

# Harnessing Technology for Website Redesign

**Rhode Island Housing**

Management Innovation: Technology

**HFA Staff Contact**

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## OVERVIEW

In just one year since its launch, RIHousing's new website has completely transformed how we drive business to our programs, communicate with our customers, partners and the general public, and has helped us achieve a number of strategic objectives. The new website reinforces our agency messaging of RIHousing as an innovator and a nimble and responsive statewide agency. With a focus on utilizing technology to improve functionality and the user experience, we've been able to reduce agency costs, create a fully ADA compliant and bilingual site, integrate a host of communications lead generation technologies to broaden our reach and improve agency operations.

## IT WAS TIME

20 years was too long. Too long of being held back by a website we had long outgrown, that had become burdensome, was supported by a patchwork of multiple microsites and CMS platforms that undermined our efforts to attract and retain customers and reduce operational costs. It was time for a new platform to expand our agency reach, drive business, improve customer service, match our innovation, and support our new brand. Following years of neglect, our main rihousing.com website had devolved into a complicated, tangled mess that was having a negative impact on our programs, our outreach and communications efforts and the agency's bottom line.

## IT GETS WORSE

In response to the systemic issues with our main website, over the last decade we had launched a series of microsites to support new programs and efforts....meaning we **began 2019 maintaining a total of four separate websites and an employee intranet**. This situation was compounded by the fact that the different sites relied on outdated technology and different CMS platforms, one of which was controlled by an outside vendor, requiring us to submit requests and pay for any major updates to the site. Agency efforts were hampered as multiple outdated websites no longer met our needs or the needs of our customers, partners or the general public. The website was severely limiting the agency's reach, undermining programs, and preventing us from achieving a number of critical goals.

From an operational perspective, the old sites greatly limited expansion of programs or integration of new technologies. The former rihousing.com website required additional expenses to update and limited our hiring options in both our IT and Communications departments as the CMS platforms were outdated and not commonly used.

## RESPONSE TO MANAGEMENT CHALLENGE

In strategic planning discussions and operational meetings, a common theme resonated throughout: *we needed 21<sup>st</sup> century technology to develop a 21<sup>st</sup> century website*. We fully committed to beginning a new decade with a website that fully exploited new and emerging technologies. We made the decision to build a completely brand-new web platform, fully integrating all our programs under one website, vs an update or 'band-aid' approach to any of our existing sites. At the start of 2019, after more than a year of planning, brainstorming sessions with each department in the agency, and meetings with IT to select a CMS for the website that would integrate with other online application platforms, we were ready.

## INNOVATIVE AND REPLICABLE

With the selection of WordPress as our web CMS, we've been able to easily integrate a number of plug-ins and complimentary technologies to support the site now and allow for future expansion. Using WordPress' 'Divi' building platform, we were able to **design, build and launch our new site in 4**

**months.** Divi allowed us to build the site using a single platform, instead of managing dozens of different themes, made it easier and more efficient to build and update the site, and streamlined the design process. 'Divi,' an add-on tool within Wordpress, allows in-house staff to create, add and edit the website with minimal training or specific knowledge of coding language such as HTML / CCS. In-house staff have been able to develop skillsets and expertise to utilize the CMS themselves, in order to effectively integrate Calls to Action, Sliders, Galleries, Contact Builder Forms, and other website elements not featured on our previous sites.

## **OUTCOMES**

**We have one, fully integrated website that is completely focused on the site visitor, drives business and partnerships, effectively promotes RIHousing programs, products and our role in housing matters statewide and reflects our brand identity. With a completely new site, new CMS platform and technologies, users can find what they are looking for, be informed and engaged, and we can drive business, expand our lead generation efforts, support staff and take on the challenges of the new decade.**

Since its launch, we've received high marks and numerous compliments on the new website from both outside users and members of our staff. In less than one year, **we've increased web traffic by 33% with almost 1 million-page views on the new site.** A look at site analytics shows a significant increase in engagement throughout the site. And we've received hundreds of inquires via our consultation and information forms, allowing us to turn site visitors into RIHousing customers.

## **BENEFITS OUTWEIGH COSTS**

We've been able to utilize this technology to create a site that reflects our brand, meets our strategic goals, reduces time to update and expand the site, and streamlines processes, while being affordable, and easily customizable. Selecting WordPress and the Divi theme also meant we could easily integrate with an array of platforms and other technological solutions within the site.

The only external support needed beyond existing staffing capacity was an outside vendor to develop the initial framework for the site, which was then handed off to staff to update, add new pages and content, integrate new tools and technologies on our own. The platform has allowed the agency to fully realize our dreams for the site.

## **ACHIEVING AGENCY GOALS**

If it were just about the design and functionality, our new website would still be worthy. But we've been able to achieve a number of critical agency goals with the site:

1. *Convert Site Visitors into Customers/Lead Generation*
  - a. Multiple Program Inquiry Forms utilize HubSpot and allow us to collect questions from site visitors about specific programs, which flow directly to program staff and allow us to be more responsive to potential customers. To date, we've had 1,500+ interactions with our inquiry forms and 420+ inquiries via three program inquiry forms from homebuyers, homeowners, contractors and others looking to participate in our programs. Inquiries via our Loan Center form provide loan originators with prospective mortgage customers
  - b. We've greatly expanded our contact lists with multiple sign-up tools, providing another means to contact and engage with potential customers
  - c. "Tracking" site visitors and convert to customers: when someone adds their email/contact somewhere on our site, we can "track" them based on any other actions they take, allowing us

to how they came into the site, what interactions they take to monitor lead lifecycles on our website through Hubspot.

