Web Ministering for Your Local Group

-Musings and Suggestions-

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I've been the Web Minister for the Barony of Sternfeld for about two and a half years now, and over the duration, I've picked up a few thoughts on how to do the job that I thought might be helpful for others in the same position. It is my hope that the following series, in five parts, is useful to other Web Ministers, particularly new ones just starting out with the job. If you've got questions or feedback regarding any of the below or just want to talk to another Web Minister, feel free to email me at antonio@danscomputing.com!

Part One: It's Not About The Technology

When I put my name in for consideration for the office, I did it because I work in technology. Compared to what I do for my day job, I thought it would be a breeze to maintain and enhance the website for the local group. I came into the job with some grandiose ideas about automated content management and other complex technology solutions. For at least the first year, I was sure that making it possible for event Event Stewards to modify their own event websites through a web interface would be a great solution. Eventually, I came to a conclusion that took me by surprise: this job is not about technology at all. Being a Web Minister in the SCA is actually a people job.

To know what to post, you have to know what's going on. This requires knowing your local group. When do they meet? Who are the key officers who are running the branch? Who are the Event Stewards for the next several events? You need to spend time with these people. Go to meetings. Take copious notes. If your group has a regular business meeting and you cannot attend, ask a friend to take notes for you. Ideally, your group is already publishing business meeting minutes. If they aren't, I highly encourage you to start taking minutes and posting them on the website. Even if notes are published, it can help to have someone present who thinks about the topics being discussed and notes down specifically those things that will need updated on the website. Some Event Stewards schedule regular staff meetings for event planning - ask to be included in those meetings.

Even if you attend all the meetings there are, there will be things you don't know about that should go on the website. Email and phone Event Stewards and your Seneschal for more information about upcoming events and activities. The Event Stewards are the best source of information on an event, as they are the ones lining up the activities, setting the schedule, wrangling the volunteers, etc. But Event Stewards are frequently very busy people - they have jobs, families, and other commitments. In the chaos of getting everything organized, updating the Web Minister of every little change to the event is just not going to be a priority - you need to reach out to them and regularly remind them of what information you need that you do not have. You need to be persistent, but not annoying. Just as important is being an active listener - when you hear something that you think should be posted, write it down. Ask for clarification or more details if it is needed.

The most important thing is to try and be helpful! If you've got a well-organized event website that has complete information, there are many things you can do to help the event beyond just updating the website. Frequently, a program/schedule for the event is printed. You've already got the information. It's just a simple matter of formatting and organizing it for print. Often the Event Steward prepares this document at the last minute - many an Event Steward would be thankful if you stepped forward and offered to handle the program ahead of time. Likewise, especially for large events, you will probably be the person in your group with the second best knowledge of what is happening at an event. Be a resource and source of encouragement for Event Stewards - and provide early warning of problems as you notice them, especially during the planning process. Although most event information comes from the Event Steward and Department Heads, there is some useful event information you can identify and post on your own without help. Once you know the event location, it is really simple to use a search engine to find nearby food, hotels, attractions and amenities. Although this information is not required, it can be helpful to people visiting from outside the area, and it is extremely well received. Feast menus are commonly posted on event sites, but it is also helpful to provide complete ingredient lists for each dish – we have a lot of members with allergies.

Part Two: The Chronicler Is Your New Best Friend

A good relationship with the Chronicler of your group is critical. There is a substantial amount of overlap between the two offices. Both officers need to collect information about the group and publish it. The main difference is that the Chronicler is working to put together a document that will be static and published periodically, whereas you are publishing a document that is constantly changing. For this reason, it is important that information be flowing freely between you and the Chronicler - it makes both of your jobs easier. When there is a transition of officers, a new event announced, or a change in Baronial Law, it is likely (and advisable) that both you and the Chronicler will be publishing that information. As a good rule of thumb, if you've got new information that could also be published in the newsletter, email a copy of the information to the Chronicler. Ask the Chronicler to do the same thing for you. When the Chronicler sends you the latest issue of the newsletter for publication on the website, publish it promptly.

