

## STAMATS BEST WEB SITE PRACTICES

Over the years, Stamats has gathered the following best practices for developing and maintaining an effective web site from our clients, professionals in the field, and our own experience. In order for your site to meet your goals and provide an engaging user experience, it should:

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**1. Be user-focused, not us-focused.** The purpose of your Web site is not about this technology or that feature. It is not about promoting this program or that event. It is not about telling and selling and yelling. Rather, it is all about building community and creating a relationship between your institution and your most important audiences—prospective students, alumni, donors, and others. Many institutions are likely familiar with—though hopefully not still employing—an antiquated approach based on an inside/outside orientation that stressed what we as higher education institutions wanted others to know—it didn't focus on the needs of the audience. It typically included:

- Who we are
- What we know (the target audience)
- What we want you to know about us
- What we like
- What we believe
- What we want you to do

The best strategy is based on an outside/inside orientation that is more focused on what students and other target audiences want with the primary goal of building a relationship. It should focus on:

- Who you (your audiences) are
- What you know
- What you want us to know
- What you like
- What you believe
- What you want us to do

**2. Meet the needs of your key internal departments and staff.** Your site should be built upon the needs of your key target audiences that are defined as part of your overall strategy. However, you can't forget the needs of internal audiences, including:

- **IT staff:** The site should utilize the latest XHTML, W3C, WCAG, and 508 compliance standards.
- **Network staff:** The site should be optimized for best download times for any user on all platforms.
- **Admissions Vice President:** The site should entice the prospective student to perform a call to action, like visit campus, request more information, or apply online.
- **Admissions Counselor:** The site should be designed so prospective students can find out who we are and what we have to offer easily.
- **Marketing:** The site should clearly represent our brand.
- **Advancement Vice President:** The site should entice alumni and donors to stay connected and volunteer time or money to our institution.
- **Faculty:** The site should not inhibit an academic department's creative freedom.
- **The person who makes web site updates:** The site should be easy to update.

**3. Work from strategy.** In a typical Web development process, we often rush to the execution (creative) stage because we can see it. It's easy to mistake an aesthetically pleasing Web

## Clarify Your Web Strategy

As you think about developing a comprehensive Web strategy, begin by using a basic asset allocation model to explore how your Web initiatives fit into the other marketing investments you have made. Ask yourself:

- Are all our individual marketing investments made with a larger institution-wide marketing strategy in mind?
- Do we have a clear integrated marketing communication plan?

Now that you have established the larger view, focus on your Web site, and ask yourself:

- Are we utilizing our Web site as an effective marketing tool?
- How much do we spend on average for our Web site?
- Are we driving people to the right places on our Web site to encourage action?
- How can we monitor whether or not our Web investment is paying off?

If you invest significant dollars in your Web tactics on a hit-or-miss or periodic basis without a clear strategy, you will likely overspend. A better approach is to budget regular amounts for continual improvement. Until you sort through the answers to these questions, don't spend a dime on your Web. Find someone on your campus or hire a qualified consultant to help you gain some altitude on the problem. Zoom up to 40,000 feet and undertake a marketing audit, or at least a Web site audit, so that you can develop a Web plan that is nestled appropriately in your larger integrated marketing communication plan.

design for an effective one. Digital strategy, however, starts at the 40,000 foot-level. It's all about determining how your mission, vision, and strategic goals will be realized through all of your available digital channels. This means really thinking about the ways in which your Web site will strategically parallel your brand, recruiting, and advancement efforts. In many cases, you'll have to go back to the original research, promise or position development, and communications plans to see how the site aligns with your original goals and vision, integrates with non-digital strategies and tactics, and opens up new possibilities. Perhaps more importantly, it means figuring out how your Web site can provide unique solutions to your biggest challenges.

### 4. Be designed with the user in mind.

Traditional students and adult students look for vastly different information when they visit your Web site. Our *Teens TALK*<sup>®</sup> research indicates that the top two things traditional prospects like to see on a college or university Web site are a description of programs and majors offered and pictures and/or videos of the institution (dorm rooms, campus, activities, etc.). They want to know right away: "Do you have my major and will I fit in?" Potential adult students expect vastly different information, including course schedules, costs to attend, and information about faculty.

