Byteing Back–Turning Your Website into a Team Player

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Slide 1: Title

[Intro & Greetings]

Technology of all sorts is partly my job and mostly my passion. My husband and I semi-jokingly refer to ourselves as gadget junkies because we’re such suckers for the “wow factor” that every new tool brings. We have to try them all. Some live up to the hype brilliantly, but many are a disappointment. Like airline e-tickets and web check-ins. I fell for the hype and decided to give it a go on my way here... “get through the airport quicker!” they promised. “Just drop off your luggage and hop on the plane ‘cos the rest of it’s already done!” Hah. I arrived at the airport and of course I found myself in the same monstrously long line as everyone else, because there was only one clerk to check both the people and the luggage. It may have saved me a whopping minute and a half when I finally got to the counter, but I can’t be sure. The airline got a good deal out of it, though. They didn’t have to print my tickets or boarding passes since I was kind enough to do it for them. This time.

Anyhow, complaining about the airlines is a national sport these days, but let’s move on to honor society websites. How do we tame them? Better yet, how do we use the Internet better than the airlines, so we can convince our members to do some of our work and donate their ink and paper to us – all while being very happy about it?

Slide 2: Agenda

As just about everyone has noticed by now, technology has been advancing very quickly for the last several years, demanding substantial amounts of our time, attention, and annual budgets. Fortunately, the pace has slowed a little bit recently, and that makes NOW a very good time to turn and Byte Back, before broadband and other advancing technologies change everything on us yet again.

Last week I spent some time reviewing the status of each of your websites. While some societies have developed a really impressive space that provides a lot of value to their members, many are still at or near the starting line with Internet technologies. I don’t intend that statement as a criticism: Maybe the technology hasn’t proven its value to you, or maybe you’d love to bring yourself up to date but you don’t think you have the resources. I’m here to give you the whys and hows of the whole thing as best I can in an hour or so. To that end, we’ll cover the benefits of and potential that various, primarily Internet-based, technologies represent to honor society administration. We’ll also look at implementing a solid framework at a pace you can both live with and afford. To do this, you’ll need to: a) prioritize existing requirements, b) evaluate future purchases by weighing the potential each application may contribute to your organization’s overall well-being, and c) set practical and realistic technology goals.

We’ll begin by focusing on the basics – why it’s important to have a website at all, how a website should look, the information your site should (and even MUST) include, and some good, first-step goals. First step goals might include ways to increase efficiency; improve communications; and coordinate the needs of your administrators, advisers, students, alumni, and other audiences more effectively. This segment will be most relevant for societies who are in the early to middle planning stages of designing or redesigning a website to incorporate additional features.

Next, we’ll move on to cover some more advanced topics that will help the beginners to look forward, and to possibly generate some new ideas for those of you who are well on your way to implementing these higher-level technologies. The topics in this category are the ones that really have the potential to push your societies forward, to help you move beyond using the Internet to meet only simple goals like exposure and increased efficiency. We’ll see how existing and emerging Internet technologies, if you plan for them properly and implement them efficiently, can play a vital part in advancing your organization’s overall mission.
Slide 3: Introduction

A well-designed website doesn’t have to cost a lot or include every bell and whistle to provide some very basic but very important benefits. If it’s well organized and it looks nice, it will create a favorable impression on your visitors and give your organization a professional appearance. If you make it easy for your audiences to find the heavily requested information that they normally call or write in for, then you’ve improved your society’s ability to communicate. Convenience is also the first reason you’re giving your members that will make them happy to do some of your work for you. Just don’t make any promises you can’t keep. If you provide useful online forms and tools for your student members, advisers, and board members, you can move away from paper based forms to save money on postage and supplies while increasing your organization’s efficiency. And... you give your visitors a second reason to help you out by helping them out.

If, on the other hand, a website is thrown together, unprofessional, unattractive, or difficult to navigate, you’re going to see a whole new set of problems. The people who are most likely to seek out an honor society website (whether you directly target them or not), are prospective members and their parents. They want to check you out before they hand over their money, right? It may not be all that much, really, but no one wants to feel like they’ve been taken in.

It goes without saying that today’s students are a very savvy group when it comes to technology. They’ve grown up with it, they rely on it, they have strong opinions about what’s good and what’s bad. They’re used to seeing some beautiful, sophisticated stuff. So, even if your website provides useful information and tells visitors about your well-deserved and brilliant reputation,... you are just not going to impress these kids if your site looks like the electronic equivalent of crayon scribbled on a crumpled cocktail napkin. They are used to better.