Both the office of the Chronicler and the office of the Web Minister have their own requirements of what information must be published. Anything outside of that is optional. But where is most appropriate for articles and specific content to be published? My research (see part four for more on this topic) shows that the website is used by a very different set of people than the newsletter, even when the newsletter is published online. The newsletter's primary audience is people who are local to the group and part of it, or else have some previous affiliation with the group. The website's primary audience is people who are not part of the local group or who are new to the SCA. Visitors to the website are usually looking for event information - when is the event, where is the event, how to get there, what activities will there be, and what is the schedule. For that reason, the website should be more focused on providing information about what the group is doing, and the newsletter is generally a better place for articles, stories, art, etc. The ideal mix of content will probably vary by group, but it is a good idea to work with the Chronicler to understand what their goals are and have an established preference for where different types of content are published.

Within the SCA, there is a trend to move away from printed newsletters. As more and more people have broadband access to the internet and are conversant with using it, the need to print large numbers of copies of a group's newsletter is quickly disappearing. In our local group, only a handful of copies are printed each month, and everyone else gets the newsletter from the website. It is critical that the proper Release Forms be completed in a way that allows publication online. The Chronicler will be collecting release forms for any content and pictures being published already. The options for "publish"..."once in an issue of" (Publication Name), "publish"..."electronically", and "publish"..."on a SCA web site for" (Group Name) options should be selected.

Part Three: Everything Old Is New Again

Most groups run the same events annually. Often, an event will have many of the same activities, be hosted at the same location, and have approximately the same schedule year after year. This can work in your favor. I've found organizing my group's website with subfolders for each event website works well. Keeping a separate folder containing all the previous event websites can come in handy. When the same event is being held again, simply take the previous website, make a copy, and put it out on the web. It is important to go through the site carefully and confirm all the details listed carry over. Any information that changes year-to-year can be cleared out. Once you've done this, you can send a list of the information you are missing to the Event Steward. Even before the event link is published officially, sending the event link to the Event Steward can also be helpful to them in the early stages of planning, especially for first-time Event Stewards of an event that has been run before. Once the website only contains correct information for the current year and the Event Steward agrees it can be posted, add links on the group's website and to the event listing on the Kingdom Calendar.

Sometimes an event is held at the site where a previous event of a different type was held. Even in this case, a lot of information can be carried over. Consider - the location, directions, nearby food, hotels, amenities, and map of the site are all the same. For this reason, I recommend event sites be broken into multiple pages by topic. This enables you to drop various pages into an event site from another event very easily without requiring a lot of recoding. It is still important to review the information and confirm it is correct, but carrying over information from other events will save you a lot of time. I also recommend having a detail-oriented friend look at the entire site and make sure there's nothing you missed, such as changing titles, information about dates, etc.

To get into the more technical aspects, controlling the appearance of your site via style sheets as much as possible will make reusing your previous event sites easier - name the style sheet the same thing in each site, and you can make subtle changes to the theming and appearance of all pages in the site without hard coding those changes in the individual pages. There are many good tutorials on how to use style sheets to retheme a website - it is worth checking into and will save you a lot of time and headaches.

Part Four: Some Thoughts on Analytics

For those who are curious about how their website is being used, Google Analytics offers an easy way to find out. The only catch is you have to set it up ahead of time. You simply sign up for an account using

your email address, and then add the tracking code you are given to each page of the site. Ideally, you probably have some sort of navigation, header, or footer that you include on all pages. If you use this element on every page, adding the tracking code to the element means you only have to change it in one place and all pages get tracking automatically. From within the Google Analytics control panel, you can see all kinds of information, sorted and filtered many different ways. You can find out how many unique visitors you had to each page of the site, what country those visitors are visiting from, how many pages a visitor to the site typically views, how long a visitor stays on the site, and even how people are being referred to the site. Setting up analytics is useful, but by no means necessary - much of the information I found from the Sternfeld site will likely apply to your site as well.

So what does Google Analytics tell us? Most commonly, people are coming to the site with a specific destination in mind, and it usually is the website for a specific event. Visitors in the months leading up to an event tend to look at pages that indicate what activities are being held. Closer to the date of the event, more visitors are looking at the schedule and directions to get to the event. One key point to take away from this - event websites should be posted at least three months before the event. People in the SCA appear to like to look at the selection of upcoming events well ahead of time - if you are attempting to promote an event; one of the best ways to do this is by providing a complete event website with as many details as possible as early in the event planning process as is feasible. Looking at geographical location, the largest concentration of visitors are clustered around the area of the branch hosting the event, with numbers tapering off the further away you get. Most visitors who investigate an event are looking at an event within their own Kingdom. Sternfeld is centrally located within the Middle Kingdom, so this may not hold true in other areas, particularly near borders between Kingdoms. If your events are linked on the Kingdom Calendar (you need to add the link to the event yourself via the Kingdom Calendar website), it will be a good source of referrals. You will also see a good amount of referrals from SCA.org and other related websites and message boards. But by far, the largest number of people find the website by Googling the name of your group!