- d. We implemented cookies through HubSpot, which allows us to gather user cookie information, which in turn improves our reporting and provides a clearer picture of a lead's lifecycle on our website.
2. *Improved Customer Service*
  - a. The ability to respond to inquiries via multiple online tools allows us to quickly respond to customer inquiries
  - b. Automated emails ensure responsive and professional communications can quickly supply additional information and pathways for users
  - c. Ability to position ourselves as responsive and helpful
3. *Improved Communications and Consistent Branding*
  - a. Integration of rich content for site visitors includes videos, dynamic and engaging graphics, online applications and forms, streamlined site map with easy-to-find documents and information
  - b. Utilization of array of new outreach tools: chatbots, automatic emails, inquiry forms, etc. expands our communications efforts, requiring less time and staffing
  - c. Theme customization, powerful Visual Builder, customization tools, as well as huge selection of design settings has allowed us to fully promote and integrate our visual branding and identity to the site: it is uniquely RIHousing
4. *Connectivity to Online Platforms and Databases*
  - a. Seamless integration and connectivity to: Online Preapproval, New Lender SharePoint site, SmartSheet applications, online wait list, and contact management system
5. *Reduced Reliance on Outside Vendors*
  - a. Ease-of-use tools and features (Quick page creation, builder settings and controls) allow even new users to this CMS platform to quickly get up to speed.
  - b. In-house staff have developed the tools and skillsets they need to fully manage and maintain the site.

## **ACHIEVE MEASURABLE IMPROVEMENTS**

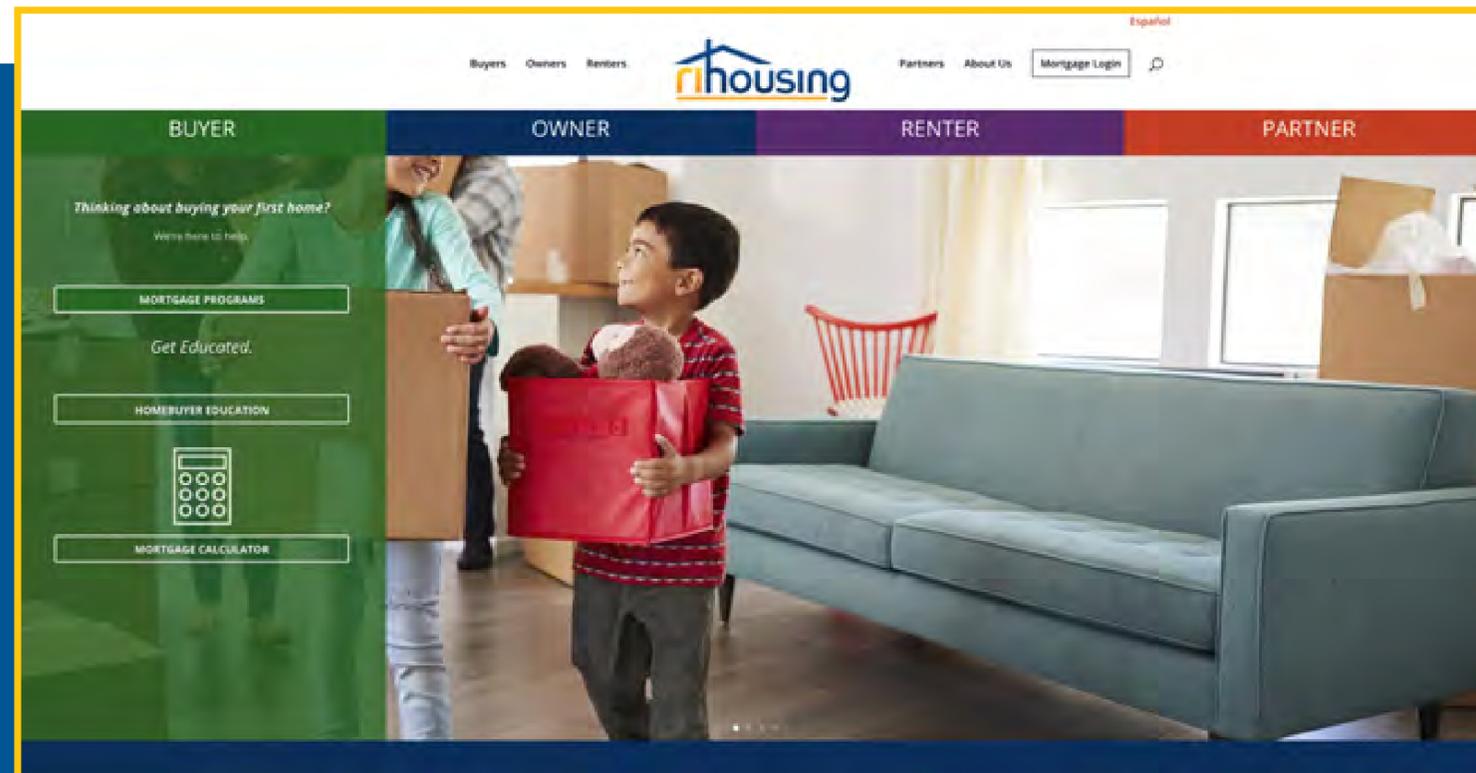
A look at site analytics shows that 80% of site visitors are "new" visitors and the overwhelming percentage of visitors are between the ages of 25-34, a demographic that expects user-friendly, mobile-responsive platforms. Tracking site visitor behavior shows that users are getting the information they need faster and easier than ever before. As the site allows us to integrate with other online tools and platforms, we've been able to move our customers to online applications and form submissions, greatly reducing staff time and allowing for improved response time for applicants. Site visitors can apply to get pre-approved for a mortgage, sign up for the HCVP wait list, access available REO properties, sign up for alerts and updates on our programs, and get answers to their questions almost immediately. An added bonus: the new CMS platform allowed us to build our online annual report, integrated into the site and using only in-house Communications!

