

“Large organizations do a lot right in running their websites. However, they also face some unique challenges that can lead to painful mistakes. Resolving these problems means accepting that mistakes have been made, overcoming internal politics and changing the way you control your brand. Doing so will give you a significant competitive advantage and allow your Web strategy to become more effective over the long term.”

Paul Boag, author of the *Website Owners Manual*

Brief Description of Reinventing vhda.com

Competing with millions of websites—as every organization is—the Virginia Housing Development Authority (VHDA) wanted and needed our site to be as informative and user friendly as possible for consumers as well as a wide variety of affordable housing stakeholders. The original vhda.com was launched in 1990, and by 2008 it was obvious to most within the authority that our website had:

- A significant amount of content that wasn't current.
- Navigation that wasn't easy to use.
- An outdated design that was inconsistent and noncompliant with Section 508 accessibility standards.
- Serious issues with workflow approval, auditing, records management and accessibility enforcement that were rooted in the original Content Management System (CMS).
- Unsecured and hard to maintain application architecture that increased development time and non-productivity of valuable resources. Because maintainability was lacking, making changes often resulted in interruptions to the business and made integration with other applications difficult.
- Applications that had been developed without adherence to standards. When combined with inadequate security, this presented an increased risk of business interruption via unauthorized access to critical VHDA systems.

Why/When it was undertaken

Reinventing vhda.com to bring it into the 21st century—and support VHDA's strategic priority to strengthen our long-term ability to provide affordable housing—took a year-long web modernization initiative that kicked-off in January of 2009. The new site went live in January 2010.

What VHDA has accomplished

The new vhda.com successfully incorporates our branding—including the authority's unique “look and feel” we established in our print materials—to provide continuity in tone and message. Other important goals achieved by reinventing our website include:

- Organizing content by VHDA customer group to make the site more intuitive for all visitors.
- Meeting federal accessibility standards set forth under Section 508 compliance.
- Optimizing metadata for external and internal search engines.
- Developing content governance to maximize quality, consistency and accountability, and simplify updates.
- Implementing the Microsoft Office SharePoint Server Content Management System (CMS) and migrating all content to it.
- Establishing design and content standards acceptable to the marketing department and other key stakeholders.

Why it is Meritorious and Meets NCSHA Award Judging Criteria

Innovative

Our warm “happy community” illustration, conversational yet professional writing tone, text-based site map and other improvements provide a website that boldly communicates our approachability, reinforces our trustworthiness and actively engages visitors. Our new user-friendly site also helps dispel the misperception that because VHDA is a quasi-government agency we are aloof, old-fashioned and difficult to work with.

In fact, Virginia-based website consultant Anne Moss Rogers recently noted in her blog that the “VHDA site is a refreshing change. The brand comes across as friendly—something you rarely see with a government logo. Also well done was how they wrested multiple elements and compartmentalized them so neatly. The navigation is practical, easy to use and makes sense. The menus on government sites rarely do and are often quite circuitous. Now if we could get all the other government agencies to create their sites this way.”

Replicable

Any HFA can significantly improve its website, even without reinventing it, by incorporating incremental updates that increase usability and ease of navigation. This can include making headlines meaningful, navigation consistent from page to page, footers functional and forms accessible by all visitors.

Responds to an important state housing need

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that some 1,491,965 Virginians are disabled. VHDA recognizes the need for affordable, accessible housing options that promote independence and dignity for people with disabilities. To meet our strategic goal to increase affordable housing opportunities for people with disabilities, we work with stakeholders statewide to provide information and resources to make it possible for individuals to live successfully in the community of their choice.

To further this strategic outreach, VHDA wanted to become 100 percent compliant with Section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Section 508 requires that electronic information technology take into account the needs of all end users—including those who are visually impaired or lack fine motor control. In Virginia, Executive Branch agencies must meet the accessibility requirements contained in the Code of Virginia, and the Virginia Information Technology Accessibility Standard is adopted from the Guide to the Section 508 Standards for Electronic and Information Technology of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Although VHDA is not legally required to be Section 508 compliant, we recognized that accessible website design would enhance our Internet business and communications performance, as well as strengthen our ability to reach out to Virginians with disabilities. Our reinvented website is now **100 percent** Section 508 compliant, thanks to closely detailed work from our website design team and the site audit assessment software that helped identify areas for improvement. In addition, as part of reinventing vhda.com, our web team established processes to maintain full compliance in the future as vhda.com is updated.

