Key software solutions for the VCS

What's available, and how it can be used to improve operational performance

Content Managed Websites and Online Transactions

ict hub

Introduction

This report was commissioned by the ICT Hub and CITA have developed these resources in partnership with the VCS.

A website is normally high on the list of wants for any organisation, most people want a web presence but do not know why, how one works and if it is doing its job. Many websites once launched become stale, out of date and can become more of a liability.

A website will not attract new clients or customers by itself, a potential client must either know about you or the site or use, be referred or chance upon it using a search engine (Google, Yahoo, etc).

Every organisation must know what it expects to gain from its website, who it is intended to serve and what message is intended to pass on. Does the group need a separate website if all it needs to do is publish contact details? Why not save the money and get the details added to a web directory, these are normally free to the VCS.

A common use of a website is to advertise an organisation's services (and/or goods). Such websites are termed "brochure ware" and need to be kept fresh and up to date.

The website is the first port of call for a potential funder or recruit, an out of date or amateurish look can be a liability. A good website can give an organisation an edge.

Website Costs

The domain name (www.mygroup.org) needs to be rented, normally for a period of up to 2 years, this can cost up to £25 but is often part of a wider package.

You also need to rent some space on a server to save your website code – hosting. This can cost from a few pounds to a few hundred, depending on the level of services required. Most hosting packages include e-mails addresses and can include other features such as domain names, file transfer systems, templates, etc.

A cost that is rarely considered is the long term maintenance and management of the site. Professional web designers often engage clients in relationships with respect to on-going website development, updating and management. Groups need to consider the budgetary implications of paying a website designer £20 each time additional information is added to the site, either that or someone needs to be trained how to do it internally. Training someone to manage a "flat" (HTML based) website using Dreamweaver or Front Page can be time consuming and cost a few hundred pounds.

On-going site development (new sections, make-overs, additional features, etc) needs also to be considered. Time needs to be allocated to manage the site, the more complex the site the more time it will need.

Initial design costs can be as low as £50, with professional fees running into many thousands of pounds for large scale and complex websites.

Homemade, Tailored or Bespoke?

One way to keep the costs down is to create a website in-house – the type of the website is dependent on the level of skill available within the organisation. Such websites cost no more than the hosting charges and domain name but are very reliant on the original creator for updating and management.

A volunteer can knock up a website very quickly for little or no money but the longer term management of the site needs to be considered.

The process of website design can be very frustrating, make sure that you check how "professional" your designer is prior to signing up.

A professional designer may tailor a website for an organisation using one of many systems (and/or modules) available. Some of these modules require a licence, hence cost, but many are based on Open Source products and are as such "free". Tailored systems allow for flexible functions and features but can be complex to manage and require expert maintenance.

Bespoke systems should always do exactly what you want them to do but come at a premium.

What Website?

The choice of websites is as wide as the potential budget. Many websites can be built for "free" or rather, using templates that come as a part of a package (e.g. Communigate), many websites hosting packages offer template systems that can build a functional website. These can look very effective but lack flexibility and control in the look and feel of the site.

A "flat" website is rather old fashioned by today's standards – these are typically written in a programming language called HTML, often using development tools such as Dreamweaver or Front Page. They can be excellent systems but, unless specifically written, require the same tools to manage and maintain them. The website designer will often look to sell these additional services as a part of the website package.

Currently best practice suggests that most web designers make use of CSS (Cascading Style Sheets – a design system) in website design, these are more flexible and adaptable than flat sites but require more development work and hence cost more. CSS is one of the mechanisms that allows for accessibility options to be included within the site.

One intermediate step is a website that is written with a specific management tool in mind, e.g Adobe Contribute. These sites will be more expensive to set up but cheaper to manage in the longer term. This type of site is less rigid, compared to a template driven site, in the respect that the content (text, images, etc) can be changed easily, even the

colours, but layouts and menus are often fixed.