In fact, these critical visitors will very quickly judge a site and, by extension, the honor society that owns it, by the professionalism of the image it projects. A site that comes up too far short will send them running before they’ve read a single word. And why shouldn’t they run? Here they are, top of their class, invited to join an organization that claims to honor them for their achievements, their hard work, their perfectionism and excellence; yet this same organization seems to place very little value on projecting those qualities.

Of course, no one posts a bad website intentionally. Even with limited funds, a bottomless to-do list, and/or a lack of understanding about the technology and culture of the web, everyone tries to do something decent with the available resources. Sometimes a few pages are thrown together in a word processor, then posted hastily and "temporarily" by a student volunteer, yet they seem to take hold and they’re never updated or improved. If this describes your web strategy, you should know that it is doing you harm. If you know you don’t have the time, money, or talent to do it right; it is almost, almost better to have no web presence at all. You are most certainly better off to have one simple page done very well. You make a better impression with a single, highly professional page that says nothing more than who you are and what you do, than you can with 10 jumbled pages that do a little bit of everything badly.

Slide 4: Terms & Acronyms

I’m going to try to avoid acronyms and “tech-speak” in general, or to at least explain strange words and non-words as I go along... If at first I don’t succeed, well..., at least you’ll have this little cheat sheet.

Slide 5: Overview (Set goals)

Even before you decide if the technology you’re using is doing the job, if your website looks the way it should, or if it contains all of the necessary information, you should give some thought to setting goals. How should your website work within your administrative framework to further your society’s overall goals?

There are a lot of possibilities. A website can reduce the amount of staff time spent on repetitive tasks (such as data entry and re-entry). It can reduce the number of incoming phone calls by addressing the most commonly asked questions. It can perform useful services that offer added value to your membership and your advisers. Such services might include career information, continuing education
or distance learning resources, articles and links of interest that relate to your field, and so forth. If your website is to accomplish all of these lofty goals, it should also:

- Present a polished image that will encourage new members to join
- Make it easier for chapter officials to perform administrative and other duties
- Provide each of your audiences with improved ease of access to information and forms
- Open a new and effective fundraising channel
- Obtain feedback through membership and user surveys, and
- Perform a whole host of other functions that are directly related to your individual goals and challenges, which we’ll talk about on the next slide

Each goal you set should be evaluated both on its own immediate merits, and on the potential impact it may have on your overall mission and on your society’s long term goals. By setting these goals thoughtfully, you can determine how to distribute your budget wisely. By spreading out the expenses and only paying for what you need when you need it, the technology can pay for itself incrementally over time.

Slide 6: What’s in it for Me? A Brainstorming Activity

An effective web site can be useful in addressing all sorts of challenges, even if they don’t seem to have any relationship to technology or the Internet. The brainstorming activity you received might help to get you thinking about ongoing challenges in a new light. Is the Internet the right tool for every job or the answer to every question? No, sadly, it’s not. Can it be used creatively and effectively to find new pieces of the solutions to old problems? Sure. Almost always.

<allow up to 15 minutes for exercise>

Slide 7: The Basics: Websites Matter

Now, with our mission firmed up somewhat, let’s return for a moment to building your site on a solid foundation.

There is no way to overestimate the importance of the statements on this slide. Only a few years ago, smart designers often asked prospective clients “do you really need a website?” Back then, we were all just starting out in the field of website building, but it was already obvious that no prestige would be gained from designing websites that had no discernable purpose. Some clients wanted them because... well, just because everyone else was doing it, I suppose. Now, technology has advanced, and both the Internet and its role in society have evolved into something new. Today, the lack of a web address can be nearly disastrous, because its absence can subtly imply a corresponding lack of a legitimate physical address in our Internet-reliant brains. A hastily designed, amateurish website implies that the site’s owner must not be very respectable, because so little effort has gone into projecting a professional public image.

A website is the equivalent of an office, a home, even a face on the Internet. Visitors to your site will consciously or subconsciously assume that these pages accurately reflect your organization’s identity and values. The impression a home page makes in the first few seconds is the impression your visitors will walk away with, and it will be difficult, if not impossible, to change their minds later. As we discussed in the introduction, your target market is a very sophisticated group and many (if not most) of them will check you out before they accept your invitation or allow their kids to accept your invitation to become a member.

If your honor society depends heavily on new initiates for a significant chunk of your revenue, this is a particularly critical issue for you. If your site is not up to the tough professional standards you set for yourselves in other areas, you cannot afford to place it on the back burner any longer. You must spend some time, effort, and money on this project or the cost of not doing so will become very high indeed.