5. **Be easy to navigate.** If your users can't find what they want within about three or four clicks, they leave your site. At its most basic, information architecture is all about how Web sites are organized, kind of like the floor plan of a house. One of the biggest mistakes that colleges make is to organize their site like they organize their institution. Most prospective students don't really know what a provost is. However, they are keenly interested in what kinds of students attend your institution, what your dorms look like, and what kind of food is available in the snack bar from midnight to four a.m. on weeknights.

6. **Be intuitive.** Don't use "internal speak" anywhere on your site. Audiences don't know your business lingo and shouldn't have to. The same theory applies to how the site is constructed. Don't create sections based on internal organizational structure. Base sections on easy and intuitive navigation. Make the titles,

buttons, and navigation aids simple and obvious. Use clear naming conventions. Call your majors just that, "curricular areas of investigation." Remember that students, donors, parents, and alumni don't scroll as much as they click. Student expectations are shaped largely by noneducational Web sites like Amazon, Google, and Facebook. These sites stress intuitive navigation and dynamic content.

7. **Be well-written.** Writing for print is not the same as writing for the Web. Site visitors prefer to skim, not read. Be concise and to the point. Break copy into short paragraphs—sometimes two to three sentences long—and use pull quotes, bulleted lists, and easy-to-follow steps... all of it framed by the right heads and subheads. When developing Web sites, some institutions push for visually striking pages, yet leave copy as an afterthought. Usually, they are guided by the belief that a strong color palette and flash features will transform their site into a state-of-the-art Web presence. Unfortunately, they couldn't be more wrong. Before users do anything else on your site, they read it—in fact, reading is the primary activity of any and all Web users. They read page titles, heads, and subheads to get a sense of who you are and what you do, links to determine if you have information they need, and a page or two in running copy that delivers that information. If readers can't understand your site or don't get what they're looking for, they won't stay long and certainly won't come back. Pretty pictures alone won't make a strong first impression—language, and how you use it, may be the best way to give your institution a unique voice.

8. **Focus on Content.** Relevant content is at the center of all Web transactions today. Users look for, talk about, and share content that engages them on a significant level—not on a 'funky chicken' level. Actually, this should be called Subservient Chicken, a viral Web stunt for Burger King that may or may not have actually sold more burgers.

To meet this demand, place content at the center of your web strategy and ask the following questions:

- What content is critical to your site's target audiences?
- What are they not getting currently?
- Where are they, and how do they think?



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- How do they consume content?
- What perception do they have of your institution and your site now?
- What kind of experience are they expecting from your site?
- How should you speak to them? What messages will they respond to?
- What do you want you them to do on your site?
- What do you think they want to do on your site?

**9. Provide an engaging experience.** Web visitors today expect movement, top notch visuals, and videography (even if it's shot by students). A stale, *static site* will stand out (but not in a good way). Incorporate features like video clips, faculty and student profiles, and interactive features. A microsite is an excellent way of providing such an experience. A microsite tends to be an audience—rather than institution—specific site. For example, a college or university might have one site set up just for recruiting. This site would have a different URL than the college site, but it would be linked to the college site.

A microsite has a number of very important benefits. First, it can focus exclusively on the needs of a particular audience. A site that is dedicated to just prospective students—but is linked to the larger Web site—means that content, architecture, and navigation will be more focused, more intuitive, and likely more engaging. Of course, you can also set up microsites for other key audiences like alumni or donors. Second, because it is not a component of the larger university site, it is far less political and time-consuming to change and update. In fact, many microsites can be maintained by the Admissions Office. Third, because they are smaller, they are usually less expensive to develop. And finally, the microsite can easily carry on the graphic identity used by the college's primary recruiting publications or brand campaigns. Microsites can pack an enormous amount of power and can be feature-rich. Perhaps most importantly, they can focus on enabling community between prospective students and the institution.