Previously, with multiple websites and platforms, separate analytic reports had to be pulled for each website, meaning more time was spent pulling even the most minimal of stats on visitorship, mapping, and user experiences vs spending time reflecting on the stats themselves. With a single website and CMS platform, all analytics are available in one place; less time spent pulling data allows for more time to plan, improve and make decisions based on the data. Significantly, we've assured the longevity of our website as both Wordpress and the Divi plug-in are commonly used website building tools, meaning future staffing decisions will not be limited due to use of obscure/outdated tools and platforms.

# 2019 RIHOUSING WEBSITE UPDATE



Before

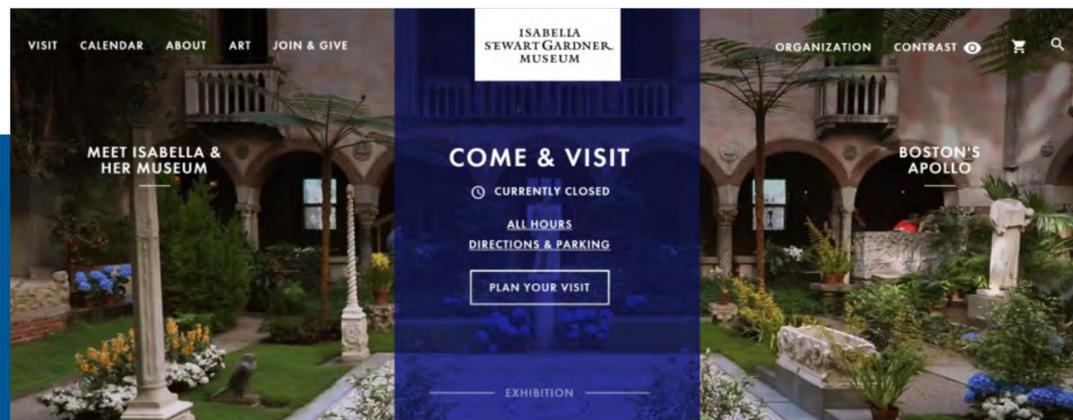


After

- ✓ Reinforces the brand
- ✓ User friendly
- ✓ Fully Responsive
- ✓ More flexibility + scalability