There are some tips that might help to save you some money later on in this presentation, and our mini CDs contain some additional resources and support for both do-it-yourselfers and societies that have to utilize students or semi-professionals. However you have to do it, though, now is really the time to get it done.
**Slide 8: Location and Support**

Get your own URL (*your .org domain name*) and advertise it. It adds professional authenticity. My own experience in searching your society names also showed that it is sometimes very difficult to determine which results referred to your national organizations, and which belonged to your chapters. This can really run you into trouble because it means your chapter sites are too visible in comparison to your own, and that takes the national image and message out of your control and places it in the hands of the students. The national site should display first, it should be the resource everyone goes to first when they’re looking up information about your society, right? Your own URL will move you miles along that path. There are some "google-massaging" tips that we’ll talk about later on, too, but for now let’s stick to URLs.

As an independent, national organization that values each of your schools and chapters, it is better if your e-mail address and website are not too closely associated with a single chapter or a single campus. Having a URL that is a subset of a University system places too much emphasis on the host school at the expense of your own "brand." It may also give your other chapters and institutions the impression that they do not matter to you as much as your home campus does.

Web addresses now cost as little as $15/year, and *your host school may still be willing to provide the server space to host it at no charge*. Commercial host space can also be found at no charge, but a variety of issues make using this type of server very risky. Good quality but very basic commercial space that offers reasonable levels of features and security start around $10 per month.

**Slide 9: Define Yourself**

I’m going to mention some brief points about usability, usability testing, and design, but it would take days to address these topics adequately. The fact that I’m glossing over them shouldn’t detract from their importance, though. I’ve included a 5 page handout on our mini CD, and links to quite a few more great design and usability tips.

**What is usability testing?** Usability testing involves recruiting a few people who are representative of your various Internet audiences, (students, alumni, advisers, parents, professionals, and so on). These people become your testers as you sit with them in front of a PC and watch them as they attempt to navigate your site and perform certain pre-defined tasks. The most important thing to remember is that you *must* talk to real users as opposed to your office staff, your spouse, or other people who may not approach things in quite the same way as your target audience. Again, more specific instructions on conducting this testing are included on the mini-cd.

**EFFECTIVE DESIGN:** The design notes on the mini-cd include some basic elements of a nice looking, useful site. There are interesting facts on writing for the web, like: *Removing half of a website’s words will literally double the amount of information that users will take away from your site.* There’s some discussion on making sure your site is *visually reflective of your specialization or mission.* When a member, professional, or prospective member visits your site for the first time, the appearance of the site should give some hint as to your identity and purpose. Some more basic tips are also included on tasks like keeping the *copyrights current.* I noticed that a fair number of ACHS sites are still displaying a 2003 or earlier copyright. This can give the impression that your site’s content is *all* old and outdated.

**Credibility:** This credibility punch list on the slide appears on the ACHS website, under *How to Judge the Credibility of an Honor Society.* These are the items that absolutely *must* be easily accessible to the general public. If any of them are missing, it will send up a red flag about your credibility as a legitimate honor society. Be sure to keep these in mind as you’re working through the *Buckets!* exercise.

**Buckets! Exercise**

Organizing your information and services used to mean little more than making sure no content was more than 2 clicks away from the home page. The sheer volume of information we now offer sometimes makes this goal very difficult, but if your site is compact enough it is advice that’s well worth following. Larger sites, on the other hand, cannot achieve the two click rule without hopelessly cluttering the home page and offering the user an overwhelming array of navigational choices. Your only option is to make sure everything is presented in a logical fashion, placing services and information on an obvious path under headings that will make sense to your visitors. It’s also a good
idea to use some form of tree structure that will remain visible to show the user where they are located in your site as they progress in search of information.

The buckets exercise can help you to plan or reorganize your site navigation to make it more friendly to your users.

Imagine that all of the information you want to present has to be stored in one of these six buckets on your home pages. Your visitors will be dashing in and grabbing a bucket, and will only have time to take a quick glance at the names you provide. If they choose the wrong bucket, they will get annoyed. They may try again, but there’s a good chance they’ll decide it’s not worth the trouble. Your job is to make sure that they will find what they’ve come looking for, and that they find it in the first bucket they choose.

The search, return to home page, and contact information should be placed somewhere in these buckets, but remember that are also stand-alone headings that should be visible somewhere on each page at all times. Also note that you can place the same piece of information in more than one bucket if it makes sense for you to do so.

When you’ve finished, you can get together and test each other by folding the paper so that only the main buckets and their labels show. Then, try to enter the mindset of a member, an adviser, or another typical visitor, and look for a specific service or piece of information. Select the bucket you think you’ll need within 3 seconds, because that’s about how long your visitors will actually give you.

This is also a fun activity for campus chapters who are creating websites; they get to have a little more fun by running around all over the place and using real buckets.