Additionally, individuals using the site to get event info will usually click on a few specific pages, and then leave the site. The behavior of new users on the site is substantially different - they usually browse around and view pages on a wide variety of topics. They are also more frequently local to the group. Many people hear about the SCA from someone, go find SCA.org, and look for information about local groups there. From there, many people will go to the Map of the Midrealm, and find their region and then follow the link on the area they live to the website for the local group. After Google Searches and the Kingdom Calendar, this is the next most common source of web traffic. Having information easily available for new people to know where to find regular meetings, fighter practices, and events is extremely important - it will draw new people to your group.

Part Five: Using Technology to Make Your Life Easier

Previously, I had mentioned that the Web Minister position for a local branch wasn't really about the technology. And to a certain extent, that's true. But that doesn't mean you can't use technology to make your work easier. Like other warranted officers, branch Web Ministers are required to submit quarterly reports - February 15th, May 15th, August 15th, and November 15th of each year. I struggled

to remember to submit my quarterly report on time. Recently, I added it as a recurring appointment on my calendar, which has helped a great deal. As someone who keeps a calendar in my work life, but never in my personal life, it wasn't obvious to me at first to do this - but even if you don't usually use a calendar, this can be very useful. Most calendaring programs can generate email reminders - I've got mine set to pop-up a reminder on my phone 5 days before the report is due.

Although much content on event and group websites is static, there are times where data needs to be regularly updated, which can be time consuming. Consider adopting Google Docs for these cases. A Google Docs spreadsheet can display class listings, allow for a potluck signup sheet, or track volunteer shifts for upcoming events. These spreadsheets can be embedded in your web pages in an iframe very quickly. Any updates to the spreadsheet will immediately show up on the website. In all these examples, the spreadsheet needs to be set to allow anyone who has the link to see the information. In some cases, such as a potluck signup sheet, you'll want to allow anyone with the link to edit the information, to add their own entries. In other cases, like the class listings or volunteer shifts, it is usually better to restrict who can update the spreadsheet to a specific group of people who will be responsible for making updates. Although you may not be scheduling classes or volunteer shifts, it is frequently a good idea for you to have access to modify these spreadsheets as well. Many times you will be asked to make updates by a member of event staff who doesn't have time to update the spreadsheet themselves, so plan for this possibility. It is important that it is clearly stated on the website or in the spreadsheet who to contact to make changes. Having these spreadsheets serves many purposes - people can see what they are committed to doing, Department Heads can see that their area of responsibility is covered, and the Event Steward can easily see where additional volunteers or classes might be needed.

In Sternfeld, we've taken the idea even further. A member of the Barony donated a web domain to our group, and was able to get us setup with Google Apps for Domains (for Nonprofits). This is a free set of tools that can be extremely useful to a group. Most offices have a requirement that certain documentation and emails be kept and passed on when the office changes hands. With Google Apps for Domains, all officers in our group have an email address for official correspondence for their office. When they step down, that account can be very easily passed on to the next person who will hold the office, with history intact. Additionally, storage space on Google Docs is provided, which can be useful for storing the documents generated in the course of business. You can even upload documents that you created using other programs. We've been using this for about a year and have had some decent success. In addition to officers, we also have accounts for all our regular events so that the Event Steward for each event can be emailed and the mail can be collected in one place, outside of the Event Steward's personal account. Administration is relatively quick and easy - it is recommended that you have more than one person administer this solution, however.

In conclusion, I hope this series has made it clear how important communication is to the office of Web Minister. You'll collaborate with many people in your local group – both gathering and sharing information. In addition to being fun, It is a fantastic way for a newer person to get to know the members of their group. Although I've been participating in SCA activities in one form or another for about five years, prior to taking the office, I really didn't know who most people in my local group were.

Every group has different needs, but I hope you are able to take at least a few of the ideas presented and use them in your own group. I welcome feedback, and am glad to assist others in the Kingdom with their web projects – you are encouraged to contact me at antonio@danscomputing.com with questions, ideas, or even just to chat.