

Writing and Maintaining a VFW Post Website

Telling the story of an organization on the internet. (revised 8/10/21)

BY MARK PERSONS

State VFW organizations are moving to a new progressive look on their websites. Like the national VFW, they are doing this to satisfy the requirement to better inform people about the organization and boost membership. VFW now has a Website Solution Program to help posts get websites with a minimum of effort. Log into VFW.org for details. However, this is only a start. A local commitment to customize and update the site frequently is required.

Your VFW post may be experiencing declining membership. Yes, the old ones die, but there are plenty of potential new vets who COULD become members. The younger crowd doesn't look in a phone book to find a post. They Google their smart phones. If your post is not on the web, then likely they won't find you. Worst yet, they might think you do not exist. Your post NEEDS to be on the web to attract new members and maintain credibility in the community. The good part is that you don't have to be a pro to write a website. I took on the challenge to help my local post in 2015 at age 68.

BrainerdVFW.org Website Goals:

1. Represent Post 1647 in a positive way to members, our community, the world and to prospective members. (Two young vets became members recently because they discovered the website.)
2. Be an information resource for everyone, not just members. A newspaper or other media might need to know more about the post. Brainerd's mayor recently visited our website looking for material for a speech at our post. He found and used a poem written by one of our members.

Writing a Website

Almost anyone can write for the web. As a member of VFW Post 1647, that is my responsibility in the organization. I don't have any formal training, just a desire to do a good job. If a local professional had created the Brainerd VFW website, the initial cost would have been \$1500 to \$3000 for a four-page site plus \$1000 or more per year for maintenance. Actual total cost to my post is \$170/year with no startup charge. That includes web hosting and two domain names. More on that later.

A post website should reflect the "personality" of the organization. Every post web writer should be a member of the post he or she is writing the site for. It takes an insider to understand and convey the essence an organization. An outsider will likely make mistakes and will have little incentive to make it right. Throwing money at a professional web writer is a bad move! Web writing, in my opinion, should be at a position at each VFW post, just like commander and quartermaster. It is important volunteer work.

Content

Good websites are "information resources," not just billboards on the Internet highway. Flashy graphics are no substitute for usable information.

In the case of the Brainerd VFW site, there is only a small image of the post building at the bottom of the home page. The header (top of the home page) has a photo that portrays an almost current day soldier, which I found as a life-size statue in a cemetery. Young veterans will recognize the image as what they looked like in the service. The flags are from Memorial Day ceremonies in my town.

Below is a slide show with images that draw visitor interest. Each one is a clickable link to another part of the website for more information. Remember, the VFW is not about a building, it is an organization of people. Veterans helping veterans. That theme includes duty, honor, country and community.

The street address, phone number and hours of operation need to be easily found. I put those on the footer (bottom), which appears on ALL pages. Remember, you know where the post is, others may not.

I regularly visit other post websites to collect ideas. After all, copying is the highest form of flattery. Everyone knows that a website is an "information resource." It is something like Facebook, only far better organized and complete in telling a story. We advertise free wheelchairs, walkers, canes and bricks for the All-Veterans Memorial in town. Learn about local winners of Patriot's Pen, Voice of Democracy and Scouting awards along with application forms for applying next year. The list goes on.

Don't be a showoff. Visitors go to websites to learn. Making a big splash with flashy graphics and no specifics is a bad choice. It is better to be simple and direct with current information that is compelling. A good website tells the story of a post, its members and what they do. We can hope that a web visitor might become interested enough to join!

Menus

Eight menu categories should be enough. From there you can have drop-down links to additional pages on the site. In my case, they are Home, About, More, Membership, Newsletter, News Stories, Links and Contact Us. Post Officers is under Membership. It shows photos and bios, along with personal comments, so visitors can learn the "character" of those in charge. An added touch is photos from when each one was serving in the military years ago.