**10. Be action-oriented.** Provide the ability to apply online, chat with an admissions counselor, schedule a campus visit, etc. This not only gives

students a reason to stick around on your site, it gives you the means to measure what they do when they visit. Users typically come to a Web site with a given set of tasks in mind—be sure to design your site so that it helps them complete those tasks.

**11. Be seamlessly branded.** This is done through content, tone, visuals, and features. Integrate your site messaging with your publications and other marketing communication to achieve a cohesive message. These days, everyone agrees that adding a strong digital component to your marketing mix is a good idea. What no one seems to agree on is the best way to do it. Too often, institutions rush to build exciting features like virtual tours before developing a workable digital strategy. Most of us judge a Web site's effectiveness based on what it looks like and place less importance on what kind of brand experience it delivers. In the long run, providing a strategically-driven brand experience will do more for your institution as a whole than a cool look. This is particularly true for colleges and universities considering Web 2.0 tactics—merely replicating social networks or YouTube sites is no guarantee you'll achieve your marketing goals.

**12. Drive qualified traffic.** Once you build a great site, it doesn't mean visitors will come. Effective sites have a strategy in place to drive qualified traffic. Do search engine marketing, either naturally by optimizing your site for key areas of focus or by paid placement of search results, thus driving users to targeted landing pages for them to take a specific action. Be sure to track who completed a form on a landing page. Follow-up is critical, not only to the users, but also to demonstrate your ROI.

**13. Track results and evaluate ROI.** Don't just collect data: use it to guide the development and evolution of your Web strategy and tactical implementations. Use Web analytics to track clickstream data, where users drop off, number of hits, whether your content is shared with others (RSS feed usage, tags, etc.), and the length of time they watch the video you painstakingly created. The data will help you make solid decisions to perhaps modify your videos, add RSS feed options, add the ability to tag items, move around the order of the information so users digest it faster, etc. The data can also help to prioritize which pages on your site are most popular. Critical conversion

**ABOUT STAMATS, INC.**

Stamats, Inc. is the nation's premier provider of integrated marketing solutions for higher education institutions. Our legacy of integrated, collaborative work includes publications, research, brand marketing, direct marketing, interactive media, planning, consulting, and advertising. Every year, more than 100 colleges and universities trust the team of integrated marketing professionals at Stamats to help them identify, communicate, and keep their institution's brand promises.

pages that aren't frequently visited, especially if they directly correlate to your strategy, should receive the most attention and resources.

Additionally, pages that receive the most traffic should also receive attention.

**14. Be compliant with accessibility standards.** Even if you aren't a public institution, you are at minimum ignoring, and at worst insulting, a potentially large part of your audience when you don't have an accessible site. It's easy to do, and it's the right thing to do.



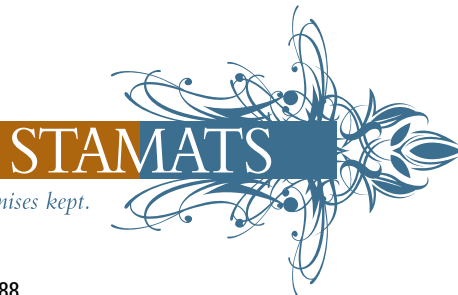
**Fritz McDonald,  
Vice President for Creative Strategy**

Fritz McDonald has more than 20 years experience as a professional writer, editor, and creative director. He earned his bachelor's degree at UCLA, and an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. At Stamats, Fritz has created marketing communications and branding programs for colleges and universities across the U.S. He has written articles on higher education marketing for Admissions Marketing Report, and his creative work has garnished numerous awards, including a CASE Gold Regional, more than 40 ADDYs, and Admissions Marketing Report Gold, Silver, and Bronze awards.



**CJ Cunniff, Interactive Media Manager**

CJ has more than ten years of experience as a programmer in the interactive media field. His specialties include Internet systems, JavaScript/XML programming, and Flash Development. His experience working in other markets including medical, small business and government sites, and customer relationship management Intranet sites help inform the work he completes with higher education clients. He has extensive experience in all facets of interactive marketing and technology and brings a wealth of knowledge and understanding to his position at Stamats.



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