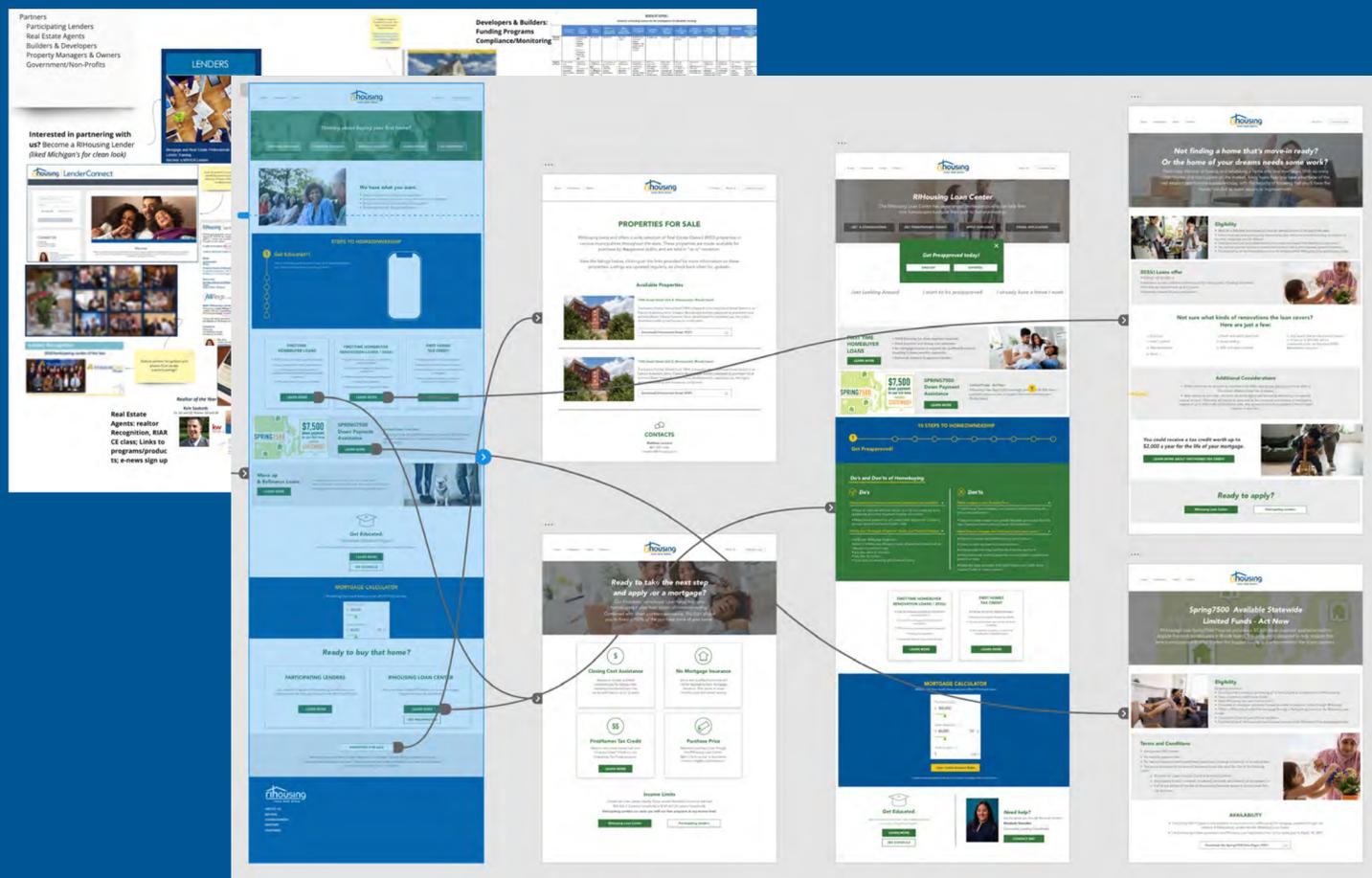
[RIHousing.com](http://RIHousing.com)

# Pre-planning



## Think outside the box.

While we explored a number of HFA websites, we also looked at sites maintained by hospitals, universities and arts programming. Inspiration for our Home Page came from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.



## User Experience

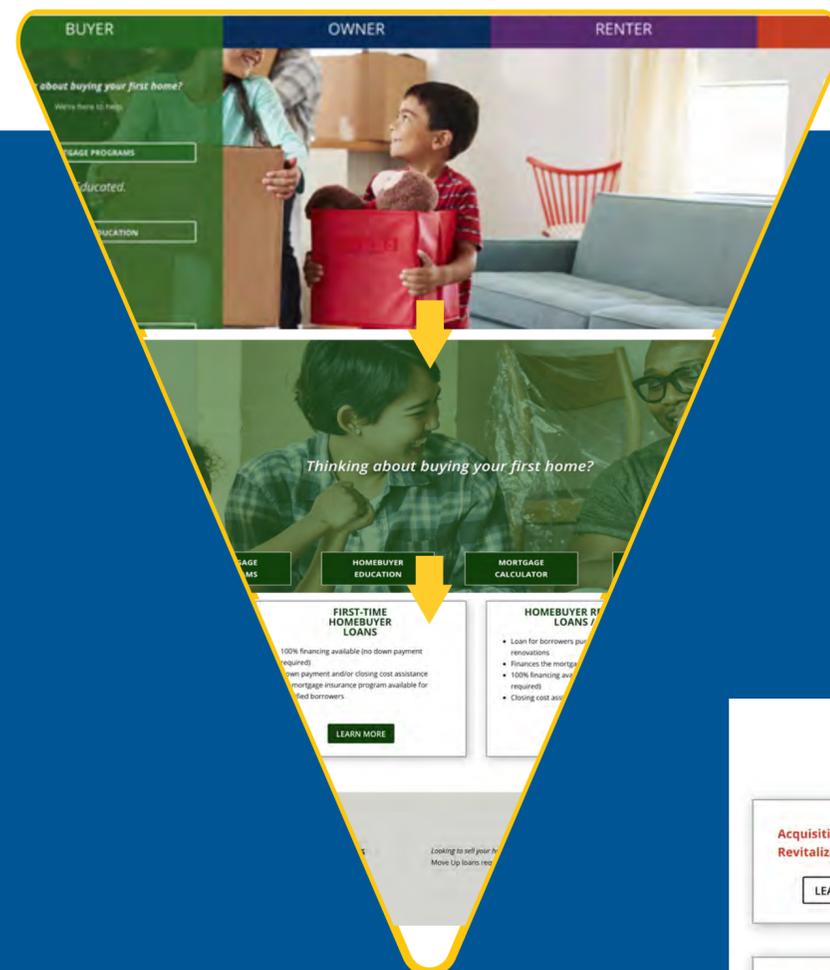
- Home Page defined by primary audiences: Buyers, Owners, Renters, and Partners to create clear paths for information
- Improved navigation ensures majority of information available within two clicks
- Fully ADA compliant and mobile responsive!



