

# Birth of a Chapter Web Site

by Jennifer S. Stephens

*Professional Perspectives* — *Tools and Techniques of the Trade*. The Professional Development Committee encourages members to continue to explore topics after presentations at the local, regional, and national levels. We welcome your comments and article suggestions. Please contact Mary A. Hotchkiss at 206/553-4475 or hotchma@u.washington.edu.

## The Beginning

It all started in February 1997 when Sharon Blackburn invited me to co-present a program with her and Louise Lindsey on the future of law libraries for the 1997 SWALL/AzALL joint meeting. After due consideration, I agreed to help with the program, which would cover new and emerging means to provide library services, including teleconferencing, Internet reference, and e-mail delivery of data.

I mulled over the idea for a few days, then realized that I could create a simple Web site with free tools from America Online (AOL), then post the Web site to my AOL member Web. The Web site would contain law library links, business links, and the program bibliography. After several modifications and e-mail conversations, Lou and Sharon approved of the site and we were ready for the conference.

## The Intranet

I showed my Web site to my manager with the offhanded remark that I was co-presenting a program at the conference and that it was fairly simple to create the site during a few lunch hours. She had me show it to her manager and before I knew what hit me, I was asked to create a Law Department site for the new Intranet, called DresserNet. I was promised a copy of Microsoft FrontPage 97 (which was the standard tool for the Intranet creation) and help from the Dresser Webmaster. After a few dry runs, the site was released to Dresser employees. The site initially included a home page, a list of legal links, a list of business links and a directory of the legal department. (It now contains lists of legal links, federal agencies and courts, the legal department directory, descriptions of individual sections, and the full text of in-house newsletters.) The feedback was generally positive, so I showed the site to Janeen Heath (tax

librarian and tax record manager at Dresser), who had just been selected vice president/president-elect of the Dallas Association of Law Librarians (DALL).

## The Fateful Board Meeting

One morning in August 1997, Sue Johnson, then president of DALL, called me to ask on behalf of the DALL board if I would consider taking on the position as DALL Webmaster and Internet Chair, saying that I had been recommended by the board. After due

consideration, I agreed to take on the task. I already had FrontPage 97 at work and at home for the actual creation of the various pages, so I could work on it on my lunch hour or at home. Janeen had told me that AALL was willing to host Chapter Web sites, so my next step was to call Jason Hinkle, AALL Webmaster. After Jason and I traded phone calls and e-mails for several weeks, I loaded the initial Web site, showed it to the DALL board, made minor corrections, the board approved it, and I rode off into the sunset.

## Bringing Up Baby, or Keeping It Up to Date

Long-winded introductions aside, what does it take to really create and maintain an excellent Chapter (or any organizational) Web site? My personal list:

- support from the Chapter board
- support from the Chapter membership
- a clean presentation (i.e., few graphics)

- frequent updates
- original content, not just links
- a designated Webmaster who is willing to keep the site updated



## Support from the Chapter Board

The first important task of creating a Chapter Web site is obtaining the board's support and approval. If the board of an organization does not feel that a Web site is necessary or important, then the membership probably will not support one either. Obtaining approval means making sure that the board members look at the site before it is public, so it can recommend changes or additions, then bless it as the official Web site. The board may also wish to require certain documents be posted, such as the constitution and bylaws, or that the official Chapter logo be posted on the home page of the Web site. Additionally, obtaining official board approval means that the Webmaster should be kept "in the loop" as far as receiving information and documents that can or should be disseminated through the Web site.

