

I-4 Nobody Does It Better:

Leading Government Web Sites

Compelling and User-Friendly Web Site Design Encourages More Online Access to Electronic Legal Information

by Sue Kelleher

Two Web sites reviewed and selected by the AALL Access to Electronic Information Committee served as the foundation for program I-4, "Nobody Does It Better: Leading Government Web Sites." Participants analyzed and evaluated the Web site of the Minnesota State Legislature, winner of 2001 Best Site—State Code, and the Web site of the North Dakota Supreme Court, winner of 2001 Best Site—Judicial. By the end of the session, the audience, myself included, was very impressed by how these two sites improved the delivery of legal information to the public.

Minnesota State Legislature

<http://www.leg.state.mn.us>

Randi Madisen, a reference librarian at the Minnesota Legislative Reference Library, presented the history, goals, costs, benefits and the future of the Minnesota State Legislature Web site, demonstrating the many features that exist for the benefit of the legislators and their constituents.

The site began in 1993 as a gopher. In 1996, the gopher was recreated as a Web site that is revamped about every two years. The goals set forth for the site are straightforward: to provide more and easier access to information, to organize the information, and to standardize the access and the information. The costs associated with the creation and maintenance of the Web site, according to Madisen, were mainly the initial staff time. The multipurpose equipment the site uses is not dedicated solely to the site. Currently, three full-time employees are responsible for maintaining the Minnesota State Legislature site.

The site benefits the public and the state government by providing users with easier access to electronic legal information. Those outside the capitol are able to monitor legislative activities.

Online access to legislation speeds floor proceedings and is a service to the constituency. The Legislative Information Office can print copies of legislation much more quickly and easily. The audio and video features have expanded access even further.

The future of the Minnesota State Legislature site looks bright. There are plans to cultivate a partnership with the National Conference of State Legislatures and its Multi-State Legislative Document Project, develop a Legislative Document Markup Language, and create Document Type Definitions for legislative documents like bills and journals.

North Dakota Supreme Court

<http://www.court.state.nd.us/> or
<http://NDCourts.com>

Dale V. Sandstrom, a justice on the North Dakota Supreme Court who oversees the state's Supreme Court Web site, explored the different aspects of North Dakota Supreme Court Web site. (An overview of the Web site's features is located at <http://www.ndcourts.com/Court/overview.htm>.)

But he spent most of his time discussing the various aspects of dynamic Web site design, including what the public is expecting, why the North Dakota Supreme Court site had been successful, and the hardware and software used. This portion of the PowerPoint presentation can be viewed at <http://www.ndcourts.com/aall>.

Sandstrom enumerated several key points to illustrate why his Web site was successful:

- A deliberate effort to lag behind the cutting-edge technology.
- Use of its own site.
- Not being content, looking to do more, and to do better.
- Understanding the purpose of the Web site.

- Knowing what can be provided that others want or need.
- Listening to site users.

Sandstrom also discussed how someone could determine if a Web site is "lame," including:

- The primary components of the site are a message from the director, the mission statement or an "about us" section.
- A site says "we're constantly improving/expanding/evolving," "stop back often" or "coming soon."
- Links to nowhere.
- "Under construction" signs.
- Anything flashing.
- Graphics under text.
- Incredibly long URLs.

Sandstrom mentioned several key factors to overall Web design:

- Understanding the business and users' needs.
- Understanding the technology.
- Understanding good graphic design.
- Avoiding graphics when possible.
- Keeping in mind that different browsers may treat code differently.
- Making it easy for the user.
- Providing more than one way to get to something.
- Making it logical, intuitive and easy to get to.

The program, while slow-moving at first, ended on a high note. Some truly amazing things are being done in the field of electronic information dissemination. Sometimes we become insulated or anesthetized and need to be reminded that there are as many different ways to present information as there are different people and sources providing that information. No one way is correct. The site developers need to determine what is needed to meet the needs of the target audience.

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