## New Technology

- New platform (WordPress) and integrations (HubSpot, SmartSheet) allow for lead generation, contact management, and customer engagement
- More features and expansive plugins library to meet current and future needs - Zapier + Smartsheet
- More flexibility and scalability
- Simple, quicker updates-allowing agency to be nimble and responsive

# Clarity through design



## Clear Pathways for Site Visitors

RIHousing serves a diverse group of customers, including: general public, first-time homebuyers, renters, developers, property owners, and non-profit organizations.

- The home page is single-paged and provides a clear pathway for site visitors to self-identify as one of our primary audiences: Buyers, Owners, Renters or Partners
- Once selected, clear pathways lead visitors to programs, products and services for each category

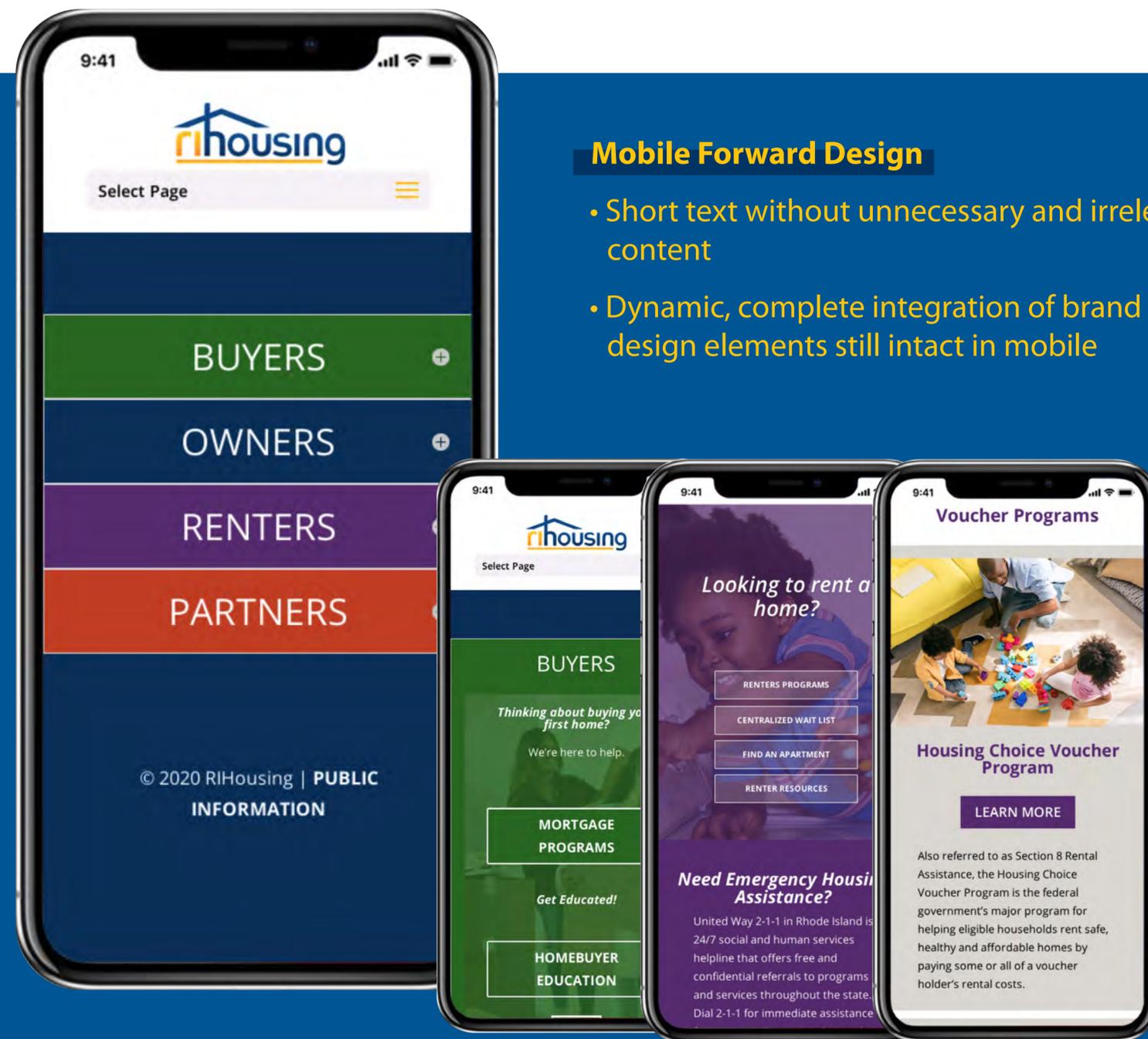


## Organize Information

New website presents information in an easily digestible, distinguishable and understandable format: **Toggles and Cards.**

- Toggles keep the website clean and easy to understand without overwhelming users. Toggles also categorize information so visitors can focus on what they need.
- Cards help show clear organizational structure and also emphasize important information

# Fully responsive



## Mobile Forward Design

- Short text without unnecessary and irrelevant content
- Dynamic, complete integration of brand and design elements still intact in mobile

## Improved features

Previous website included a link to a third-party site for a Mortgage Calculator, meaning site visitors would leave our website.

Our new site incorporates a mobile-friendly Mortgage Calculator within the site itself.

### MORTGAGE CALCULATOR

Wondering how much home you can afford? Find out now.