Slide 10: Generate Traffic

SEARCH ENGINE RANKINGS: When Internet users search for information, they typically only scan the first few references displayed, so it's important to make sure that your site emphasizes the terms visitors might use when you want your site to appear at or near the top of their search results.

To help promote your page's rank to the top of a search page, you should first select the keywords you wish to capture search rankings for. Do some brainstorming with students and others to make sure you include all of the frequently occurring terms. You should then optimize your text to include those keywords frequently on every level of your site. The search engines weigh the relevance of the keywords used within your site by looking to see if they occur in the page title, meta tags, the body text, the headlines, or in the subheadings.

Most search engine sites also give a higher rank to newer pages, so frequent page updates will also help if the competition for good placement is tight, as will utilizing some newly discovered, creative techniques like "Google bombing." Google, the search engine, reads links to your site that have been posted by external sources. It then uses this information to help categorize and prioritize your pages, so it can give a higher rank to data that is cross-referenced more often. People have learned how to take advantage of this process by working cooperatively to "bomb" Google with specific keyword associations. The clearest example of this that I’m aware of is political in nature: I’m sharing it with you to demonstrate the point and not to insert editorial comment... If you type "miserable failure" into Google and select the "I feel lucky" button to bring up the page Google believes to be the most relevant match, you will find yourself looking at the President’s resume on the official Whitehouse site. Is Google an out of control left-wing conspiracy? Nope, don’t think so.... A group of 40 or so technologically adept young people just got together and added the words miserable failure to their pages, then linked them to the resume.

This little manipulation can be an effective tool for legitimate purposes, too, particularly for organizations that are independent parts of a larger whole, like members of ACHS. You can work cooperatively to bomb Google on each others’ behalf. You can make sure your chapters are linking to the national site using your chosen keywords for this purpose, too, and if you want to carry it further still, you can work to exchange keyword links with other relevant external sites.

Ok, to recap; you should find good keywords and use them in the page title, the meta tags, in the body text, and in the headings. Also use them as an internal link, get others to post them in links to
your site from external sources, and update your content frequently to obtain a top search engine placement.

Keep in mind that these and any other tips you might come across to get a leg up on the competition in your search engine rankings are not only likely, but destined to change. In order to be effective tools, the search engines have to do what they can to outsmart unethical users who use these tricks to bring up irrelevant content - essentially spamming the search results. It’s their job to provide relevant, not manipulated, links. In addition, the Web is an evolving entity. As a popular blogger put it, "The act of Google trying to 'understand' the web caused the web itself to change." When the web shifts, the search tools shift with it; and they will continue evolve or they will no longer be useful. What this means to you is that you should never rely solely on search engines to drive traffic to your site. You need to use the same methods you would use to encourage people to seek you out using more traditional channels. As we’ll see in a moment, your best bet is to print your Internet address on every single piece of material that leaves your office.

ADVERTISING and PROMOTING YOUR SITE: There are probably not too many of you who have an interest in actually advertising your site online, but if you do, you need to know what works. Ads purchased on any popular search engine work well; particularly well-placed Google 'adwords.' These bring up your paid ad when your associated keywords are entered. This form of advertising is probably the single most cost-efficient means of advertising today, as it beats out even print and broadcast media quite handily. What other types of online ads are effective? Exactly... none. Keyworded search engine ads enhance the user’s ability to find information that is relevant to their search; advertisements in other locations just an annoyance to be ignored because they distract the user from the all-important goal of finding relevant information quickly.

As we touched on a moment ago, your website URL should feature prominently in every other form of communication you pursue. It should be included on your stationary, business cards, brochures, publications, ... even your membership certificates. Remember that your website is supposed to function as part of your team. It should give users the tools they need to quickly find what they’re looking for on their own, so your time and your staff’s time is freed up for other tasks. It should include resources that visitors can print or submit to you electronically. They benefit because they don’t have to wait for anything to come in the mail, and you save some money on supplies, time, and postage.

When your members and advisers become reliant on your website to help them accomplish their goals and perform important tasks efficiently, everyone wins. The visitor gets instant gratification; you get to have the visitor do a little portion of your job for you, and you have one less thing to worry about. Now, to build this reliance, your target audience has to be led by the hand at first. Reminding them constantly that the site exists will encourage them to give it a try. Assuming your system works well for them, they will stick with it. They will use it more and more frequently, and for an ever-increasing variety of tasks. This means that, as the technology and your talent for using it expands, your website will effectively become a superhuman assistant that runs a good portion of your operation by guiding your members and advisers with little or no intervention from you.

But you’ve got to get them through the “door” first, right? Put that address on absolutely everything. Who knows? Maybe a few lapsed alumni members you’ve lost contact with will notice that address on something one day, and be reminded to visit your site to update their contact information, pay dues, or make a donation, too. You just have to make sure they remember how to find you.