A Content Managed System (CMS) website allows, in theory, the site to be updated easily by non-experts. They are more expensive to set up (typically) and the lower cost ones can be a bit “clunky” to manage. Higher end systems have more user friendly management interfaces built in. Low cost systems in the main utilise Open Source systems such as Wordpress, Joomla, etc – there are hundreds of “off the peg” solutions that can be adapted. The basic idea of a CMS website is that changes can be made on a “click and go” basis.

Care needs to be taken with accessibility issues when using these systems – the look and feel needs to be modified to address the requirements for different text sizes and high contrast. Such systems make use of CSS for the look and feel (Skin). The content (text, images, documents, etc) are independent of the code and so the entire look and feel can be changed without having to re-write any of the information in the site – this makes a complete make-over far easier. Working with a local supplier so that face to face meetings can occur regularly should also be a preference. Training costs from a national provider might drive the project costs up significantly.

What Features?

A website can simply provide contact details or be a fully interactive system. Such sites have a high management overhead. Raising funds via the web is one potential avenue to explore. Sites that have these feature need not be complex. Third party systems such as PayPal are easy to set up and require a simple link to be added to the site. Sites that require internal transactions need to make use of commercial systems, come at a premium and have additional requirements in terms of banking set up and security associated with them. Other forms of fundraising such as sponsored linking can also be useful, systems such as BuyIT allow customers discount on goods from 3rd party suppliers by following links from your site.

Website directories such as Charitysave can also be used to attract donations. Registered groups are advertised to potential donors.

On Line trading is easiest to set up using E-Bay or similar systems but can give a less than professional look. Many of the Open Source systems allow for shopping carts to be included. Setting up such systems is complicated by the requirement to set up secure payment options, these again can be done via third parties (PayPal etc) or additional commercial modules (e.g. Protex). An online trading system is both a significant investment and management overhead.

The developers mentioned in the table (over) can be found in the ICT Hub directory of suppliers; (directory.icthub.org.uk). These are not intended as recommendations and are purely for illustrative purposes. Many other local suppliers will also use these and other systems, Business Link and other

directories are often a good starting point, but make sure that references are thoroughly vetted.

Case Study : Konnekt NE

The group is a member of the North East Further Education Interfaith Forum and is a specific project aimed at auditing and improving current provision for values, beliefs, faiths and community cohesion in NE Further Education Colleges.

Konnekt NE promotes equality and diversity in FE colleges from a faith perspective, and aims to remove barriers that prevent young people from attending college and obtaining the skills and knowledge that will enable them to contribute to their own and their community prosperity. Konnekt needed a mechanism that enabled them to communicate easily, economically and effectively with their stakeholders. These were based at many locations throughout Durham, Teesside, Northumberland and Tyne and Wear. A real logistical 'headache'!The need was two-fold with 'Konnekt' needing to disseminate information to a large number of stakeholders over a large area and the stakeholders needing a mechanism that was easily accessible and useable to them.

They approached the problem by convening a meeting with the members and stakeholders, talking through the communication issues. Areas covered included: Methods of communication, Use of ICT, Affordability, Managing the process, Sustainability, Accessibility and Need for rapid implementation

Lack of knowledge and awareness of what was available to a small VCS in relation to communication and ICT support proved a barrier to progress. After contacting VONNE and seeking advice from other VCOs a Content Managed website was identified as a

The completed website has enabled Konnekt to achieve their original aims. The staff now have one main method of communication with stakeholders, are trained so Konnekt now has the resilience in internal ICT management structure, and most importantly can disseminate relevant information rapidly and easily. Stakeholders can now access their services and information database 24 hours a day.

Konnekt can promote the work they are doing not only to stakeholders in the North East, but to a national and international audience.

What worked well was having a ready source of expertise and knowledge available to consult with about their problems, the ease of the application process and the jargon free and practical training and support provided.

www.konnektne.org

Case Study : Electroville

Electroville are a Social Enterprise based in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire. The organisation grew from another, training based, group and became an independent entity, delivering IT goods and services to the local voluntary sector, in 2007.