Purchase price ⓘ	\$ 300,000.00
Down payment ⓘ	\$ 30,000.00 10,0%
Term in years ⓘ	30 year(s)
Interest rate (per year) ⓘ	3 %
<b>Calculate</b>	

# Keep users engaged

**STEPS TO HOMEOWNERSHIP**

- Get Educated!**  
Take a [Homebuyer Education](#) class and learn everything you need to know about buying and mortgage financing.
- Get pre-approved
- Find a home
- Sign a contract
- Apply for a loan
- Close and become a homeowner



**Home Purchase** | **Home Refinance**

How will this property be used?

**Primary Residence** | **Second/ Vacation Home** | **Rental/ Investment Property**

For second homes or investment properties, please contact one of our Participating Lenders.

[LEARN MORE](#)

## Interactive

The new design and interactive components present information in an interactive and interesting way

- Interactive components provide rich data and analytics on user interest and preferences, providing insight on site visitors

**RIHousing Renters Live Chat**

Hi there! Are you a renter? Want to chat with a team member from RIHousing? Please tell us your name and what we can help you with today.

Write a message

## Chatbots

- Opens lines of communication beyond phone calls and emails, which rely on staff availability
- Potential customers can reach out from the convenience of the website
- Communications are tracked to better understand consumer needs and our own response time while also supporting lead generation

# Agency responsiveness



## COVID-19

Never were these new features more critical than during the COVID-19 health crisis. As an agency, we could not have communicated with and supported Rhode Islanders in crisis as effectively without our new website.

- COVID-19 response pop-up on home page
- Dedicated COVID-19 resource page

Past Public Meetings  
[Click here to view RIHOUSING public.](#)

RIHOUSING is closely monitoring the latest news about the coronavirus (COVID-19) and working hard to ensure there are no disruptions to service for our customers and partners.

Due to the current COVID-19 health emergency, RIHOUSING'S office building is currently closed to visitors until further notice.

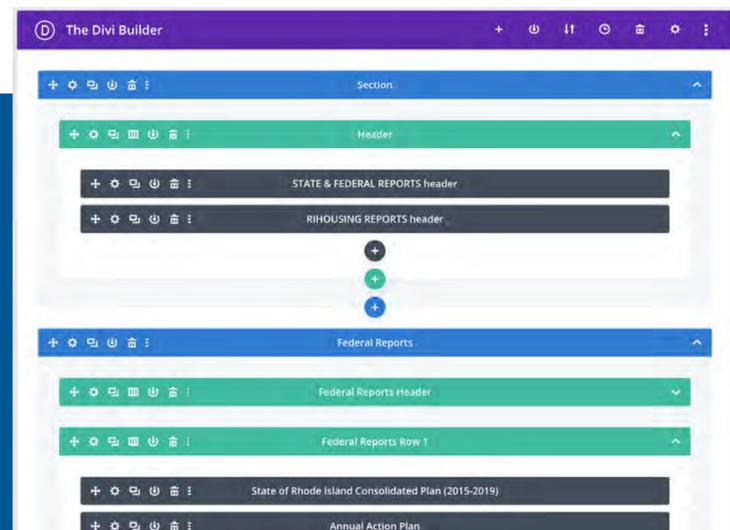
RIHOUSING STAFF IS AVAILABLE TO ASSIST YOU VIA TELEPHONE OR EMAIL. If you've been working with someone, please call or email them directly. If you aren't sure who you need to speak to and need further assistance, please call 401-457-1234 or email [scheduling@rihousing.com](mailto:scheduling@rihousing.com).

If you need to submit paperwork or a payment, please mail to: RIHOUSING, 44 WASHINGTON STREET, PROVIDENCE, RI 02903. If necessary, you can submit paperwork/payment via a mail slot located next to RIHOUSING'S main entrance on 44 Washington Street in downtown Providence.



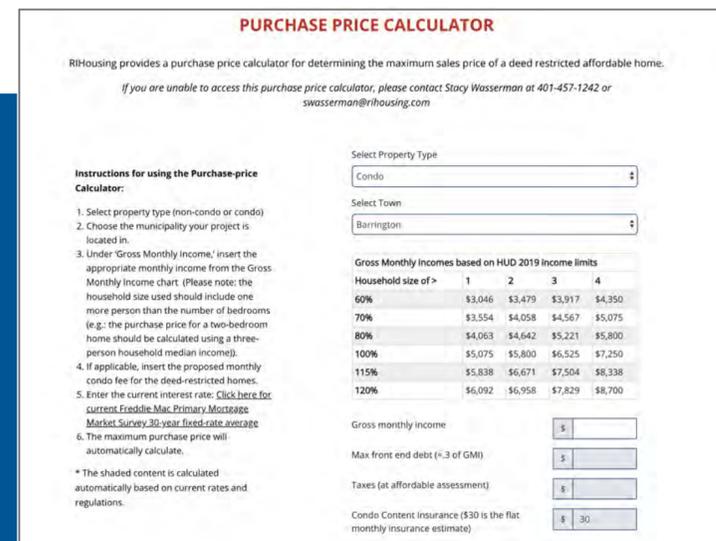
- Ability to easily create new COVID-19 resource webpages for variety of audiences, including: Homebuyers, Homeowners, RIHOUSING Mortgage Customers, Property Managers/Agents