**Slide 11: Advanced Topics – the Potential**

**Online Fundraising:** Your website’s existing visitors are there to obtain information that you have generously provided for their benefit. This may generate some sense of obligation to you, and it may put them in a receptive frame of mind if they are presented with a request for donations.

Fundraising appeals can also be made using more traditional methods that drive prospective donors to your website to make their contributions online. This strategy makes giving convenient and easy to act upon immediately; unlike the traditional “please send us a check” appeal, that involves writing a check, finding and addressing an envelope, obtaining postage, getting it into the mailbox... very often all or part of this task is put off until it is forgotten about completely.

**ePublishing:** Producing a digital publication in tandem with print or solely for online distribution has obvious, huge advantages. As a coordinated venture in conjunction with print media, online publications appeal to researchers and others who do not save their back issues but wish to look up
information later on. It also gives people alternatives so they can choose the format that suits them best. As a replacement for print distribution, of course you’re talking about significant cost savings, since you don’t require paper, printing, postage, or other mailing and distribution-related services. The expenses involved relate only to the layout and production. Drawbacks to this system stem primarily from access issues – if a significant proportion of your membership does not have readily available Internet access (retirees are a possible example), this solution is not for you. If you have a lot of members who are still using dial-up Internet connections, you may have to sacrifice some quality in the print resolution in order to maintain manageable download sizes. Additional thought must also be given to public versus private access, security, passwords, subscription rates, and other issues.

**Email Newsletters:** A respected source of Internet usage analysis recently performed usability testing a broad range of email newsletters, and discovered that the HTML variety performed **better** than its plain-text counterpart. The reason? A more attractive layout makes articles easier to read quickly, and a few pictures can add to the newsletter's communicative value. You should be sure to offer text-only versions, however, for users with slow connections or a preference for plain text. Most users seem to prefer HTML, though.

You can set up these HTML emails by creating a basic html page template and applying it to your messages prior to sending them. Some of the general HTML tips on the mini-CD might be useful in creating the look and feel of the overall design, but there are a few areas that are particularly important when generating this type of page: Be sure to upload any small images you wish to use to the web first, then link your newsletter to those – it’s easy to forget and link to your desktop or internal network. Full background images should generally be avoided as they decrease readability, distract the reader, increase download size, and add nothing to improve communication value. You also need to remember to format the content to fit the smaller space afforded by a typical email window.

You may also want to know how to set up mailing lists or groups within your email program, so that you can submit your newsletter to multiple recipients instead of submitting it to every intended recipient individually. Be aware, however, that many universities have implemented programming that will block messages to multiple recipients in an attempt to curb incoming spam. You should test a small, preliminary template with your user group before you spend a lot of time generating a lovely file that no one will see.

**Online Mentoring:** Discussion groups, online databases, interest inventories and surveys are all good tools for putting together a membership resource that matches students with professionals so you can offer added-value mentoring and career advancement services.

**Interactivity/Creating Community:** As with online mentoring, providing an outlet for your members to come together and discuss common issues of interest, share resources, conduct research, and provide support for one another can create a sense of community around your organization that will build website loyalty and offer prospective members an additional incentive to be a part of your group.

**Online Surveys and Feedback Forms:** The convenience of having these resources online for immediate response can add quick, valuable input to your decision making processes. However, it can be difficult to encourage broad segments of users to participate and it is difficult to drive users to the site for the sole purpose of completing the survey, so be aware that your results might be skewed. Incentives that appeal to the target group can help to offset these problems. Allowing users to respond anonymously can also increase participation, but it can prove a self defeating tactic, as well; since you can’t identify or “vet” your respondents, nor will you know if an individual has responded more than once, or if your users answer the questions in all seriousness.

**Employment Resources:** **Job Target** is a highly specialized job search facility that you can add to your existing website. It is the sort of value added service that can encourage members to become repeat visitors, and can illustrate a very substantial benefit of membership in your organization. While I have not worked with this job search system myself, I am impressed by the quality of their set-up and the fact that they are able to provide this high-level service at **no charge** to ACHS societies or your members. Their methods are similar to other online job posting sources, but Job Target matches students, graduates, and professionals in each society’s specific field with employers seeking staff with related talents. The employer gets well-qualified matches, the job seeker does not have to sift through irrelevant postings, and you have an opportunity to improve your level and quality of member services without adding additional costs. The folks at Alpha Lambda Delta and Beta Gamma Sigma are the ones to talk to for the whole story, since they’ve already added the Job Target facility to their sites and their opinions will be more valuable than mine. You can get more specific information about how
Job Target works and the requirements for participation online. I’ve placed the link at the top of the resource page on the mini CD, and we will also make it available at theachs website.

