

10 steps to help you build and maintain a successful school website

Michael Tunks says keep it simple while you're planning your school's internet presence

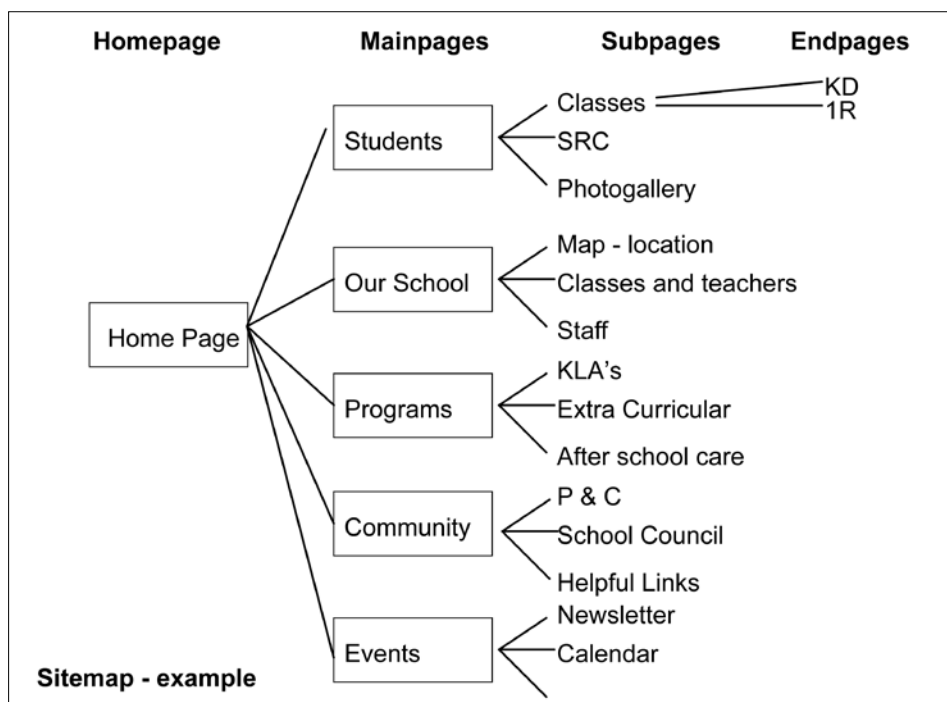


Fig. A: School website flowchart

In my work with schools, I often need to visit a school's website to grab the logo or note the school colours. All too often, I find that what presents itself as the school's online presence is sadly neglected and woefully out of date... or the school has no internet presence at all.

With over 70 school websites completed in the last couple of years, I have developed a list of 10 tips to help schools to get a website up and running and to keep it maintained efficiently.

These tips adhere closely to the eternal principles: KISS – keep it simple stupid, and DRTW – don't reinvent the wheel.

If yours is a little school, you don't need a website that looks like ninemsn or Yahoo. Small websites can easily be self-built; someone with an IT background should be able to build a good medium size website; if you need a bigger internet presence, hire a professional.

A word of warning here, many graphic designers sell themselves as website developers, but there's a big difference between making a pretty page and writing the software that makes it work. Before you sign up, explore the developer's websites, check references and above all, talk to their clients.

1 Pick your web team

You need a team – ideally two to four members. A strange thing happens when there are less than two or more than four – decision paralysis. There are lots of decisions to make when working with websites. So on your team try to have:

- ◆ At least one member who is confident with computers. You need someone who is not afraid to click a button to see what happens.
- ◆ Someone with an artistic or design flair. The choice of colours, how they are displayed, position of logos and photographs etc will benefit if you have someone with a little talent in this area.
- ◆ A member with enough authority to validate decisions as you go. Website making is an iterative process with decisions late in the process significantly influenced by decisions made early in the process. Try to have someone on the team who can OK your decisions as you go.

2 Survey the field

Set the team a webquest to visit six to 10 websites of other schools and take note of what you like and don't like about these sites.

You can ask questions like:

Do I like this layout? Can I find my way around easily? Is it inviting to stop and read? How have they used colour? Do they have sections we would like on our website?

Spending an hour on this step will help you to clarify your preferences for the three main structural elements of a website – layout, colour scheme and site map.

3 Layout

Do you like layouts that fill the screen or layouts that are centred on the screen with left and right borders? Though wide format screens are taking over, there are many older screens around; a border to left and right will prevent lost image, so be cautious.

Where do you want the main navigation – across the top of the page or in the left or right margins? (See below for some additional considerations on navigation).

4 Colour scheme

Choice of colour scheme usually reflects the school colours, but don't be limited by them. Some schools prefer the crispness of a white background behind the text content of a page while others like to soften this with a buff or light coloured background and coloured text. Play with the mix of colours to find a combination you are happy with. Readability is everything so avoid dark background colours behind text.

5 Site map

A site map is a map of the sections or pages you want on your website and how they are grouped. My own analysis of several hundred school websites led to the development of the sitemap in Fig. A. This contains the most typical areas found. You can download a copy together with a blank template to assist your own planning from www.impromation.com.au/websitehelp.

Keep your site map small and simple (manageable). You can always add new areas later if you find that you need them. I think the Education Today website at www.minniscomms.com.au/educationtoday is a good example of a clear, easy to navigate site.

