

## MaineHousing Communications: Website

MaineHousing was among the first state housing finance agencies to create a website when it developed its original design in 1996. The site, which was selected as the best new website in the state by the Maine Public Relations Council, served the agency well for a number of years.

A decade later, in 2006 MaineHousing decided to create a new website with a goal of providing clear, concise, timely, and user friendly information on the agency's priorities, programs, and services. The site would have better access and services and serve as a central point for anyone seeking information about housing in Maine, especially affordable housing.

The original website was badly outdated. The design was behind the times, it was difficult to navigate, and it was unpopular with many MaineHousing staff, customers, and partners. More important, no one had the full time responsibility for maintaining and managing the ever-growing site on a day-to-day basis. Consequently, needed information sometimes was not posted quickly while other information remained on the site after it lost relevance.

The initial meeting on the new website was in October, 2006. Among the key decisions:

- MaineHousing would hire a “webmaster” with experience in operating and designing a website.
- MaineHousing would use its marketing firm to help with the initial look and feel of the site, but most of the design work and all of the website material and data would be developed internally under the guidance of a website management team consisting of members of both the Information Services and Communications departments.
- It would be necessary to build staff buy-in from the bottom up to ensure that the website was not only redesigned, but also kept up to date so it would remain used and useful over time.

To develop staff buy-in, the website management team, with support from MaineHousing's director, formed an inter-departmental team with representatives from each MaineHousing production department. Members of the departmental team were asked to advise on site design and content. They also would become responsible for updating and maintaining content related to their Department's programs and activities.

The website management team would meet frequently for regular updates with the webmaster to monitor ongoing site development and establish critical timelines.

The teams reviewed many state housing finance agency websites, as well as websites of some of the most creative private companies. They surveyed internal staff and external customers and partners to discover what these groups felt should be on the new website and how it should differ from the old one. They also conducted research to make certain the new site was accessible for persons with disabilities and met all other legal requirements.

The review of other websites and results from the surveys enabled the web teams to establish some broad parameters for the new site look and feel, such as:

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- A front page that quickly identifies what MaineHousing is and what kind of information resides on the site
- A design simple enough so that users can easily find what they want within two to three clicks, and is easy to navigate
- A site organized by subject area
- A site where information can be accessed in several different ways
- A site that serves as an effective portal to other web based applications that the agency and its partners use, and with quick links to other sites
- A content with multiple audiences in mind
- A look that is compatible with other MaineHousing communications products

These parameters helped shape the site, including one key decision to have two index pages for accessing the site. The primary homepage is designed for consumers, and leads users to consumer-orientated pages that provide relevant information for people looking for MaineHousing programs and services. A second index page, which can be accessed from the primary homepage, is designed for MaineHousing's business partners, such as developers, owners of assisted apartments, lenders that take part in the first-time homebuyer program, Community Action Agencies, and others.

Creating separate paths for these two groups of users allows easier access to relevant material. Consumers are offered program information that is designed to help them understand what assistance is available, whether they are eligible and how they would apply. Partners, on the other hand, are provided more direct access to manuals, forms, and the technology portals they use in their business with MaineHousing. Consumers looking for specific program information can find it without being confused by inadvertently looking at information designed for business partners.

At the same time that MaineHousing internal teams were determining the broad outline of the site look and content, the agency's marketing partners were developing the concept design and the agency was in the process of hiring a webmaster.

MaineHousing's new webmaster started work in February of 2007, about the same time as the initial design was presented by MaineHousing's marketing firm.

The website management team's first tasks were to create a site map for both the "partner" and "consumer" sides of the website, and to work with the internal committees in modifying the initial design submitted by the marketing agency.

The work was in two phases. Phase one was updating the existing website data and converting it to the new design. Phase two was incorporating some of the changes that were recommended by external stakeholders after they reviewed an off-line version of the website. These changes were sent back to the marketing firm for a second, revised design.

The revised design was again modified so that the menu could run down the left hand side of the page, rather than across the top, but in general the design was incorporated as the new "look."

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The webmaster, working with the internal teams, continued to modify the design and content as the agency approached its July launch date. Significant later modifications included adding a search engine and creating a box to highlight new or timely programs and initiatives. For example, the current interest rate for the agency's First Home Program (first-time homebuyer loans) is listed there with a quick link to the section of the website with additional information on the program.

The new website was shown and explained to the entire MaineHousing staff in early June, then released internally only for staff comments in mid-month. The agency Director's final "go" decision was June 27<sup>th</sup>, and the site went live June 29<sup>th</sup>.

Going on line is not the end of the process, but a beginning. MaineHousing has continued to expand and improve the site for more than a year now, and those efforts continue.

Ongoing major initiatives include making the Partner's section friendlier and more compatible with the consumer section, and altering the home page to increase the emphasis on MaineHousing's green initiatives. The webmaster is adding controls that will allow more members of the staff to update their particular sections on their own (with proper safeguards), so that the burden of keeping the site up-to-date does not fall entirely on one person.

The site features the same design elements and same colors that MaineHousing uses in its brochures and other marketing materials. There is a universal design throughout the site so that facets such as the menu are found in the same place on every page. There are the same fonts, structure, and layout throughout the site, making it easier for users to find what they are looking for.

Most of the considerable amount of information on the website is database bound. This enables one change in the database to change the information wherever it appears in the website, rather than making individual changes. This feature not only makes it easier to update; it increases accuracy and reduces errors.

The new website design is proving effective in reaching the intended audiences. For example, tracking programs indicate the most "hit" portions of the website currently are the sections on the first-time homebuyer program and the heating assistance program, two of the top issues among Maine people.

The new website demonstrates an effective use of resources, since most of it was developed internally with only minimal expenses for outside design work, and achieves MaineHousing's strategic objective of being the site most often used when people seek information about housing in Maine. Recently the site is averaging approximately 19,000 hits a month.