

Establishing A Web Presence For Your Club

by Glen Cormier

The Internet... or Doom!

The key to a successful, growing and active fly fishing club is communication both with it's membership and to others in the community. Prior to the internet, the only means to do this was via printing and mailing of newsletters, which was very costly and time consuming.

With the internet, newsletters can be emailed at no cost. The savings for a club of 50 members can be \$600 per year. Money better used for activities and projects. The elimination of copying, folding, stamping, stapling, and dropping at the post office has made it much easier for clubs to get volunteers for newsletter editor. And members now get a much better product: digital newsletters in PDF format read better, can be magnified, are in color, and unlike paper, can be stored intact forever.

As good as email is, having a web presence is even better. Much better. First, it allows members to check up on club events, activities, read newsletters from any internet PC. Members who don't have a home PC or email address can go to any public library, internet café, or most coffee shops and access. Second, it allows for interactivity: forums, polls, and other scripts that empower members. Third - and by far the most important - it exposes your club to the community, and even the world. A web presence is the best means of advertising what your club does, publicizing activities, and growing membership.

Given these factors, the Gulf Coast Council Federation of Fly Fishers strongly encourages it's member clubs to have a web presence. At first, the GCC-FFF entertained the idea of giving any of it's affiliated clubs their own webspace, if they so wished. Turns out this isn't a good option because (1) it's quite inflexible and restrictive and (2) the alternatives are so cheap, some even free.

Let's look at what these alternatives are.

Option 1 - Online Space Providers

You can sign up for own space online through services like Blogger, Yahoo, Myspace, Freewebs and others. In my opinion, Blogger is the best solution for clubs, so let's roll with that.

Blogs are the greatest thing of modern times, and so simple a caveman could do it. Blogger.com is owned by Google. First you create a Google account (it's free). Then go to Blogger (it's on the Google menu) and create a blog site in 3 easy steps! Here's an example of a blog I created for the Red Stick Fly Fishers in all of 5 minutes.

<http://rsff.blogspot.com>

You'll notice that all blogger websites have the domain name "xxx.blogspot.com". So if your club name is West Texas Desert Fly Fishers, then you might first try the name "wtddf.blogspot.com". If that's not available, try "wtdfflyfishers.blogspot.com". Of course if your members know how to use Favorites, you could just go with "westtexasdesertflyfishers.blogspot.com".

Blogger has many options that make it extremely flexible. You can add club info, links, polls, and much more to your page. Posts can incorporate images, and you can set the number of posts to display. All posts are archived, but can be deleted either automatically or by the administrator. Blogger also allows multiple users to a site, even multiple admins. Folks can even post

comments to any post, or the admin can restrict or block comments. The configuration even allows you to change the look of the site without losing posts. Since you really can't screw up blogger, I suggest creating one and just playing around in it to test out all the functionality it offers. I might also mention that it's got a great knowledge base and support forum in case you need help.

When you sign up for Google, you get more than just Blogger. You also get other Google tools like Calendar, Documents, Groups, Talk, and much more. These all come in very handy for your blog. For example, you can create a Google Calendar, then:

- 1) click on the right button under "My Calendars" -> "Share this calendar" -> tab "Calendar details" -> "Calendar Address HTML".
- 2) Step 1 creates a popup with a link. Click on the link and you'll go to your calendar page. Copy the url at the top and add it to your Blog's list of links.

You now have a blog with a link to your club's calendar. Adding events with time, location, and details to the club calendar is easy. The location will even allow Google Maps to help someone locate the activity. You can also incorporate other "public" calendars to your individual calendar. For example, the gulfcoastfff.org calendar contains both their own calendar plus a public calendar named "Holidays" which contains Easter, Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, etc.

Blogger does have it's limitations. Some of it's users have found workarounds and you can find what those are simply by going to the "Help Group" link and doing a search. There's even a forum you can search for answers, or pose your question.

It's limited to one page, although you can use links and even some cleverness to work around that. Example: rsff.blogspot.com has links to rsff-fishrepts.blogspot.com.