6 Build the website

Use your decisions from the preceding steps to build the site yourself or to brief a web developer. The most important point here is not the actual

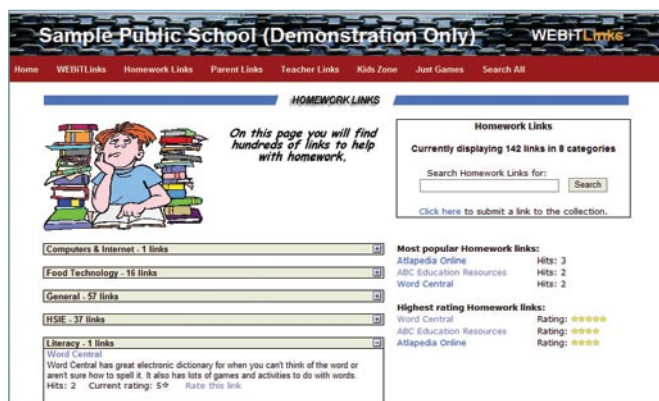


Fig. B The impromation links module has links to 500 websites

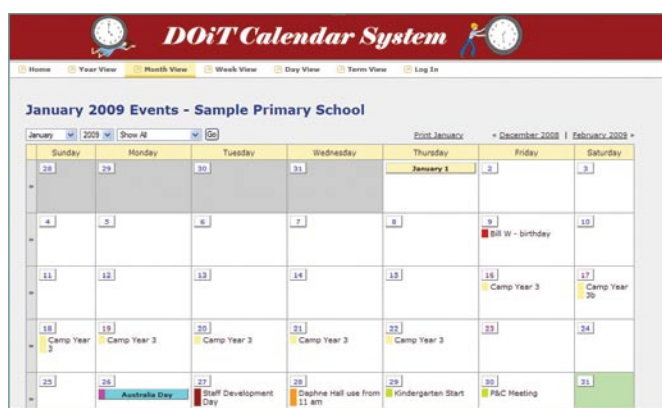


Fig. C The Do it calendar system allows different levels of access

building of the site but how it will be maintained afterwards. You will need a Content Management System (CMS) that will allow you to change text and pictures and add new pages easily.

The CMS should also allow editing of the navigation menus so you can add links to new pages. A great tool for managing your website is *Adobe Contribute*. It allows you to edit text and images, add links and add new pages directly on your website.

7 Hosting

Most state education systems provide website hosting free of charge. Great! You say, however, this can impose certain restrictions. For example, limitations on space allowance, whether you can upload files from home or not, and restrictions on certain web scripting languages, which may vary from state to state.

Alternatively, you can arrange your own hosting with a commercial hosting company. This can cost from \$10 per month depending on your requirements but can also provide some worthwhile advantages. One advantage is that most commercial hosting now comes with website building software.

8 Content

There are many considerations around content. Let's look at just two:

Relevance

It is important when preparing your content to provide information your users expect and need and have it in the right places on your website.

Research tells us that users spend five to seven seconds evaluating a web page. If they can't find what they are looking for they will move on. Use descriptive headings that let your users know what is on a page. If you have a lot of information on a page consider placing anchor links at the top of the page (Fig. A). Anchor links take users to specific parts of a page.

Photographs give visual clues to the content of a page. They also help to engage users, especially if they recognise students, staff or community members.

When next your school photographer visits, ask him/her to take some extra shots around the school for your website. Remember to obtain written parental permission to publish pictures of students. Most parents will be pleased, but there are always the few that are paranoid about protecting their offspring.

Go live quickly

Go live with your website as soon as possible and even before all the content has been entered. All too often, I have seen websites languish unpublished because busy teachers can't complete the content and other job demands eventually take over. Go live quickly and have messages on the incomplete pages saying "We are still working on this page. Please come back soon." A live website creates its own energy. You'll get feedback from the community and more incentive to keep working on it.

9 Website maintenance

Much of your website will remain static over

long periods of time. For example each year you may want to update a principals' message and change class or staff lists.

There will be pages that require more frequent updating – a newsletter page, calendar or canteen price list. The easy way to keep these pages maintained and to spread the workload is to prepare them as pdf files and display them from links on the website. This way, the pdfs can be maintained by the people responsible for the content and then uploaded as required. For example, a term calendar can be prepared in a Microsoft Word or Publisher document. Print the file as a pdf document and then upload it. Create a link from your webpage to the pdf and have it open in a new window. *CutePDF* is a free pdf application suitable for most school uses, you will find it at www.cutepdf.com.

10 Engaging your community

Finally, after all your hard work, you want your community to come to your website regularly. Having up to date content is a good start.

At the request of schools, my company has developed a number of website add-ons that can help increase the usefulness of your website to your community. These add-ons include:

- ◆ **Photogallery** where you can add photos from today's excursion or activity and have them on your website in a photo album ready for viewing in about 30 minutes.
- ◆ **Self-managing email subscription service** so your community can subscribe to receive an email with a link to the school website each time a newsletter is published. This is a great environmental initiative for any school with the potential to reduce paper wastage, photocopying and staff time.
- ◆ **Links module** with over 500 links for homework help, teacher resources, online skills practice for students, links for parents and a games area (Fig. B).
- ◆ **Online calendar** useful for managing a schools' activities and linkable to the school website where only those activities marked 'public viewing' will be displayed to the community (Fig. C).

There is much more to be said about developing and maintaining a website, however, these 10 points should provide a solid launching pad for your school website project.

Good luck, and let me know how you get on.



Michael Tunks is Director of ImproMation, a software development company with its focus on helping schools. The company currently provides online services

for over 1800 schools throughout NSW. Visit www.impromation.com.au.