some of their sites had top-level support at the beginning; others earned it along the way. In one instance, the city clerk was told by the city council to gather information and build a site. Completely redeveloping the town's site was a newly elected supervisor's first priority. Another municipal site was developed and launched out of the planning agency; top-level support came later.

Whether they are in it from the beginning or come in later in the process, top-level officials are necessary allies. They're critical in the effort to promote a vision that will get others to participate in the development, implementation, and management of the site.

Gather skilled contributors

Most Web projects require skills in project management, business planning, policy review and development, research, content creation, graphic arts, customer support services, user services, security, and marketing and promotion. While this seems like an exhaustive list, there are people within your municipality who have some or most of these skills. If you can't find people with the skills you need, then look for individuals who are comfortable learning new skills.

The individuals we worked with said the Web development groups in their governments were usually made up of employees from more than one agency. One team required the expertise of high-level staff in the supervisor's office, plus the legal input of the town attorney. Another municipality felt it was imperative to include citizens to get their perspective.

Many small county and local governments don't have the resources and staff to create a formal Web team. These governments tend to have one person responsible for Web design and maintenance. Typically, this employee works in, or is, the computer or information technology department and has some knowledge of Internet technology. But even in this situation, the content needs to come from others.

Encourage government-wide participation

A strong network of staff is essential for implementing a successful Web site. This network will be used to proceed with many of the steps outlined in this guidebook, including:

- Getting and maintaining support
- Gathering ideas
- Setting objectives
- Finding the necessary resources
- Identifying costs
- Designing the site
- Creating and maintaining content
- Implementing the plan
- Managing the site
- Evaluating its effectiveness

Tips from colleagues

- "Get support from top elected officials from the start. It'll get everyone else on board."
- "Educate officials and department staff about the amount of information and cooperation required from them. Also tell them about the potential uses and value of the site."
- "Enlist the help of colleagues. Tap into their hidden talents and experience."
- "Work together as a team, but don't get bogged down by committees."

Market the idea to staff

Effective marketing to staff is critical—from the beginning stages of gathering ideas and needs analysis until the Web site becomes part of the day-to-day business of your government. Market your project with the tools and support you have at your disposal. This may include getting supporters to talk about the project or creating a mock-up of the home page to show what it will look like.

The Web managers we spoke with said it helped to have elected officials—your top-level support—tout the Web project at meetings with staff to gain support and acceptance. This is especially useful at the beginning of the project. One town encouraged local non-profits and citizens to ask for online information. In another case, a city department gained community support by quickly launching a site to illustrate how it could help local groups and individuals.

Promote Internet awareness

Regardless of the roles employees may play in the development or management of the Web site, it's important they have a general awareness of the Internet. Producing a user-friendly Web site requires staff to understand what it's like to call up a site, wait for it to load, view it on their PCs, and then use it to answer a question or find information.

According to participants, many of their colleagues weren't familiar with the Web. Some municipal employees don't have Internet access. Other governments have internal rules that prohibit regular use of the Web. And some simply were uncomfortable with the technology. One city had difficulty designing its Web site because key members of the design team did not use the Internet very often. Because of these issues, participants encouraged staff to get comfortable using the Web. This includes getting accustomed to the way material is written for and presented on Web sites.

Find the infrastructure

Whether you outsource your design or do it yourself, your Web site needs to be connected to the Internet. If you have the technical infrastructure and skills in-house, it may make the most sense to host your own site. If not, it may make more sense to outsource hosting to avoid making expensive investments in technology and technical expertise.

Outsourcing requires someone from your government to manage not only the content and development of the site, but also the relationship with the Internet Service Provider (ISP).

Saratoga Springs' Web site started as a result of the need to publicize community development information.