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Owning and Writing a Website for a VFW Post

Putting a website together is like writing a book. It is telling a story.

Your VFW post may be experiencing declining membership. Yes, the old ones die, but there are plenty of potential new vets out there who COULD become members. The younger crowd doesn't look in a phone book to find a post. They go online. If your post is not there, then they likely can't find you. Your post NEEDS to be on the web to attract new members.

BrainerdVFW.org Website Goals:

1. Represent Post 1647 in a positive way to the community, to the world and to prospective members. (2 new young vets were attributed to the website shortly after it was put up.)
2. Be an information resource for everyone, not just members.

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. A .com name implies it is a commercial organization. Using such a .com name could put the organization's tax status in jeopardy. 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 was 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 so often. Domain mapping the .com name can automatically port that address to the .org website. It is seamless and the website is always seen as a .org.

I registered the domain names through <http://pairdomains.com> at \$65 for five years, which is \$13/year. That is for each name. There are some less expensive domain name registrars, but they sometimes come with strings attached.

The names I registered are not owned by me, but rather the Brainerd VFW post. My name is listed as a contact person. I gave the post full documentation including username and password for accessing the account. If I die or leave, the post still has full ownership. **This is extremely important.** There are countless 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, <http://brainerdvfwpost1647.org> is way too long and difficult for people to remember. There is almost no good reason to use a number in a web name. Delete the "post1647" and you've got it. Likewise, 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.

Writing a Website

If a professional web writer had created the Brainerd VFW website, the cost would have been \$2000 or more plus \$1200 per year maintenance. Actual cost to the Brainerd post is \$170/year with no upfront cost. That includes owning two domain names. The work is strictly volunteer.

The web writer should be a member of the post he or she is writing the site for. It takes an insider to understand what is going on in the organization. An outsider will likely make mistakes and will have little incentive to make it right. No non-commercial organization, in my opinion, should pay anyone to write its website. This is inside volunteer work. Throwing money at it is a bad plan! Web writing, in my opinion, should be at a position at each VFW post, just like commander and quartermaster.

Web Writing Tools

There are many computer applications for writing websites. A relatively easy one is <http://weebly.com>. I chose that for brainerdvfw.org. Text boxes, photos, and other elements are dragged from a menu on the left and dropped onto a page. Weebly hosts the site for just \$144/year.

The latest web editors fix a compatibility problem between desktop and smart phone viewing so it is mobile friendly. The same information is displayed in the best way on each screen. Weebly is one of them.

Other web writing tools are found at: <http://wix.com>, <https://www.sitebuilder.com/>, <http://www.adobe.com/products/dreamweaver.html> and <https://wordpress.com>. Microsoft has Expression Web. It is free, but you'll need to find a web server to host the site. Many web servers are no cost because the user accepts advertising that gets pasted on their site. Not a good move!

Web Hosting

This is the second part of the website equation. There are thousands of website servers in the world. I chose <http://pair.com> for other web projects because they are reliable and cost less than \$10/month. They host over 100,000 websites including Best Buy. Going cheaper doesn't make much sense when the price is small to begin with. Lesser priced or free servers often put advertising on customer websites. Not a good choice! This is not an issue with Weebly because they host their paid sites.

Content

Websites are **information resources** for anyone and everyone looking to find out about the organization. That includes the news media. Web visitors should learn the post is there to help veterans and be of service to the community. In the case of the Brainerd VFW site, there is only a small image of the post building at the bottom. The header (top of the home page) portrays veterans and Americanism. I also chose to put upcoming event information on the home page for web visitors to find quickly. That obligates me to change content frequently. Then there are pages showing club officers, along with their bios, so people can learn about the character of the organization. There is a page with stories of recent events. A nice part of the web is you can add and subtract on a site at will.

Website links

You'll want to add links to the national VFW, state VFW, your local American Legion and DAV. Those links should be coded so browsers open a new window when going there. That leaves your site still open where it will not be lost.

In the case of the VFW site I write, there are no links to commercial sites. Promoting a .com site from a .org site is not a great idea. I have received many requests from sites that offer help to veterans for cancer etc. Looking at their web pages more closely, I found they have attorneys who offer their services for a fee to help veterans get compensation from the VA. Let me remind you

that your county veteran service officer does 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 usually gets new information weekly. Web visitors quickly catch on if a site has old information and it can become 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.

Social Media

A website is just part of an Internet presence. Use [Facebook](#) and as much other social media as possible. Avoid poor grammar, four-letter words, and writing for shock value. You want to put a good face on your post.

Quality

An organization needs to connect with visitors. A website doesn't need to be fancy, but it should be worth the time for someone to view it. Make a good first impression. Tell the organization's story in a logical and convincing way. The <http://brainerdvfw.org> site that I write is not the best, it is a work in progress that strives to show heart to the world. Content is the key.

Any 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.

Photographs

There are plenty of amateur photographers out there with photo editing software. One of those people in your post could provide photographs for web content. That's one more volunteer job. In my case, I do both. Also, don't use a photograph from the Internet unless you have permission.

In Summary

Writing a website is not a one-shot deal. It requires a constant commitment to keep a site relevant and up to date. Remember, a website that is not up to date is worse than not having one at all.

Writing for the web can be fun and challenging. If I can do it at age 71, then anyone can. It is a hobby for me and a contribution to the Brainerd VFW post. I don't have all the answers, just guidelines to help web writers in their quest to do the right thing.

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