# Ease-of-use and automation



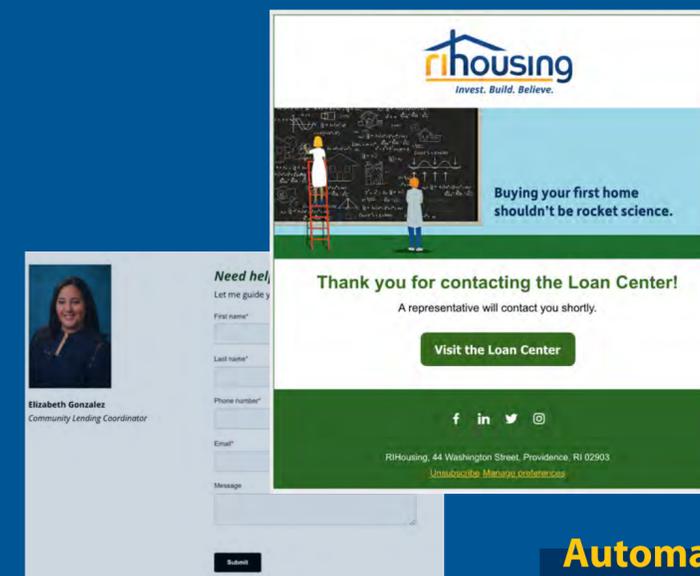
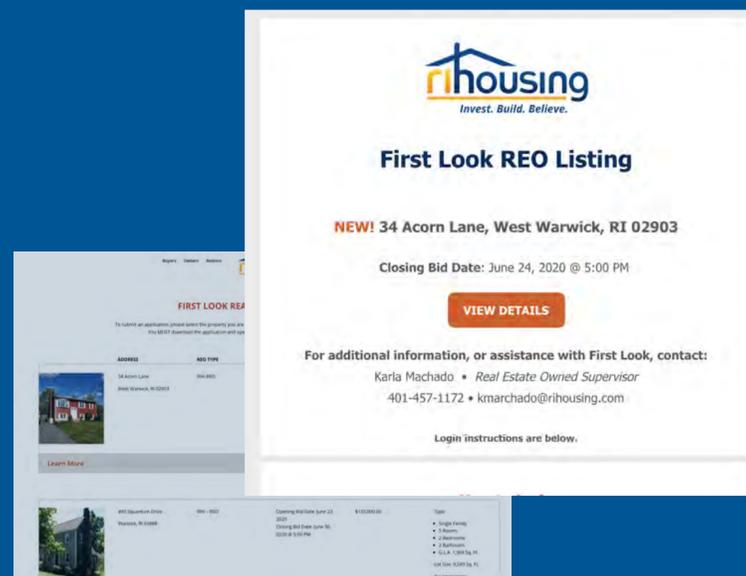
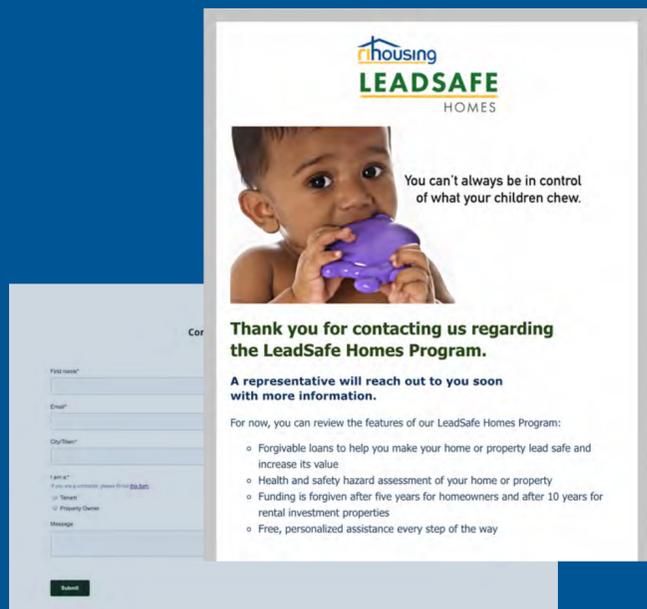
## Divi Builder

Ease-of-use back-end tools: quickly create and edit pages



## Purchase Price Calculator

Built-in calculator, specifically developed for RIHousing, is user-friendly and does not require a spreadsheet program like Excel to use. [See the calculator here.](#)



## Automated Emails

Old vs. New

The screenshot shows the old RIhousing website interface. At the top, there is a search bar and navigation links. The main heading is "Mortgage payment calculator". Below this, there is a green box with the text: "Whether you're moving in, moving up or refinancing, RIhousing is here to provide the resources and services to help you determine the best move for you and your family. Use this mortgage calculator to approximate your monthly mortgage payment." To the right, there are two "LEARN MORE" buttons. Below the text, there is a "Mortgage Calculator" section with a link to Bankrate.com. A "TAKE THE NEXT STEP" section follows, providing instructions on how to use the calculator. At the bottom, there is a "Loan Center Interest Rates" section with a note that rates are updated daily.

