

Getting More Than You're Giving With Your Website

By Philip Siddons



Today, every one of us benefits from information we receive from the internet. Our questions are answered with amazing speed. People around the world freely share their knowledge and experiences. The institutions you trust provide you with information and services. Websites on our computer screens are like magic bulletin boards – giving us helpful, entertaining and sometimes life-preserving information.

But broadcasting information out is all that websites used to do – at least through the 80's and 90's. Now websites have many more capabilities. We can provide information ourselves, joining in collaboration with the organization hosting the website.

I'm not talking about how some creepy online programs can track and record our information and then turn around and sell our preferences, buying habits and other needs to vendors. I'm thinking of the many ways you and I are able to supply information to the websites hosted by the trust centers with which we are affiliated. Community centers, faith-based organizations, clubs, social gatherings and internet gatherings of people who are committed to common causes.

One of the drawbacks of this new sharing technology is that most people aren't taking advantage of it. Most think that the only place

we can share with others is on *Facebook* and *LinkedIn*. Even with those avenues, there is the looming fear, at least for most of us, that what we share will end up before the eyes of the entire world.

The institution with which you are affiliated has a website. The website is likely used *only* for broadcasting information out. It is like a bulletin board with sticky notes pasted up regarding what your organization can do and needs for itself.

In some cases, this website may even have PayPal buttons, enabling visitors it serves to purchase tickets to a fundraiser or make a contribution. And that's great as far as that goes but there is so much more that can be done in terms of making the website more interactive. More collaborative.

Online forms enable anyone to contribute to the organization from the convenience of their home computer, tablet or smartphone. Here are a few ideas you could be using for your committee, department or team. Standard online form usages include:

1. Signing up to volunteer.
2. Signing up to attend an event
3. Writing questions in order to have the answers posted and available for you and others with the same questions.

More community-building uses of online forms include:

1. Polling members of your group on the most convenient time for your next meeting or getting their opinions and thoughts on an issue with which your group is addressing.
2. Gathering group member ideas on a project before the next meeting. This converts brainstorming time at a meeting into additional time spent on fleshing out the consensus of those ideas in practical project management tasks.
3. Polling those you serve, or hope to serve, to gather their ideas, their true needs and creative suggestions for improvements of the services you provide.

Today, computers are no longer made with just one processor chip. Instead, computing is done with multiple computer processors, all working at the same time on different functions but in a connected way. Hence, *two(or more) heads are better than one.*

Your committee or department could use an online form to receive input from all of its committee members (or clients or potential clients.) Information received is secure and private. The forms take information users provide, encrypts the data and sends it only to the intended person or persons. It is instant and accessible only to the people who need that information.

If using these forms in your organization were free, would you and your committee or department use it? If your website can freely publicize, why not get information from those whom you serve as well?

Here are five steps you can take to use online forms in your organization.

1. Contact your organization's leader or department chair. Find out if your committee or department has the authority and permission to gather information for your group's purposes. If so, the rest is just simple project management.



2. In your work group, discuss what input you want to receive from those you serve and when you want it. It might be simply a signup list for an event or project for which you seek volunteers. It might be an opinion poll or request for suggestions about improving or expanding your services. Whatever information your group wants, arrive at consensus and communicate this to the person who will make your form. If your group is uncertain about the kinds of information a web form can bring you, have the person who will make your forms meet with your group and explain it. There's so much you could receive. It would be a shame if you didn't take advantage of this marvelous technology, simply because you don't know about it.

3. Once your work group has listed the information you want to receive, plot out when the form should appear on your organization's website (or blog) and how long you want the form in place. Some forms, like membership registration forms, stay up perpetually. Other forms are up for only a few weeks. Also, determine the individual(s) who should receive the gathered information and supply their name and email addresses to the person making your form.
4. In determining the time span for the form's use, be sure to plan for the time it will take to create and post the form on your organization's website. It might take a two hours or a week to create your form.
5. After all that, your organization's new form will not serve your purpose unless you promote it. If no one knows where the form is, on your website, nobody will use it to get information to your committee or department. To promote it, regularly get into some of these best-practice habits:
 - On every printed poster, flyer or printed announcement, whenever you want people to complete a form for an event or service, **include the location of the form on your website.** If the solicitation appears on your website itself, include a link to the form. Just as your



organization ALWAYS includes its website address on its printed materials and business cards, do the same every time you advertise an event, project or service that has a related form.

- **In every spoken announcement** about your event or project, include directions about where the form is on your website – even if it is already clearly included in the written announcement. Most of the time, you would simply announce: “the location of the sign-up form is written in your announcement on page 6.”
- **Obviously** not every person has a computer. During oral and in written announcements, **remind these people where the printed versions of the forms are located.**

Two (or 100 heads) are better than one. This week, start using the collaborative brain and commitment power of all of your organization. Online forms are available for you and your group and you don't have to be a geek programmer to prepare one.

If you'd like some guidance in using forms for your organization's website, contact me. [Here is a sample form](#) for you to give me your contact information and get a chance to use an online form in the process. ■