The News Stories menu item has a page for each year describing what transpired at post events. Web visitors can see photos and read stories about members having a good time. All of that adds to a positive experience.

Events under More has eleven annual gatherings. That includes a New Year's Day Party, Mid-Winter Conference, Vets on the Hill, Memorial Day, summer picnic, Veterans Day and Santa's visit. Those pages contain stories, photos and specific information that can be linked to the calendar. They promote upcoming events while showing what it was like the year before.

Calendar

I chose to put calendar/upcoming event information on the home page for web visitors to find quickly. That obligates me to update content frequently. I don't like traditional calendars that have a lot of wasted white space and then very little room to put items in small boxes. I just spell out what and when on the home page. There are flu shot dates and times at the local VA clinic along with community events that feature veterans. Then of course, post and auxiliary meeting dates with times. Don't assume a web visitor will figure out that the second Tuesday is when monthly post and auxiliary meetings are held at 7 pm.

The calendar is usually three months long. I delete each item as it becomes outdated. The nice part is that information can be added and subtracted quickly, such as a cancellation because weather.

I keep a separate computer record of annual events that can be added to the calendar. They include history dates such as victory in Europe, victory over Japan in WWII, Patriot's Day on September 11th, election day – get out and vote, the U.S. Air Force was established on September 18, 1947 along with POW/MIA Recognition Day with links to official websites. This adds interest. The list goes on.

Graphics

VFW moved to a new logo in November of 2018. It is the one with two slanted gold lines preceding VFW. I recommend using that in place of the previous Cross of Malta image. It is more progressive and looks good. Use the two slanted gold lines in the website "favorite icon" spot as well.

Photographs

It is easy to do your own photographs using a smart phone. I carry a small point-and-shoot camera in a holster on my belt. For better results, there are plenty of amateur photographers with photo editing software. One of those people, in your post, could provide images for web content and Facebook. That's one more volunteer job. In my case, I do both. It is not difficult; it just takes a little time.

By the way, it is better to throw away poorly done photos than use them on a website. Also, don't use a photograph found on the Internet unless you have permission. The military has some free images at: <https://www.dvidshub.net> Go to content, then images, and filter by branch etc.

On the technical side, most cameras today output images at around 2 mb, which is too large for websites. They should be reduced in byte size to minimize load time to web visitors. I typically make photos 1000 pixels across, so they are about 250 kb or less in size. Simple/free photo editing software can do that for you while improving the appearance with brightness and contrast adjustments along with cropping the edges. I use Adobe Lightroom. It comes with Photoshop and the subscription costs only about \$10/month.

The post should never be obligated to purchase a camera, a computer and software. Those should be owned by the volunteer doing the job.

Links

You'll want to add links to the national VFW, district VFW, your local American Legion and DAV, even if you are not on the best terms with them. Best to persuade the other local organizations to do the same for you in the spirit of cooperation. In the end, the goal is to help veterans. All links to websites should be written so browsers open them in a new window. That still leaves the post site open where it will not be lost by the web visitor. Also, check web links frequently and delete any that are not working.

In the case of the site I write, there are almost no links to commercial sites. Promoting a .com site from a .org site is not always a good idea. I receive requests from sites that offer help to veterans. Looking at their web pages more closely, I often find they are funded by attorneys who offer services, for a fee, to help veterans get compensation from the VA. Let me remind you that county veteran service officers do that for FREE. He or she knows the VA system from the inside and is a much better resource.

Updating – Keep it Current

Every website needs to be updated at least once a month. The site I write gets new information at least weekly. That sometimes happens via a notebook computer while I am on the road. Web visitors quickly catch on if a site has old information, visitors will turn away and it becomes a black eye for the organization involved. When listing upcoming activities, be sure to include the year in the date. May 25th is not enough because it could be May 25th from last year.

Show ways for students to enter the Patriot's Pen and Voice of Democracy competitions. Then, publish the winner names and photographs as soon as parents of the winners agree it is OK. I add their scripts and the actual audio recording for the Voice of Democracy.

