

Electronic Communications:

Where Websites Fit In

March 1999

**covering
Kids**

A National Health Access
Initiative for Low-Income,
Uninsured Children

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About Covering Kids

Covering Kids is a national health access initiative for low-income, uninsured children. The program was made possible by a \$47 million grant from The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation of Princeton, New Jersey, and is designed to help states and local communities increase the number of eligible children who benefit from health insurance coverage programs by: designing and conducting outreach programs that identify and enroll eligible children into Medicaid and other coverage programs; simplifying the enrollment processes; and coordinating existing coverage programs for low-income children. Covering Kids receives direction and technical support from the Southern Institute on Children and Families, located in Columbia, South Carolina.

The views expressed in this report are those of the authors, and no official endorsement by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is intended or should be inferred.

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Electronic Communications

These days, many people think of the World Wide Web when they think of “electronic communications.” There are other types of electronic communications that have been around for years and years, and some still are extremely reliable. The advantages of conventional methods of electronic communication, such as sending faxes, is that many people feel more comfortable with them because they are familiar. Website communication for some is very new. Other electronic communications vehicles include:

- Telephone or Facsimile (fax) Machine
- E-Mail
- Public Access Television and Radio
- Internet/World Wide Web

Other Communications Choices

Communicating organizations have a variety of options when it comes to communications, and while electronic communications are the wave of the future, several older, tried-and-true methods still get results. They include:

- Traditional Correspondence
- News Releases
- Brochures and Flyers
- Print Publications and Newsletters
- Paid Advertising (broadcast, print, outdoor, etc.)
- Earned Media
- Word-of-Mouth Networking

Website Development

Background

The Internet was developed nearly a quarter of a century ago by the U.S. Department of Defense to serve as a nationwide computer network that would continue to function even if a large portion of it were destroyed in a nuclear war or natural disaster. Initially the Internet was characterized by unattractive text and codes without pictures or sounds. In 1989, the World Wide Web emerged, featuring color, sound, graphics, animation, video, interactivity and links that enable rapid travel from site to site. The “Web” consists of millions upon millions of individual pages that are linked to still more pages. A collection of related pages is called a website. Each website has

a home page, which usually is the first page you see when visiting the site and operates much like a table of contents in a printed book.

Compared to the cost of traditional full-color printing, the cost of website publishing is surprisingly low. Companies that previously could not afford even low-budget printed materials now have beautiful, full-color web sites that contain much more information than they could possibly fit into a brochure or annual report. Unlike print publications, websites can be updated almost instantaneously without the time and expense of reprinting. Distribution is no longer a problem because the website is as widely accessible as a standard-equipped computer. Another advantage to establishing an online presence is that websites can accommodate immediate customer response via e-mail and other electronically submitted forms.

As a marketing tool, the World Wide Web has the potential to reach billions of homes across the globe. In the United States alone, an estimated 47 million people use the Web to obtain information and communicate with others. According to IBM, 146 countries currently have at least some level of Internet access. And the numbers are increasing every day.

To Be or Not To Be Online: Questions to Consider

- How much will a website cost (through development, implementation and maintenance phases)?
- Do I have adequate money in my budget for a website?
- Can I (and should I) transfer money from my print budget toward the development of a website?
- How will I use the website (research, posting of information)?
- Who will be my target audience?
- Should I outsource the site or maintain it in-house?
- What will I need to purchase?
 - Equipment
 - Software
 - Training
 - Technical support
- Who on my staff will be responsible for the site?
- How much time will be required to maintain a website?

Retaining a Consultant

Internet and website consulting is a rapidly growing field. Some consultants operate on a freelance basis, while others work for companies that specialize in the full range of Internet services from site design to hosting. If you are starting from scratch and have no recommendations from colleagues to follow-up on, the Yellow Pages are always a reliable place to start. Look under "Internet Services" and "Website Design" to obtain the names and phone numbers of potential consultants. Try to investigate at least three candidates before contracting with one. Some things to consider:

- Look at the consultant's reputation and obtain client references.
- Review samples of the consultant's work and accompanying results.
- Consider the consultant's personality and whether you have compatible habits and styles.
- Consider the consultant's geographic scope (local, regional or national).
- Ask colleagues for their recommendations.
- Lay out a timetable for the project.
- Learn how the consultant is compensated (flat rate versus hourly or daily charge).
- Consider how you will evaluate results of the project.