Blogger falls under the Google limit of 100mb file capacity (storage). That should never be a problem, especially if the images you load up are downsized first to 1028x760 or smaller (as all web images should be). In fact, this also applies to newsletters - images should ALWAYS be downsized first before inserting. An 8 megabyte photo inserted into one column of a 2-column newsletter uses only about 400 pixels of space yet contributes about 600 megabytes to the PDF document.

While you can upload images, you can't upload documents such as PDFs.... directly. However, you can create a Google Groups (name of your club) and upload the PDF into your Google Groups. Here's an example of Red Stick Fly Fishers group:

<http://groups.google.com/group/rsffbr>

You'll notice we uploaded our July newsletter into the group's files. Click on the filename link, and it opens up the newsletter. You can then copy and paste that URL into your Blogger post. And that's how we got the newsletter into our blog!

You can also use Google Groups for board members to communicate, more like a bulletin board. IMO, Google Talk is the much better tool for off-site board meetings or committee discussions. It's basically a live chat room. Everyone logs on at a certain time, and the discussions begin.

Option 2 - A True Website

Blogger is simple to use, and a good starting point for most clubs. But at some point you may want to consider a true website. It'll cost, but a whole lot less than it used to. Typically, a 500mb capacity, 10 gigabyte transfer, web hosting package runs less than \$100 dollars a year. Just putting your newsletter in PDF format and on your site will save you that much or more in one month alone.

First, you need to find a web host... uh, make that a GOOD web host. Forget about the 10 free megabytes your ISP provides you. Believe me (speaking from early experience) someday you'll live to regret that. This is a great site - with user reviews - for locating a web hosting service:

<http://www.webhostingunleashed.com/hosts/best-hosts.php>

Personally, I've done business with HostGator, Doreo, and Bluehost. All are good. The GCC website uses HostGator's Baby package, although it's overkill. The Hatchling package at \$84 a year would've more than sufficed.

Not all web hosts are the same, and depending on what you plan to do with your site, the options they offer for packages become very important. For example, the laflyfish.com site uses Readyhosting, which is a Windows-based host. If you plan to add a forum to your site, there are few forum scripts that run on Windows hosts. That's because most forums use a database called MySQL, which is found on Unix and Linux hosts. I've been asked many times about switching to a more featured forum on laflyfish.com, one that incorporates photos and allows signatures, and the reason I don't is because I'm limited to use of either SQL (different from MySQL) or flat-file scripts, both of which are not common.

When you choose a host, your setup will require you to provide a domain name, ie, www.rsff.org. There is an annual fee for domain names, anywhere from \$5 to \$20. This is one quirk of the internet... you don't have to purchase your domain name through the host you plan to use. For example, the laflyfish.com name is with Network Solutions, while the site itself is with Readyhosting. My recommendation: keep it simple, and get the domain name through your host.

If you get the right host, the most difficult part will be setting up your website the first time. Maintaining it will be a piece of cake. Three things you want to look for are: does it offer MySQL database, does it offer a Control Panel, and does it offer Fantastico. MySQL will be needed if you use Content Management (an easy way to maintain a site - read below), or add your own forum, a photo gallery, or other neat tools. The Control Panel allows you to upload/download files and web pages, setup email addresses, webmail, create your databases for your forum or content management, and much more. Fantastico is a tool that allows you to setup scripts for content management, forums, photo galleries, and more without having to know FTP or PHP or Perl. It's the reason 8-year olds can setup their own web pages.

What is content management? Also known as CMS, it allows a user(s) to maintain a website through an administrative panel. You can create or modify pages, change the website menu, and much more with only a few clicks here and there. Many CMS scripts allow different access levels so that certain users can only update certain pages, or just the content on those pages. Because many companies and big organizations use CMS, most CMS scripts are overkill for use for clubs. The Gulf Coast Council website uses "CMS Made Simple" one of the smaller, user-friendly content management scripts. You can test it out yourself at this website:

<http://www.opensourcecms.com>

Click on Portals, then on CMS Made Simple. Try logging on as an Admin and play around. Every 20 minutes or so, these pages are refreshed, and you'll lose whatever changes or additions you made. Not to mention there might be somebody else playing around as an Admin at the same time. Nonetheless, give it a try. After a few hours, you get the hang of it. If you've been using Notepad, HTML and FTP to maintain a website, you'll say "NEVER AGAIN".