Demonstrates measurable benefits to HFA targeted customers

VHDA's new website benefits our targeted customers, as demonstrated by Google Analytics showing that a significant number of:

- Stakeholder sites (108), including local housing and redevelopment agencies and lenders, have established inbound links to our site.
- Homeowners (29,188 between April 5 and July 5, 2010) have visited our Make a Payment page.

Proven track record of success in the marketplace

Using Google Analytics and comparing April 5 –July 5, 2010 with the same 90-day period in 2009, showed improved content, functionality and meta-tagging have reduced our bounce rate from 59 percent to 34 percent. (Bounce is defined as the percentage of initial visitors to a site who "bounce" away to a different site, rather than continue on to other pages within the same site.) In addition, other Google Analytics prove the site's success with a:

- 300% increase in page views (579,624 up from 144,869).
- 111% increase in average time on site (3:15 minutes up from 1:32 minutes).
- 40% increase in visits (146,228 up from 104,464).

(see attachment sent separately)

Benefits that outweigh the costs

In addition to increased traffic to our site, including more new visits, the benefits of reinventing vhda.com outweighed the costs by:

- Eliminating the inadequate security of outdated applications, which had presented an increased risk of business interruption via unauthorized access to critical VHDA systems.
- More easily maintaining application architecture to decrease development time and increase the productivity of valuable ITS resources. Greatly improved maintainability means that making changes are less likely to result in interruptions to the business, and integration with other applications is much simpler.

Demonstrates effective use of resources

Teamwork and intensive collaboration among VHDA's business units, ITS, and the marketing department made the most of a resource we already had, our website, by reinventing it to be more effective, efficient and user friendly. Effective use of these resources resulted in the new website meeting its strategic objective, as well as the "go live" deadline of January 15, 2010. In addition, the new Content Management System simplified the process for making content updates, enabling non-ITS staff to author and approve copy. This allows ITS resources to concentrate on other aspects of our information technology.

Effectively employs partnerships

Comparing April 5 –July 5, 2010 with the same 90-day period in 2009, Google Analytics shows an approximate 100 percent increase in page views by VHDA's lending partners, including:

- 20,974 views of our Business Partners/Tools for Lenders page.
- 15,294 views of our Business Partners/Lenders home page.

In addition to our new site providing outbound links to HUD, the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, and other websites helpful to our stakeholders, many affordable housing advocates have added inbound links to vhda.com, including most of the state's local housing and redevelopment agencies. Because we have content that is truly helpful to our customers, these housing sites have linked to vhda.com on their own.

Achieves strategic objectives

The primary strategic objective for reinventing our website was to enable VHDA to reach more low- and moderate-income Virginians with vital information concerning quality, affordable housing opportunities. The goals required to achieve this objective included:

- Making navigation more intuitive.
- Simplifying terminology.
- Organizing information logically to make it easier to find.
- Reviewing and revising content.
- Improving security structure.

Equally important was our strategic objective to maximize website accessibility by implementing the standards for accessible electronic and information technology as specified by Section 508 of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act. As mentioned previously, VHDA's site is 100 percent compliant with the Act, a very notable achievement as very few websites manage to reach full compliance.

Conclusion

In 1990, we launched our parent website, www.vhda.com. Since then, we've built websites for our Hispanic customers and our Homeownership classes—including tools enabling first-time homebuyers to take classes online. Our page views have grown significantly over time. And we gained tremendous credibility and interest from within the affordable housing industry. To support all of our initiatives and prepare a foundation for expansion and future growth into other online communities (RSS feeds and blogs), VHDA needed to reinvent our website. So we did.

Attachments: Screen shots of vhda.com pages, VHDA YouTube page, blogger review, and Google Analytics.