Getting Established

Review What's Out There

Spend some time exploring the Internet and look at a variety of websites, particularly those of related organizations. Note those qualities you want to emulate and begin to formulate an idea about how you want to organize your website and how you want it to look. Think about links you want to establish with other organizations. By linking websites of many organizations with common missions to your site, you can create a clearinghouse of information that not only introduces visitors to the many groups involved in the issue but also provides access to information on those groups and the pertinent issues.

Purchase Necessary Equipment and Software

A website can be developed and maintained regardless of whether your computer platform is PC-based or Mac-based. There are software packages available for either environment. Some popular commercial website software packages include: Adobe PageMill, Claris Home Page and GoLive CyberStudio (being used by *Covering Kids*). Prices run the gamut from \$40 up to \$400. A consultant can provide guidance on what package might be best for you.

Designate a Designer

Unless you or someone on your staff has experience in website design, it's probably best to retain a professional designer, at least for the initial development phase of your site. A good designer can create a design template that will give your page a clean, consistent appearance with browser-safe colors. Consistency from page to page is extremely important because a visitor should never have to wonder whether linked pages belong to the same site. Repetition in design among web pages works much like a corporate logo works to sustain a company's image on stationery and publications. Professional designers also are

trained to ensure that a site is easy and efficient to navigate for the broadest spectrum of users. Once a template has been created, a staff member can be trained to maintain the site in-house.

Find a Site Host

A website must be posted on a computer server that's connected to the Internet 24 hours a day. An Internet service provider or any other hosting service can arrange to "host" your site files. The cost of hosting a website varies, so shop around. Website storage is usually provided by the megabyte — one provider might charge \$25 a month for 5 megabytes and \$10 for each additional megabyte. Another provider might charge \$50 a month for the same amount of space. There also may be some peripheral costs, so be sure to discuss any other expenses that might arise. Ask about obtaining "ftp (file transfer protocol) privileges" to upload and update your site directly from your computer. If you do not get this, you will have to send website page files as e-mail attachments for the host to upload for you. There is nothing wrong with this arrangement, but it can cost you time. If you are able to upload yourself via ftp (without the aid of a middleman), your website updates appear instantaneously.

Decide on a Domain Name and Register Your Site

A company called InterNIC keeps a master list of all the domain names in the world and issues new ones. It costs about \$100 to register your domain name for two years, and the name is renewable every two years after that.

The domain name that you choose is important because it becomes your online signature. It should reflect the identity of your organization and, if possible, be brief and easy to remember. *Covering Kids* was fortunate that the name www.coveringkids.org had not already been registered. The domain name is specific and easy to remember.

The suffix of the domain name in the website address hints at the nature of the web site. For example, ".com" stands for commercial entities. Other common suffixes include: .org, for organizations (such as *Covering Kids*); .edu for educational institutions; .gov for government agencies; and .net for network organizations. The webmaster where your site is hosted can check to ascertain whether the domain name you want is already taken. If it isn't, the webmaster or service provider probably will charge you a small fee (generally \$25 to \$50) to register your requested domain name with InterNIC, which in turn usually will send an invoice for its fee.

Secure Training and Technical Support

The web authoring software referenced above accommodates all manner of user, from the inexperienced novice to the highly advanced professional. Web sites are full of pages of text with coded messages telling a browser what to do. The acronym HTML stands for hypertext markup language, but it need not strike fear into the hearts of newcomers. Some die-hard “techie” still may prefer to laboriously write the HTML coding themselves. The newest web authoring applications automatically write HTML code for you while you are typing text and inserting graphics in much the same way you do with word processing applications.

Because of these newer, easier applications, one need not have a degree in computer programming or even a passing familiarity with HTML to maintain a website. It certainly doesn't hurt to know the basics of HTML, but chances are that you will never need it. If you want to look at the coding to troubleshoot some kind of problem, you can view and manipulate the coding under a special option you select within the application.

For the most part, once your site is designed, uploaded and running online, a staff member can make updates and upload new pages after only a few hours of training. Very small offices usually receive technical support from their Internet service provider, or site host, for an agreed-upon fee. Larger organizations may have full-time technicians on staff devoted entirely to providing computer and Internet technical support.

Website Features to Consider

Search Capability

Many people doing research on the Internet appreciate the ability to search your site for information or publications on a specific topic or even a specific date. This saves them time and guesswork in figuring out where on your site you have posted certain kinds of information. If you want your site to be searchable, discuss the options with your technical support person or computer website consultant. A variety of software applications support search functions.

Bulletin Board

A bulletin board is an open computer system that members can dial into and send e-mail, join discussion groups or download files. Since the 1970s, bulletin boards have provided a means for home users to get online.

