

The best way to get a handle on building and maintaining your Web site is to learn how others have done it. "How to" books, the Internet itself, and the experiences of colleagues all provide a wealth of ideas and know-how.

### Review what others have done

There are countless sites from which to gather ideas. A number of portals (Web sites that serve as an entry point to related sites on the Web) link to a variety of different local and county sites. Visit and evaluate these sites. Look at a few sites of municipalities that are similar to yours in terms of size, population, and demographics. Also look at commercial and educational sites for innovative design and presentation ideas.

- When you evaluate Web sites, ask these questions:
- Does this municipality seem to know who its audience is?
- Is it easy for people to contact the municipality or ask questions?
- Is the site easy to navigate?
- Does it waste visitors' time?
- Is it providing a useful service?
- Are you glad you found the site? Would you visit again?

### Balance your time

Unless your time is fully devoted to Web site development, the chances are good that there will be several demands on your time. Keep that in mind as you gather ideas. There are as many ideas as there are Web sites and people who have developed them. Spend the time you need to get comfortable with the ideas you've gathered, then put them to use.

It was important for participants to take seriously the need to balance time between their Web site work and their other responsibilities. One participant said he hears and finds lots of good ideas, but many of them simply require too much time to set up and maintain. Therefore, he sticks with implementing ideas that he has the time to manage.

### Track best (and worst) practices

As you look at other sites, keep track of good (and bad) ideas you encounter. Does the site have a coherent or clear organization of information? Is it simply presented? Does it tell you what the sponsor can do for you and how? What type of e-government services and information does it provide?

Look for clarity, ease of access, attractiveness, efficiency, and effectiveness in each of these Web site components:

- Content-text, images/video, sound, data bases
- Graphics-main graphic, buttons, supporting images, image maps, background, bullets, pointers, text-only option
- Page presentation-titles, labels, indexes, highlighting, layouts
- Navigation-within pages, within site, links to external sites
- Tools-e-mail, searching, transaction processing, downloading forms

### Listen to co-workers

Your colleagues will be a great source of ideas. Other than citizens themselves, they are in the best position to know what is most frequently asked of their department. Establish a process to gather ideas from the various departments in your government. No matter what method you choose, it's important to get others' ideas on what features, services, and content should be included in the site.

For example, one county used quarterly cabinet meetings with department heads to encourage contributions and ideas. Other representatives said they gathered input through more informal, free-flowing discussions with key people.

The Montgomery County Web site provides demographic and census information that can be used by citizens and businesses for research.

### Gather outside advice

There may be individuals and groups in your community that can provide expertise and advice as you develop your site. Chambers of commerce, tourism groups, your counterparts in state government, planning commissions, and local civic groups may all have a stake in the Web site. Tap their ideas. They can help your project move forward and generate community support.

### Incorporate creativity

Some of the best Web site features grow from the seeds of creative ideas. Whether they come from department heads, citizens, or Web masters, it's important to cultivate these ideas.

One city site developed from ideas generated by its economic development office. The success of those ideas grew quickly into an effective citywide Web site. One county used a flowchart to capture all of the ideas generated for its site. First they organized the ideas according to the county executive's mission, then expanded the flowchart with additional ideas.

### Tips from colleagues

- "Look at a variety of sites-government and non-government-for ideas on what will and won't work for you."
- "Enlist contributors from throughout your government. Choose people with good knowledge of your municipality (to help provide content) and those who know the Web (to help design the site)."
- "Educate yourself. Buy a book or take a class on Web design and development."
- "Ask for assistance from other knowledgeable professionals and organizations."
- "Don't limit the creativity of your Web master. Channel it."