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**Title: Is Your Association's Website Smart? (Or Do You Need to Tackle an Upgrade?)**

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Upgrading your association's website is a process that can often be stressful, costly and time-intensive. If you're considering a redesign because you don't like the look and feel of your current website, it's important that you first take a step back. You should determine exactly how you want to engage your members and what services you want to provide to them online. By doing so, you will be in a much better position to tackle the project-and build better member relationships and drive revenue upon its completion.

So, what does a smart website even look like for an association? Every organization is going to have its own vision, but they should all focus on engagement and not just design, content and convenience. Members want to feel connected to your organization, which is why today, it's essential to offer personalized, online functions based on their demographics, behaviors and preferences. Your association also needs to empower members with self-service capabilities on your website. Your audience will feel a closer tie to your organization if they are able to manage their profiles and community relationships themselves. E-commerce functions are another critical component; members should be able to purchase products, register for events and pay dues online at their own convenience.

To give your website an even more personal and interactive feel, you should not only share links to your organization's blog and public social networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, but also offer private social networking capabilities. Tying a private social network directly into your website can help your association maintain its branding, while deepening interactions with members. Private social networks can serve as a venue for them to express ideas and, in turn, gain recognition for their expertise and feel a closer connection to the association. In addition, these communities appeal to younger members who are already active on public social networks, and will show them that your organization is keeping up online.

Finally, you should aim to have a website that is user-friendly and accessible. Keep in mind that your website will not look the same on a mobile device as it will on a PC. It will also appear differently depending on whether members are viewing it on an iPhone, BlackBerry or Android device. By optimizing your website for all of these devices, as well as different browsers, you can ensure that all members have the best possible web experience.

Beyond these traits, it might be helpful for your organization to have discussions with its stakeholders, including staff and board members, about how they use the current

website and what they would like to see come out of the upgrade. Also consider who your association's audiences are (members, volunteers, etc.) and gauge their thoughts

on your website and what they'd like it to offer. Once you've collected feedback, document a list of all of the recommendations—even if you can't immediately fit some of them into the project, you can always go back and make additional updates later on.

And if your association thinks that completing online transactions will lead to further member engagement, you'll have to think again. You need to engage members on your website first in order to drive revenue (whether from member renewals, product sales or event registrations). What's critical to accomplish this is access to your membership data. With this, your website can recognize and gather information on visitors and present tailored pages to them. If your organization's current system doesn't enable you to access the data you need, it might be time to review your membership database system instead of your website. Having end-user data more readily available will enable your association to treat members as individuals, and increase the opportunity for engagement.

You may think it's easier to just upgrade your website and deal with your database later, but the interface for membership management is no longer web-based—it actually is the website. Although updating your database system will require more time and planning in the long run, it's better to get everything taken care of at once instead of having an outdated system that you're just adding onto. If you're not offering personalization, self-service functionality and social networking on your website, it will be difficult to foster relationships that drive revenue growth. By making sure that you also have access to your membership management system's important data, your association will be in a great position to succeed with its website.