

From Cacophony to Symphony

Community Music School's new website

Research and Planning

Jeff Paterson, APR, took the reins as executive director of Community Music School of Buffalo – a nonprofit organization offering music lessons, classes and ensembles for all ages – in February 2012. The PR veteran quickly began looking into redesigning CMS's stale website.

Eager for data on the subject, Paterson unearthed an assessment tool, available online, to assess the quality of corporate websites. The assessment was based on 50 leading indicators of website quality. Paterson found that CMS's existing site complied with only 49% of the indicators of a good website. Meanwhile, he reviewed other schools' websites to see how CMS's site stacked up and to gather ideas.

Based on his research, Paterson found the CMS site lacking in numerous ways:

- It had not been redesigned since 2003. It was cluttered, text-heavy and visually unappealing – a cacophony of uncoordinated colors, images and copy.
- It was loaded with piles of text, written in long, journalistic form.
- Many of the external links scattered about the home page were outdated and had little to do with CMS.
- Most internal links pointed to non-interactive PDFs instead of actual live web content – which was a nuisance to the reader and a drag on search optimization.
- The site was not compatible with most mobile devices.

There were structural problems, too. When employees wanted to add information to the home page, they had to contact a board member, who would make the changes from his office. Other changes could be made by internal staff, but the user editing interface was so clunky and inflexible that it created a disincentive to add new information; the website was too much trouble to maintain, so it wasn't being used as an integrated component of the institution's marketing communications efforts. The "user unfriendliness" of the hosting company's interface made the monthly \$94 hosting fee that much harder to swallow.

All of this research pointed to an obvious need for total redesign. The goal was to turn a cacophony into a symphony of coordinated colors, images, copy and site structure. In other words, CMS needed to make its website more compelling and effective in telling the School's story.

Paterson identified the following objectives for the redesign:

- Reach at least 85% compliance with key indicators of website quality as identified in the assessment tool described above
- Increase the length of the average visit from just over a minute to 3 minutes or more – enough time to find pertinent information about CMS and its programs

- Make the new site mobile-compatible
- Improve the efficiency of updating the site, from an average time commitment of 12 minutes per post to an average time of 6 minutes
- Cut hosting costs by 50%
- Ensure that the staff had full editing control over website content

Key audiences for the website included current students and parents using the site as an ongoing information resource; parents of children and teens in the Buffalo area, as well as adults interested in music who might want to study at CMS; and CMS staff and teachers who use the site to find out new information about the organization.

The overall approach came into focus when the Gelia advertising agency, with which Paterson had a relationship, agreed to design the shell of a new website at no charge. Gelia would use WordPress to create a theme and overall look for the site. CMS staff would then be responsible for populating the site with content.

The project budget was \$200 to pay for a WordPress theme if needed, as well as any images. The budget also included money for parallel hosting so that the existing site could stay live until the new site was ready. Paterson estimated he would spend about 60 hours of his time on the project over six months – a value of approximately \$2,300.

Execution

Right off the bat, Paterson ran into an obstacle. Before hiring Paterson, the CMS Board of Trustees had discussed a potential website redesign. One trustee had offered to spearhead the process by working with a paid vendor to develop a new site. She had already started writing copy.

Paterson felt strongly that website development and maintenance was a staff function and needed to be directed by him – especially given his extensive background as a professional communicator. At the next board meeting, he convinced the board to relinquish its role and let him take the lead – this became much easier when the board heard that the project would be essentially free. Paterson pledged to incorporate the copy already written by the board member who had volunteered to work on the website, and he kept her engaged by involving her in the development of a sitemap and logic outline for the new site.

While Paterson worked on the site map and structure over the summer, Gelia's creative staff developed a theme and page template, and set them up on WordPress for easy management. Gelia also very helpfully rebuilt CMS's logo. Paterson was planning to have the logo redesigned at a later time, but in the meantime the existing logo

needed some work. It existed only in low-quality electronic files, and the typeface used with it was outdated. Gelia's staff sharpened the logo and updated the logo type to freshen the entire look. This "new old" logo was incorporated into the website, along with images and colors that gave the site a current, sleek and clean look.