Chat Room

Chatting is a form of interactive online communication that enables typed conversations to occur in real-time over the Internet. A chat room is a location on the Internet where such conversations take place. When participating in a chat discussion, your messages are instantaneously relayed to other members in the chat room while other members' messages are instantaneously relayed to you.

Listserv

A listserv is an automated mailing list distribution system that maintains a list of e-mail addresses to be used for mass e-mailing. Subscribing and unsubscribing to the list is accomplished by sending a properly formatted e-mail message to the listserver. Some listservs are designed to facilitate discussion among its subscribers, and all messages generated on the listserv go to all subscribers. Subsequently, any responses, in turn, are shared with all subscribers as well.

Contributor Form or Suggestion Box

Most website software enables the designer to develop a form with open fields in which users can provide information and return it to the webmaster via e-mail. Forms can serve many purposes, from a questionnaire to a suggestion box to an order form.

PDF Documents

PDF stands for Portable Document Format. Special software, called Adobe Acrobat, is needed to create PDF documents. Acrobat costs about \$100 and is easy to use. Simply open the document in the application in which it was created, open your "Chooser" menu and select "Acrobat PDF Writer" as your "printer" and "print" the document just as if you were printing to your printer. Acrobat will "copy" the document in PDF and automatically store it on your desktop or hard drive. Converted PDF documents retain the look and layout of original documents and can be viewed on any type of computer. Readers use Acrobat viewers to open the PDF documents. You can distribute Acrobat Reader, one of the Acrobat viewers, without charge from the manufacturer.

How the Internet Can Help Achieve the Goals of *Covering Kids*

Perhaps the most obvious role of the Internet as a whole (and a website in particular) is as a tool for conducting outreach, but the Internet can play a larger role as regards the three goals of the *Covering Kids* initiative:

Outreach

Having a presence on the World Wide Web and being properly registered with the major search engines will ensure that people who are actively looking on the Internet for information about children's health coverage will be directed to your website. Once they visit your site, it is important that they can navigate easily from page to page and come away with useful information and, more important, a next step or action step. In some cases, this step may be to dial a toll-free phone number, to click a link to a related site or even to download an application form.

Your website also can be a vehicle of indirect outreach via peripheral sources, which may come in the form of child advocates, social workers or even academic researchers who obtain information from your site and, in turn, share the information with others in a secondhand way. It's much like the term "pass-along value" that marketers use in referring to the total scope and reach of print publications that are shared with others.

Simplification

In locations where it is permissible and where required verification has been significantly reduced, grantee websites can play a role in simplifying the application process. Several states are exploring the option of allowing electronic application for CHIP and Medicaid. When and where this possibility becomes reality, your website can feature electronic application or provide links to local human services websites that offer electronic application so that the consumer can apply almost instantaneously without handling a single piece of paper. The applicant would simply complete a series of questions on a secure (encrypted) form and e-mail it to the appropriate office, which would determine eligibility and notify the applicant of his petition's disposition (approved or denied). It is likely that such a scenario would take significantly less time from start to finish than conventional procedures. Electronic application would only be feasible in situations where face-to-face interviews are not required. In addition, confidentiality and Internet security concerns will have to be resolved to ensure that applicant information is truly secure.

Coordination

The government originally conceived of the Internet as a resilient network of computers enabling links and information sharing among databases nationwide and, eventually, worldwide. As such, the Internet has succeeded on a broad scale. It's all about multilateral access to information. On a smaller scale, the Internet also can facilitate coordination among health coverage programs at the state level by potentially enabling public/birth records, food stamp, school lunch, TANF, CHIP and Medicaid program databases to link and communicate with one another and automatically identify and refer potential enrollees to programs for which they are likely to be eligible. As with simplification (above) confidentiality and Internet

security concerns have prevented significant activity in this direction, and several groups are working to address these issues.

Helpful Publications

The Non-Designer's Web Book by Robin Williams and John Tollett, Peachpit Press, Berkeley, California, 1998 (about \$24; varies by bookseller).

Getting Hits by Don Sellers, Peachpit Press, Berkeley, California, 1998 (about \$19; varies by bookseller).

Strategic Communications for Nonprofit Organizations by Janel M. Radtke, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York, 1998 (about \$40; varies by bookseller).

Beginner's Guide to HTML by the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA), available online at the following case-sensitive address:
www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/General/Internet/WWW/HTMLPrimerPrintable.html.

The RWJF Internet Handbook: Basic, Specialized, Health Care and Grant Seeking Resources on the World Wide Web by Michelle M. Volesko, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, May 1998.