Just like with Blogger, these CMS scripts have strong community support via their forums. If you've got a problem, someone has an answer. If your host has Fantastico and a choice of CMS scripts, then you probably won't even need help with the installation.

Here's the cons to CMS: first, there's a learning curve, and second, it uses a database and that usually means big files. Not big enough to worry about exceeding your allotted storage space or transfer quota each month, but it will make your site slower. It also means if you backup your website to your hard drive, it might take awhile. The gulfcoastfff.org site uses CMS and file transfer is about 294 megabytes per month, while the rsff.org site uses generic HTML pages and file transfer averages 18 megabytes per month (mostly from downloading club newsletters). So the rsff.org site is pretty fast compared to the gulfcoastfff.org site.

CMS isn't for everyone. If you want a simple site, with just a few pages and no forum (read on - there's an option there too!), it makes sense to stick with HTML pages. Create the original pages, or get someone to create the site for you, and add this script to each page:

<http://www.contenteditable.com>

It costs \$49, but you can test it out on their website, and even download it for free and test on your website. The free version will contain a message. The licensed version doesn't show the message. It's a great way to keep an active website.

So which is it.... Blogger or Website (CMS or HTML) ?

Why not some of both!

If you go to the rsff.org or gulfcoastfff.org websites, you'll see that the Calendar page is actually the Google Calendar. Google provides a simple menu to create an line of code that allows you to incorporate the calendar into a website.

Go to the Tippetts page on the gulfcoastfff.org site and you'll see the content of the GCC blog (gulfcoastfff.blogspot.com). This website generates a Javascript code that you put into your web page, based on the RSS feed from your blog:

<http://itde.vccs.edu/rss2js/build.php>

For an explanation of what RSS is, check out this site:

<http://www.whatisrss.com>.

Forums

Even if you decide to use Blogger, you can still have a forum. The trick there is to use a hosted forum, such as Cutecast, then link to it. Check out the gulfcoastfff.org site and you'll see that it uses a hosted forum. No having to upload, install and maintain a forum script on your website. Not to mention that forums are notorious targets for hackers. Nine out of ten websites that get corrupted do so because a hacker got into their forum.

Simply sign up for Cutecast. It's free, they can afford to provide your forum on their server because they contract with Google Ads. That's why you see those little ads at the top of the GCC forum. Once you've created your forum, you can link it to your website or blog.

If you go the CMS route, some CMS scripts include a forum option that installs itself. I've found that you're better off avoiding the built-in forums, and choosing the CMS for page content capability alone (like ease of use). Then either link to a hosted forum, or install an established and secure full-featured forum such as phpbb, vBulletin, miniBB or SMF.

The reason for going to a full-featured forum is because they offer all kinds of options such as multiple boards, photos in posts, multiple administrators, yada, yada, yada. If you don't have knowledge of PHP or Perl, I strongly suggest researching forums, picking a good one, getting

someone to install it for your site, and then leave it alone. Like, forever. I'm convinced the cause for the high suicidal rate is people who have tried to upgrade their forum.

Having Someone Build Your Website

Is not a good idea unless they set it up so that:

- 1) You own the domain name.
- 2) You own the webspace with the hosting company.
- 3) They build it using CMS or include a content editor for each page so it can be easily maintained.
- 4) You have someone in your club vaguely familiar with HTML and FTP.

The last item should not be a problem. You'd be surprised how many 5th graders know HTML and use it to build their own websites. Using FTP with the right software (eg, FTP Commander) is as simple as moving files on your PC directory. Learning about these tools is easy: there are vast numbers of books at the library or bookstore, as well as dozens of websites, covering these topics.

Nearly all websites that fall into total neglect do so because they didn't have one or more of the four points covered. One prominent organization, which shall go unnamed, did not have ownership of their domain name, and it later became a "redirect url" to a porn site. That organization then had to establish a new domain while suffering great embarrassment and a loss of allegiance.