**eCommerce** – eCommerce capability can be a convenient, useful tool for collecting membership dues, subscription renewals, charitable donations, merchandise orders and payments, conference registration fees,... just about anything. If you do not currently offer credit card payment options, an online system can also increase your ability to serve your membership, because you do not need to rent equipment or form a traditional credit card relationship with a bank in order to accept plastic online. Some online shopping cart type services also allow visitors to pay online using an electronic check. Payments are deposited directly into your regular bank account, and you’ll receive regular statements. We’ve noticed that many people and institutions are increasingly requesting the ability to pay by credit card, so adding this feature should result in faster payments, and possibly in increased overall revenue.

**Some shopping cart systems & Credit card processing issues**: There are some sample links on the mini CD to companies that will electronically process checks and credit cards by depositing funds directly into your regular bank account. I’m not affiliated or experienced with them personally, but they looked interesting. You should do your own research before you select one; I noticed that a widely used company called Authorize.net has experienced some simple but uncorrected security flaws that have been reported by MSNBC and others. PayPal is another widely used system, but it can be inconvenient for people who do not have an account already set up. Search terms like credit card gateway should give you some good places to start looking and comparing costs and features. You should also talk to some of your peers who have implemented these systems to see what their experiences have been.

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**Slide 12: Tools and Goodies**

**Software-based Tools**: If you intend to develop your own website or maintain and add to an existing website, you will need a variety of tools to make these tasks manageable. The programs you choose should depend first on your experience level, then on your budget.

Beginners should probably stick to inexpensive or free html and image editors to generate basic web pages. As your skills improve, you may want to upgrade to more advanced tools like Macromedia’s Dreamweaver and Adobe’s Photoshop. These programs are, and will probably continue to be, the industry standards for the foreseeable future, and they are 2 of the programs most commonly used by professionals.

Posting existing, print based forms and publications to the web requires scanning the paper version and either exporting to HTML using a program like Omniform (which “recognizes” and converts the text, entry blanks, and general layout), or printing a fillable or static PDF via Adobe Acrobat. PDF documents are not a friendly format for online reading, however. You should reserve their use for fillable forms or for publications that the user is likely to print for offline reading. There are some additional and important comments about using PDFs in the design tips handout on the mini-cd.

In addition to basic HTML and its companions, web pages use a variety of other programs and languages to achieve more advanced functionality.

Flash, Java and JavaScript are other software languages that can enhance the functionality and appearance of a web site. Their use in programming, forms, and more complex layout and design often lend a more professional appearance to a site and allow users to access advanced capabilities. Still other formats are database driven to organize data in user friendly fields that are easy to search, organize, and update.

**ADMINISTRATION & MAINTENANCE**: Ease of administration and maintenance are important factors to consider when evaluating an existing or potential website. Sites that are designed by student volunteers or an in-house staff member will likely be supported the same way, so the page layout and administrative details should be well documented. A backup cd that contains a full copy of the site and all of the relevant passwords and admin information should also be kept at the National office in case the student volunteer or staff member is no longer able to maintain the site.

In addition, in-house sites should be simple enough to facilitate ongoing updates without requiring extensive formatting and reformatting. Templates should be created and used faithfully when adding new pages. Professionally designed sites often use Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) to make maintenance tasks easier. These small files define key layout elements like typefaces, colors,
headings, etcetera. The CSS is written once and is applied to every page on a site to provide a consistent look and feel. It also reduces design and update time, because you don't have to format each page or each paragraph of text individually.

You can also outsource your site creation to a professional. Contract designers and small companies are usually willing to handle ongoing updates and maintenance, as well, or they can design sites to be maintained by your in-house staff or volunteers. On the low end, you should expect a designer to meet an in-house or volunteer maintenance requirement by generating pages that are well suited to the knowledge level of the person in charge of the site. The site designer should also provide basic instructions for inserting and formatting new content. On the flip side, if you have a lot of money to spend, you can hire a developer to create a text-only entry system that allows non-technical users to make updates without knowing anything whatever about web pages. Contracting ongoing maintenance to the site designer can be the most efficient option for many. The designers are often in a better position to ensure that the site's consistency and quality remain high; they do not require training; and they can likely handle any additions and changes much more quickly and reliably than a staff person or volunteer who's busily switching hats to cover many other duties.

For those of you who are bringing the whole project in house, a good rule of thumb is to dedicate 30% of your technology spending to hardware and software, while earmarking a full 70% for training and support. You don’t need to follow the percentages religiously, but keeping them in mind can help you to avoid purchasing more technology than you are able to use effectively.

