

Message board policies and procedures

Many websites have support groups and message boards. Factors that need to be considered include:

✉ Are there any negative outcomes that might arise when operating a peer-to-peer service?

At an eating disorder charity (EDA) staff were worried that those celebrating their disorder might unduly influence other participants, to the detriment both of their recovery and of the organisation

✉ How will users' identities be protected? Do you want to remove the sender's email details and any other material likely to identify them?

✉ Will you want users to be registered? Having a registered list of contributors helps in moderating messages and can be used to debar people if necessary.

Email advice

Another form of communication is an email link, whereby site users can post questions to the organisation/charity's staff. Is email appropriate for the kind of enquiries you might get? Email has the advantage of anonymity and it may be that some people who would not otherwise seek information do so using this medium. On the other hand, understanding queries may be more difficult when working with email than on the

telephone. There are also ethical questions around particularly dangerous situations. In the case of the charity offering anonymity, what happens when a clearly suicidal co-respondent wishes to remain anonymous?

Practical concerns

There are, of course, practical concerns to be addressed. Specifications to potential system designers generally include the following:

✉ Use of images/enhanced features. To what extent do you want to enliven your site with graphics/games etc? Is it possible to do this without losing potential users who may have old computers or web browsers, or may not be comfortable in installing or using 'plug-ins'?

✉ Navigation. There are various kinds ('hub-to-spoke', where links go back to a home page; 'spider's web' where spokes are joined together, etc.) and aids (site maps; indexes etc. Part 2 of the factsheet should be useful here)

✉ Accessibility for people with disabilities. Pages can be 'Bobby' checked for free on the net. Bobby is a web accessibility tool designed to help expose barriers to accessibility and encourage compliance with existing accessibility guidelines. Go to <http://bobby.watchfire.com/bobby/html/en/index.jsp> to find out more.

Diana

THE WORK CONTINUES

Web Factsheet 1

Questions charities need to ask about their web sites

The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund



In early 2004, City University's Ciber research group completed an evaluation of websites for young people sponsored by The Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund. The study highlighted that voluntary organisations were not always clear about the significance or implications of having moved their services into a digital environment¹. The Fund and Ciber have prepared three information sheets arising from the research that will hopefully be useful to organisations considering having or revamping a website and to Funders considering supporting an organisation's website.

This Factsheet, the first of three, deals with some general issues organisations need to consider about websites. Factsheet 2 offers practical advice on how best to evaluate and monitor a website. Factsheet 3 offers advice to funders on funding websites.

There are a number of key issues that need considering before embarking on developing a website.

¹ The full report can be found on the Ciber web site, <http://www.soi.city.ac.uk/organisation/is/research/ciber/> and on The Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fund's web site <http://www.theworkcontinues.org>

Do you need a website?

Will a website help young people whom you wish to attract and promote the aims of your organisation? Research has shown that digital users are more likely to be students, academics, professionals and carers than the young people for whom you actually provide.

Many charities have as a major aim the provision of timely and accurate information and advice. Is it possible to offer such information and advice from your organisation in an online environment?

Designing a good website can be costly; the information will need frequent updating, and use of the website needs regular monitoring/evaluation. Do you have the resources to do this?

Remember your users will be global. Our experience shows that in many digital environments international users will dwarf UK users in number and the demands they make. At the very least you will need to consider how to deal with these users – whether that is through targeted information or links to other sites.

Content and tone

Careful consideration needs to be taken of your potential user group and how they may approach the site. *Winston's Wish* (a charity for bereaved young people) determined, from their experiences in dealing with youngsters, that they might come to the site with a mixture of emotions including caution, diffidence, anger, isolation and anxiety. All you can do is avoid being patronising, be realistic, but emphasise the positive.

How wide is the target audience?

It is not only young people but also parents/carers/researchers and the general public who may use your site. How can you structure your site to accommodate this? Some sites, such as *Mencap's* 'Trans-active', have different pages for parents/careers and young people. *Rethink*, a mental health charity, has two completely separate sites: one exclusively for young people, '@ease', and the other a more general site for adults

Lastly, the audience for websites is far more mixed and in information terms – more promiscuous than that for print or telephone communications. People will often use search engines to make a choice, will check your site quickly and do the same to other sites. With such an abundance of choice around, they are unlikely to come back on anything approaching a regular basis unless you offer them something

special. This digital audience is fickle and dynamic and it is helpful to think of them as consumers rather than users.

How can we be most helpful to site visitors?

It is almost certain that the vast majority of people coming to your site will have checked out quite a few others and will probably go on from your site to yet more, often with a view to checking the information on your site. It makes good sense, therefore, to be pro-active and to actively link to sites, through hyperlinks, that you feel will be useful. Questions you need to ask in considering hyperlinks include:

- 📖 The extent to which you consider it is good policy to link to organisations which may take a different stance on some of the issues. How far is it important for your organisation to censor access to information?
- 📖 The number of sites linked - take care not to drown or detract from your own site
- 📖 If and how, you wish to classify or categorise sites linked. Some may be for researchers, others for the young people themselves. Alternatively, some may deal with one particular aspect your site deals with, (i.e. from a health or education point of view) or be from different kinds of sources (personal web page, government site, voluntary organisation etc.).