Every webmaster needs to check his or her work on multiple browsers, tablets and smart phones to make sure the site looks good on all medium. Also, do not use an “under construction” graphic with a figure digging a hole. A website is always work in progress. Don’t walk away, but instead keep building and improving it...a little at a time. I’ve been doing that since 2015 and there is no end. The site has evolved and improved since its humble beginnings. It started with four pages and evolved to over sixty. This is a better plan than the big splash with a new design followed by little or no action.

I am always on the lookout for bits of wisdom that can be added to the site. One part of my routine is to read what I wrote a day or a week earlier and then revise the wording for better clarity. It just gets better with time.

Web Visitors

You might wonder if anyone sees the website. In my community of only 18,000 people, the Brainerd VFW website has about 130 unique visitors each week. The term unique means I am counted only once, even when doing numerous checks and edits every week. The Minnesota state high school baseball tournament was held in Brainerd in 2019. I posted scores daily. The web visitor count soared to over 950 that week. That means a lot of people were, in essence, peering in the front door to see what the post is like. A website is a great opportunity to show the organization in a good light.

Social Media

Websites are the brick and mortar of an Internet presence. Use Facebook and as much other social media as possible. Avoid badly done photos, poor grammar, four-letter words, and writing for shock value. You want to put a good face on your post.

Quality

A website doesn’t need to be fancy, but it should be worth the time for someone to view it. Make a good impression. Tell the organization’s story in a logical and convincing way. The <http://brainerdvfw.org> site is not the best, but it strives to show heart to the world.

The Nuts and Bolts of it:

Domain Name

This is the address by which a website is found on the Internet. Non-commercial service clubs should have a .org web address. The national VFW is vfw.org, Minnesota state VFW is vfwmn.org. A .com name implies it is a commercial organization. Using a .com name could put the organization’s not-for-profit tax status in question. There is one exception, as described below.

I write the <http://brainerdvfw.org> website. That address and <http://brainerdvfw.com> are owned by the Brainerd VFW post. It is a defensive move to prevent a scammer from grabbing the name and using it for ill purposes. Most Americans automatically think of a website as ending in .com because they use that suffix often. Domain mapping, otherwise known as web address forwarding, is the answer. A .com name can automatically direct web browsers to a .org website. It is seamless for web visitors typing in the .com name. With that, the Brainerd VFW website is always seen as a .org.

I registered each domain name through <http://paireddomains.com> at \$65 for five years, which is \$13/year. There are some less expensive domain name registrars, but they sometimes come with strings attached. Don’t economize, it is not much money.

The names I registered are not owned by me, but rather the Brainerd VFW post. My name is listed as administrator. I gave the post quartermaster full documentation, including username and password, for accessing the accounts. If I die or leave, the post has full ownership and ability to continue updating the site. **This is extremely important.** There are numerous examples of

commercial and non-commercial organizations that don't own their domain names and it has caused serious problems!

Short domain names are the best. For instance, the Mahlem-Hanson post 1647 I belong to is not easy to remember or even spell. <http://brainerdvfmahlemhansonpost1647.org> is way too long and difficult for people to remember. Also, there is almost no good reason to use a number in a web name. Delete the "malemhansenpost1647" and you've got it. The domain name should be the way you tell others about the post in a normal conversation. Hence, Brainerdvfw.org/ Also, you don't want a website address that is a portion of a larger website. An example would be brainerdvfw.wordpress.com. Keep it short and simple!

Web Writing Tools

There are many computer applications for writing websites. A relatively easy one is <http://weebly.com>. There is no software on the webmaster's computer. The writing is all cloud based. I chose that for BrainerdVFW.org for simplicity's sake. Almost any non-technical person can make it work. Text boxes, photos, and other elements are "drag and drop" from a menu onto a page. That includes a search box, which is very convenient for web visitors. The Weebly theme I picked keeps menu choices at the top of the screen, regardless of how far a web visitor has scrolled down a page.