# A Desktop Learning Opportunity

## Support from the Membership

The members of the Chapter or organization must also be supportive of the Web site. For the Web site to be worth the time and effort of the Webmaster, the membership must be willing to use the Web site and to give feedback to the Webmaster. Admittedly, this is much easier when the majority of the membership has Internet access either at the office or at home, and if the hosting site supports feedback forms. (Feedback forms are Web-based forms in which visitors may fill in blanks or check off items, which in turn will be e-mailed to a designated e-mail address.) If the Chapter has regular meetings, it is a good idea to show the new Web site to the membership. I was able to show the DALL Web site to the membership during the October 1997 meeting and received immediate and invaluable feedback during the meeting. (The new, revised Web site will be shown at a DALL meeting in the spring of 1999.) Showing the Web site during a meeting also negates the "I'll look at it later [but later never comes]" factor. As far as advertising the Web site, enlisting the newsletter editor's help is a great idea. Our newsletter has the URL posted on the masthead, so the members can't say that they forgot the URL. (URL stands for Uniform Resource Locator and is also known as the Web address or simply "address." DALL's URL is <http://www.aallnet.org/chapter/dall/>.)

## Clean Presentation

Web sites can easily become bogged down with graphics, flashing icons, music, etc. I personally believe in keeping the graphics to a minimum. What good is a Web site if an individual page takes so long to load that the user clicks the stop button? Currently, the DALL Web site has very few graphics: the official logo, a few dividing lines, an "up" icon and occasional special event pictures. Using just a few graphics not only makes individual pages load faster, but also allows the Webmaster to post more actual content in the allotted server space. Ideally, the site should be

"browser-neutral" (meaning that the pages can be interpreted correctly by Netscape Navigator or Microsoft's Internet Explorer) and not require extensive "plug-ins" unless a link is provided to the site where the plug-in program may be downloaded. ("Plug-ins" are small programs that open a specific type of file, such as a video file, an audio file, or a specific type of document, such as a Portable Document file [pdf].)

While on the discussion of graphics, make sure that the graphics used are legal. There are probably thousands of Web sites with graphics, many of which will allow people to download the graphics for free. Be sure to read any disclaimers, legal notices, or permissions statements before downloading those nifty new bullets or lines. I have used some seasonal graphics in the past and posted the URL of the Web site and their logo, as requested by the Webmaster of the site.

## Frequent Updates

In my mind, there is nothing worse than a beautiful Web site that is not kept up to date. I try to keep the DALL Web site as up to date as possible, with a combination of checking for new or dead links, posting new materials, correcting or adding member names and/or addresses within one business day of notification, and posting the newsletter in HTML format within a business day of receiving it from the editor. It also helps that I am able to directly upload new and updated files, rather than depending on someone else to upload my files.

## Original Content

The DALL Web site has original content in the form of the *DALL Advance Sheet* (DALL's official Chapter newsletter), special reports, photos from special events, and memorials. The special reports and photographs are usually posted for a limited time so as to conserve server space and for practical reasons: who wants to look at party pictures six months later? Original content also helps distinguish our Web site from every other Web site that happens to have a collection of legal-oriented links. Additionally,

posting our own material means we don't have to worry about obtaining reprint permission from the copyright holders.

## Designating a Webmaster

The last point I would like to bring out is designating a Webmaster who is responsible for the entire Chapter Web site. Fortunately, the DALL Web site is small enough for one person to easily update and oversee, which makes it simpler to keep the Web site consistent in "look and feel." A Webmaster may wish to use volunteers to code, write original content, search for new links, etc., but the Webmaster should be responsible for making sure that each page is accurate, fits into the visual scheme of the Web site, has the correct copyright notices, and has consistent navigation tools. In this respect, the Webmaster is acting as the senior editor of the Web site.

## Conclusion

A Chapter Web site can be a wonderful tool to disseminate information among members, potential members, and other interested parties. The Chapter leadership must approve both the idea and the execution of the Web site and declare it as the official Web site. Web sites should be updated on a regular basis to avoid the dead link syndrome and to create a reason for the community to check the site on a regular basis. A Chapter Web site should also have original material, whether it is the official newsletter, special reports, pictures, or even a memorial. There should be a designated Webmaster to maintain the integrity of the Web site in its look and feel, as well as its navigation. Well-designed Web sites do not need an excess of graphics; this can slow the download time of an individual page to a crawl, potentially causing users to click the "stop" button of their browser and never return. Lastly, the Web site should be browser-neutral, without proprietary "plug-ins" or other browser specific coding for equal access.

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