**Databases and Forms:** Membership registrations, annual reports, contact information, scholarship applications, subscriptions,... just about any type of individual member or chapter form can be connected to an online database. Members and chapter representatives enter or edit their own information, submit their forms, and your records are updated instantly. No more paper form storage, no more illegible handwriting, no more duplicated effort in entering data more than once. The data also becomes easy to sort or search over the Internet, improving ease of use for your members. You may have noticed that ACHS recently added this capability to track each society's campus chapters. You can now access the ACHS online chapter database from the "full menu" link on the home page. You can then sort or search your chapters and those that belong to other societies, and you can log-in to edit the status of your chapters.

Choosing a new database or upgrading an existing one for online use is, or soon may be, a major issue for many of you. Ongoing maintenance and upgrade costs, dependability and longevity, ease of use, and Internet-friendliness should be your chief considerations. In my opinion, an established product like Microsoft Access or SQL best addresses these needs overall. Other, non-standard companies quit supporting older platforms, charge excessively for necessary upgrades, go out of business rather inconveniently, or may not be web-ready.

**Group communication tools:** Email lists, listservs, discussion groups, Usenet, Instant Messaging (IM), and blogs are all great tools for increasing the effectiveness of and access to inter-, intra-, and extra-organizational communications. Each offers similar community-building capabilities, with many differences in price, set-up, and intuitive ease of use.

**Email lists**, as we discussed earlier, are generated by an individual, who simply submits an email to a group of recipients. The recipients then use the “Reply all” feature in their email programs to conduct a “conversation.”

There is usually a charge for listserv setup and hosting, because these often require specialized software that resides on a public server. Users subscribe or unsubscribe to the bulletins that arrive in the email inbox at predetermined intervals, or whenever a new posting has been made.

**Discussion groups** are essentially web-based bulletin boards that feature a threaded discussion located on the hosts' website. A threaded conversation is one in which the messages are displayed in a hierarchical format, where the original “parent” message contains offshoots or "child" messages that were written in response. Discussion groups can be password protected to limit access, and they may offer features that allow private messaging between users, email distribution of postings, and various other conveniences. You can now join a Discussion Group environment for yourself on the ACHS website by going to achsnatl.org/forum. Dorothy has passed out the sign up forms so you can select your own usernames and passwords if you would like to participate. Kappa Delta Pi is planning to offer this feature to their members, as well.

**Usenet forums**, also called Newsgroups, also offer threaded discussion capability. Usenet is open to the general public over news servers provided by the Internet Service Providers (ISPs). From what I've read starting a new one is quite a project, but if you would like to, you can apply to set up a new
group based on the topic of your choosing, write your charter, and open the doors to whomever may take an interest anywhere in the world. You could also take advantage of Usenet newsgroups more simply by directing participants to an existing group whose charter more or less conforms to your needs.

A blog (taken from "web-log"), is an online "journal" primarily driven by the efforts of one person. The blog's owner posts events, research, news, editorials or other commentary, etcetera. The blog's readers can then respond to posted topics to further the discussion. A blog that is hosted by an individual who is prominent and well respected in your field has the potential to create high-level discussion, draw new users, potentially even generate media attention. There's a link to one of many good blogging tools on our mini-CD resource list, as well.

IM, or Instant messaging, has achieved wild popularity, particularly among students. You can make yourself more accessible to student members and advisers by installing an AOL, MSN, ICQ, or Yahoo instant messaging program. You simply sign up for a user name, publicize it, run the software, and people can communicate with you directly from their pc to yours in real time at no cost. You will also find that the ACHS discussion forum allows for private instant messaging between members while you're logged into the system.

SECURITY: Password protection allows you to create members-only site segments for the most basic level of security. However, password protecting a page will only discourage automatic web crawlers and casual browsers – it won’t pose any great challenge for hackers. There are many higher levels of site security available, though, most of which are set in place for you by your web host or eCommerce service provider.

To avoid having problems if you run into a worst case security scenario, 1) be religious about doing backups at least once a week, and 2) don't ever ask your users for extremely sensitive information (credit card/social security/drivers license numbers, etc.) if you do not employ encryption and keep the information on a secure server.

Slide 13: Budget tips & outsourcing

SAVING MONEY IN-HOUSE: Doing it yourself is obviously an inexpensive way to go, so long as you're not interested in paying yourself for your overtime. If you have the crazy urge to take on a project like this, we’ve put some tips on the mini CD for you. If you’re not a skilled designer or web programmer, you should be sure to do some additional research into what format and tools would be appropriate to give your organization a professional web appearance. You might also consider using a website template, and you should conduct fairly thorough user testing to make sure your hard work will suit your needs well. The best advice is to stay flexible, seek out and accept feedback and criticism, and be prepared to spend a lot of time and energy to get a quality product at the end of the process.