The latest web editors, like Weebly, fix a compatibility problem between desktop, tablets and smart phone viewing. They are "mobile friendly." The same information is displayed differently, but in the best way, which means the site fills each screen and there are no horizontal scroll bars. Web visitors do not do well scrolling left and right. Vertical scrolling is fine.

Other web writing tools are found at: <http://wix.com>, <https://www.sitebuilder.com>, <https://webflow.com>, <https://www.godaddy.com>, <https://wordpress.com>, <http://www.adobe.com/products/dreamweaver.html>, <https://webflow.com> along with many more.

I no longer recommend software that writes basic HTML (Hyper Text Markup Language), the language of the Internet. Newer site builders, like Weebly as described above, use the latest version of HTML and look great on ALL screens.

Web Hosting

There are thousands of website servers across the world. Weebly.com hosts my post's site for \$144/year. That includes the online web writing tools. Going cheaper doesn't make sense when the price is small to begin with. Lesser priced, or free servers, often put advertising on customer websites and may have reliability problems. Not a good choice!

Backups

Best to keep a backup of the site in case there is a server crash. Weebly has that. I download a copy once every month. Also, there should be a second person who is familiar with the writing. He or she needs to be capable of taking over if the webmaster cannot continue updating the site. The transition will be much easier when that happens.

VFW Says

Our national VFW published a guide on public relations. It says, "Your post's website is a window into the post's character. In a day of "instant access," people demand that information on websites be current. Otherwise, you could lose credibility in your community. If you keep your members informed, they will feel connected to the organization and take pride in its accomplishments."

In Summary

As mentioned, the VFW Website Solution Program is an option for posts needing a website. Log into VFW.org for details. However, writing a website is not a one-shot deal. It requires a constant local commitment to keep the site relevant and current. Remember, a website that is not up to

date is worse than not having one at all. In the end, is the website something that everyone would feel good going to?

Writing for the web can be fun and challenging. I started at age 68, back in 2015. Yes, it took a few days to wrap my mind around how this works. It is a hobby and a volunteer contribution to my post. That is proof that almost anyone can do it. I do not have all the answers, just guidelines to help web writers in their quest to do the right thing.

Proof

The BrainerdVFW.org website was given the #1 award for best Department/Minnesota post website in 2020 and 2021. It goes to show that a good website can be built and maintained by a non-professional volunteer.

A funny thing happened in October 2020. The Brainerd VFW received a Voice of Democracy entry from California and another one from Maryland. A Google search for Voice of Democracy put the Brainerd VFW as sixth down the list in the entire country. That is the power of a website.

Member View

Yvette Steriker retired in 2011 after 20 years in the U.S. Air Force, including a year in Korea. As a master sergeant, her specialty was radiation health physics. Yvette is a life member of the VFW and joined the Brainerd post in 2016. She enjoys being a part of the community and likes the military connection at the VFW. Yvette recently moved to another state but checks the Brainerd VFW website for updates and reads the monthly newsletter online, saving printing and postage costs.

About the Author

Mark Persons did not want to go into the military, but he knew it was a young man's obligation to serve our country. Mark joined the U. S. Army in 1966 and learned electronic repair of the AN-MPQ-4 and MPQ-10 Weapons Support Radars at Ft. Monmouth, NJ. Then it was off to Vietnam where he became Sergeant in Charge of an avionics (aviation electronics) repair shop. The mission was to keep the OV-1 Mohawk, a high-tech surveillance aircraft, flying. This two-passenger turbo-prop airplane carried cameras, infra-red cameras and side-looking airborne radar to spot enemy movements in the jungles. He came back with noticeably reduced hearing, but that didn't stop him from leading a productive life as a radio broadcast engineer. Mark is proud to be an active life member of VFW Post 1647 in Brainerd, Minnesota, writing BrainerdVFW.org



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