In early fall, Paterson used the board member's copy as a starting point for rewriting the website content. Key staff reviewed his draft copy to make sure it was accurate and complete. Revisions were made as needed.

In late fall, with no dedicated marketing communications staff to absorb the project, Paterson began inputting copy and images into the established WordPress template. At Gelia's suggestion, Paterson opened a hosting account with a new and much less expensive provider. This allowed for the new site to be developed in private under a temporary domain name while the existing site remained live at its existing URL.

Day by day, Paterson spent whatever time he could spare to enter content and build out the new website. He consciously wrote for the audiences at hand – a very culturally, linguistically and socioeconomically diverse group of people.

As part of his effort to make the site more compelling and readable, Paterson added tasteful visual elements to enhance the copy. For example, when a user clicked on an instrument name on the "Individual Lessons" page, it would open a small window with a picture of the instrument, the exact cost of lessons, and the locations where students could study that particular instrument. This may not seem advanced – but none of this information was available on the existing site.

Likewise, Paterson seized the opportunity to showcase CMS's impressive network of satellite locations. He created a page with the address and a picture of each satellite, along with clickable maps and directions. Again, this information was not offered on the existing site. He also embedded video content about the school, added a news section and a history section with pictures, and streamlined the format of faculty photos and biographies so they would be consistent.

Along the way, Paterson learned the ins and outs of WordPress – essentially teaching himself based on his knowledge of HTML and previous experience using other web editing interfaces – and found plugins to facilitate additions such as drop-down menus and PayPal donation integration. He also made sure all the content would be mobile-compatible.

By December, the site was built and ready to launch. Unfortunately, CMS ran into a problem with the transfer of the existing domain name to the new hosting company. The transfer failed several times as the old and new hosting companies tried to interact. Unwilling to wait any longer to take the new site live, Paterson decided to keep the new site at its temporary web address with the new hosting company; he was then

able to add a redirect from the old site so visitors would reach the new site. This workaround proved effective until the proper domain transfer actually happened a few weeks later.

Results and Evaluation

CMS achieved all of its stated objectives with a visually appealing, well-written and well-organized website. The site has received great anecdotal feedback from students, donors, trustees, faculty and staff alike. But the evidence of success goes well beyond the anecdotal.

The data also tell the tale:

- Once the new site was live, Paterson used the same 50-question assessment tool he had used to evaluate the old site: the goal was to hit 85% compliance with key indicators for a quality website, and that was the exact score that the new site reached. Paterson is now using the assessment tool to bring the site to 100% compliance.
- The new site has increased the average visit from just over a minute to 3:31.
- The new site is compatible with smart phones, iPads and laptops – and that has been verified through testing on various devices.
- While the average site update used to take 12 minutes, it now takes 5 minutes. And because the site is easy to update, the staff is using it more thoroughly and has fully integrated it into CMS's marketing communications mix.
- The new hosting provider offers a more user-friendly interface – at a considerably lower price. Paterson had hoped to save 50% on hosting costs. The actual annual savings will be 89%, as the monthly hosting price has dropped from \$94 to \$9.95. That equates to a savings of \$1,000 per year, which can be directed toward other marketing communications efforts.
- As expected, the new site design gives internal staff full control over all website content. The staff no longer has to contact anyone outside the building to update the home page.

Paterson has used online readability testing tools to make sure the new website is easy to read. The various tests verify that CMS's site is written at roughly a 6th grade level, down two levels from the previous site.

All of this was accomplished at 93% of the allocated budget.

Meanwhile, the improved logo files became an impetus to create new stationery and refresh print materials. And with newfound confidence in its website, CMS is now moving toward offering web-based registration and billing on the site through a third-party provider, giving the new website more functionality than ever.

Best of all, what was once a cacophony of disorganized online material is now a sophisticated symphony of information – and that would be music to any PR professional's ears.