Part of Electroville's mission is to support employment opportunities for the disabled.

Electroville provide the full range of IT support services, data cabling, web and database design, IT strategy through Net:Gain, management training packages and host the regional ICT champion for Yorkshire and Humberside.

The problem that they had encountered with the old (flat) website belonging to their parent organisation was that a full time technician was required to manage and maintain the site. Wanting to maintain a low operational overhead they turned to CMS websites for a solution.

Colin Harrison adds an anecdote to illustrate the rationale for looking at CMS websites; "in the early days when I wanted a letter written it went down to the typing pool, it bounced back and forth until everyone was happy, this was the same with any changes to the old website"

After examining many options including Open Source solutions such as Joomla and Drupal Electroville settled on a local supplier's (Artimedia) system – ArtiCMS.
Electroville have now formed a relationship with Artimedia to market ArtiCMS and deliver the product as a part of a training package in combination with Wordpress. Colin sees Wordpress as the first port of call for a CMS, allowing users a simpler way to start, manage and maintain a web presence. Within the training package, "Website in a day", two types of clients are served. Wordpress suits those making a start whilst ArtiCMS is useful for those who want something more sophisticated that looks good and is easily maintained.

All CMS can be "fiddly" in parts, depending on the complexity of the site. Colin's only regret is that he didn't ask for the back end statistics to be built into his system, whereas Wordpress has built in statistics.

The "website in a day" course that Electroville run shows great potential and is providing a useful service to groups in the Yorkshire area.

In terms of saving staff resources and allowing Electroville to manage their website for themselves ArtiCMS does its job well.

www.electroville.co.uk

	Comparison Table	Cost	Ease of use	Set up
Lycos Tripod	Web Builder – domain name not individualised www.tripod.lycos.co.uk	£	***	***
Communigate	Simple site building tools, template driven, annual rental, www.communigate.co.uk	££	***	**
Site Builder	Template driven simple site building tool, available from many hosts (e.g. Blackfoot www.blackfoot.co.uk) also known as Bravenet, Bazaar Builder	££	***	**
Open Source Drupal	Mid range to large scale CMS website tool, see SCIP, www.scip.org.uk, (S East) Illuminate ICT, www.illuminateweb.org.uk, (W Midlands)	£ - ££££	***	*
Open Source Joomla	Mid range CMS website - requires additional set up and support – see CITA www.communityitacademy.org (N East)	£ - ££££	***	*
Open Source Wordpress	Good starting point - can also be developed on a DIY basis, see FreeCharity (all regions) www.freecharity.org.uk	£ - ££££	****	**
Open source Plone	Larger scale website development tool. Midlands based M6 IT www.m6-it.org Cornwall based Altcom www.altcom.co.uk	££££	***	*
Rocket CMS	COSMIC - SW based bespoke and open source CMS www.cosmic.org.uk	££££	***	*
ArtiCMS	Open source based CMS www.artimedia.co.uk	£££	**	*
BuyAt	Sponsored link/referral type www.buy.at	£	****	****
CP Terminal and others including SMS text donations	Discounted services available from Charities Technology Trust www.ctt.org/fundraising/default.asp	££ - £££ (on usage)	**	*
Donation4Charity	Directory where registered groups can receive and seek donations included are RSS (live news) feeds www.donation4charity.org	£	****	****

Cost		Ease of use		Set up	
£	Free	*	Extensive training needed	*	Specialist setup required
££	Under £100	**	Some training required	**	Expert user setup only
£££	up to £500	***	Requires use of a manual	***	Setup for experienced users and/or practitioners
££££	£thousand plus	****	Easy – no training required	****	Very easy

The table above gives some examples of online fundraising systems, for a more detailed list please refer to the Fundraising products section of this report.