If doing it yourself is too big a project, you can consider a barter arrangement with another department or an outside company to obtain technological or design expertise. For example, societies with members in health care could offer ergonomics seminars in trade for web design/consultation. I’m told many of you utilize student interns and volunteers, and that can cause some trouble if for no other reason than you have to keep finding new help as your volunteers graduate. Still, if you’re determined to go this route, you should try to avoid using your own students. Web design and information management students are likely to have a better base of knowledge and talent for this project, and they'll have a better handle on what you will need to know when they’re gone. They may be every bit as willing to volunteer their services for free as your own members are, too, since they need to begin to build their professional portfolios. On the downside, they are not experts yet, and you will likely need to perform a lot more supervision, evaluation, user reviews, and tweaking. They will also continue to leave you in the lurch by graduating at an alarming rate.

OUTSOURCING: Outsourcing to a professional freelance or corporate designer is the surest way to end up with a quality website. Determining who is right for the job can still be difficult, however. There are a lot of freelancers and a lot of small, medium, and large companies out there that advertise website creation. On the low end, they may be kids or other beginners with little or no experience. Be particularly careful of these folks – they may advertise at half the going hourly rate for their work but take twice as long to complete it, so you end up paying premium prices for beginner's work. In the moderate cost range, you may run into individuals or companies who have a significant amount of talent in design but are weak in programming/technology application (or vice versa). At the top, you will find the best of the best but they may still not be worth what they’re charging. You have to
investigate a designer’s references, see if you like his or her style, and evaluate candidates personally to be sure you’ll get the fit you need.

A lot of organizations send out RFPs to find someone to create a website or manage technology needs, but I recommend against that approach. Strongly. RFPs, done correctly, take an amazing amount of time both to write and to respond to. Professional designers very often do not respond to RFPs at all because a) they prioritize existing, paying work over prospective work, so they may or may not get around to responding to your RFP by the deadline, and b) rightly or wrongly, RFPs create the impression is that the client is looking for bargain basement bids and/or something for nothing – people who have worked hard to learn their craft generally like to be paid to perform it.

For these reasons, your RFP responses are likely to be limited to beginners and desperate designers with time on their hands who are willing to work for peanuts. If that’s all your budget allows, then you’re probably stuck with the RFP (though you might be better off with the intern scenario). Be prepared, however, to spend extra time with an RFP so that it specifies your requirements to the letter, make sure the winning bid addresses each requirement adequately, and be sure you have a good contract in place to hold the winning bidder to the promises made.

Instead of sending out RFPs, you will probably be better off just doing some basic research. You can look at websites that were done for other societies or similar non-profit organizations, particularly those you think might fall within your approximate budget. Pick a few you like the looks of, then talk to the site owners. Was the company or individual that built the site easy to work with? Is the group happy with the result? Is the site easy to maintain (if maintained in house) or what are the maintenance charges (if outsourced)? What was the approximate cost? How long have they been working with this designer? Once you’ve identified a good candidate or two, you can start outlining your needs and negotiating fees. Ideally, this strategy will provide you with a candidate that has done exactly the sort of work you require at a price you can afford and with a style that you’re comfortable with, all in significantly less time and with better results than would be the case with RFPs.

**Slide 14: Broadband and the future**

So, that’s where we are and what’s possible today. But... we’ve all heard too many stories about laptops and such that cost a minor fortune when they were top of the line only 3 years ago but are now little more than awkward paper weights. How do you make purchasing decisions in an environment that changes so quickly that you can almost hear your money fluttering effortlessly out the window? Well, ideally you have some notion of what’s on the horizon, namely broadband. It’s available today but it’s not in widespread use yet because the availability’s still limited. However, in my own home state of Michigan, the Governor’s promising we’ll all be able to tap into it by 2007, even folks like me who live in mosquito infested rural swamp land.

Wider broadband use is going to up the ante considerably. Older technologies that never took off because the capabilities weren’t there will finally start to spread. Video conferencing is one good example; Internet voice calls are another. The notion of paying for sophisticated software and using it over the internet only on the rare occasions when you need it might take off finally, too. Any number of notions that require moving a lot more data a lot more quickly are going to come into their own. People will start building more complexity and greater capability into website applications. The scope of services you’re able to provide to your members and your administrative volunteers will expand, as well. So leave yourself a little room to grow, and don’t dismiss any grand ideas as pipe dreams just yet because they may soon be a very real possibility.

**Slide 14: Summary**

**Slide 15: Resources**

**Slide 16: Questions**