The screenshot shows the new RIhousing website interface for the "Section 8 Frequently Asked Questions" page. The page features a large image of a family at the top. The main heading is "Section 8 Frequently Asked Questions". Below this, there is a section titled "What is the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program?" which explains that it is the federal government's major program for helping eligible families, senior citizens, and individuals with disabilities afford safe, healthy homes. A list of bullet points follows: "The program provides that you can: choose their own home, choose their own neighborhood, use the vouchers to help pay for rent, and use the vouchers to help pay for utilities." Below this, there is a section titled "Housing Choice Voucher Program" with a sub-heading "Families with a tenant-based voucher choose and lease affordable, privately-owned rental housing. Under this program, families find their own rental apartment and use the voucher to pay for all or a portion of the rent." To the right, there is a "Do I qualify?" section with a link to "View the RI Income Limits (PDF)". Below that is a "Fair Market Rents" section with a link to "View the Small Area FMR Payment Standards (PDF)". At the bottom right, there is a "RIhousing HCV Program Jurisdiction" section with a map of Rhode Island showing the jurisdictions.

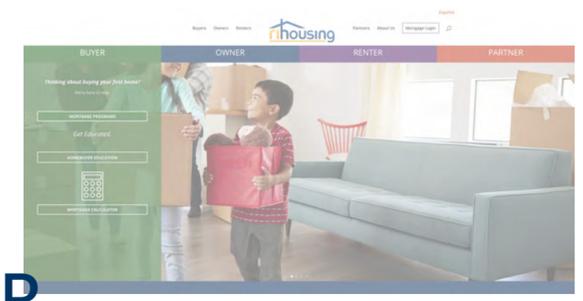
The screenshot shows the new RIhousing website interface for the "for business partners" page. The page features a large image of a modern building at the top. The main heading is "for business partners". Below this, there is a "Builders and Developers" section with a sub-heading "Builders and Developers" and a link to "Click here for a list of current Requests for Proposals (RFPs)". To the right, there is a "Section 811 Supportive Housing for Persons with Disabilities" section with a link to "Click here for more details." Below this, there is a "Statement of Fair Housing Policy" section with a link to "Click here for more details." At the bottom, there is a "Featured Properties" section with three images of properties: "GREENBURGE COMMONS, BURLINGTON", "60 KING STREET, OBANVILLE, EXETERVILLE", and "BRANCH BLACKSTONE, FARMINGTON/SCITICAT FIELDS". Below the featured properties, there is a "CALENDAR OF GROUNDBREAKINGS & RIBBON CUTTINGS" section and an "EXPLORE FINANCING OPTIONS" section with three links: "BUILDING & PRESERVING AFFORDABILITY", "PLANNING & PREDEVELOPMENT", and "OTHER FUNDING SOURCES".

The screenshot shows the new Rhode Island Housing website interface for the "OUR LOAN OPTIONS" page. The page features a large image of a city skyline at the top. The main heading is "OUR LOAN OPTIONS" with a sub-heading "Rhode Island Housing strives to help all Rhode Islanders find the perfect home for their household budget." Below this, there is a "Learn more about our many loan options" section. To the right, there are three columns of loan options: "FIRST-TIME HOMEBUYER LOANS" (100% financing available, no down payment required), "HOMEBUYER RENOVATION LOANS / 203(k)" (loan for borrowers purchasing a home that needs renovations), and "FIRST HOMES TAX CREDIT" (tax savings for eligible borrowers). Below these columns, there is a "Move up & Refinance Loans" section with a link to "LEARN MORE". At the bottom, there is a "SPRING7500 Down Payment Assistance" section with a link to "LEARN MORE" and a note that limited funds are available.

# BEFORE



# AFTER



4 websites: fractured, off brand, varying CMS platforms, difficult to update or improve

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Utilized outdated and uncommon technologies

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Limited control and functionality

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Cluttered Home Page: difficult to find even basic info

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Static, limited design, not mobile friendly

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Not a driver of business or promotion of agency mission and role in the state

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Negative impact on agency bottom line: users could not find info quickly, lacked any platform for communication/inquiries and potential customers lost

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Not a driver of communication between staff and users

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Multiple websites presented fractured image of the agency and our services

1 website: user-focused, streamlined and user-friendly, one CMS platform, reinforces our agency brand

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Maximizes CMS capabilities (WordPress) and integrations (HubSpot, Zapier, SmartSheet, etc). More features, expansive plugins library and templates to meet current and future needs, easy to use, easier learning curve, greater flexibility and scalability

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Complete Design Control and Customization, Optimize & Website Conversions, Build and Update Faster

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Home Page defined by main mission areas: Buyers, Owners, Renters and Partners

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Dynamic, complete integration of brand and design elements, mobile responsive

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Clearly defines agency role; includes program guidelines, online applications, and promotion of business lines

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Positive impact on agency bottom line: immediate responses to inquiries, easy-to find information, tools; lead generation

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Significant driver of communications efforts: Chat boxes, pop-ups, sign-ups, infographics, videos, etc.

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Single website conveys agency role, messaging and interconnectedness of programs

Undermined communications and marketing efforts	Expands and supports communications and marketing efforts: creation of new communications and outreach tools, promotion of programs and marketing campaigns
Limited ability to utilize and maximize existing IT staff for major changes; Required specialized training and support	Allows greater flexibility when hiring IT and/or Communications staffing, CMS platform more widely used, does not require knowledge of HTML to update
Different CMS platforms required additional assistance from IT staff and/or outside agencies	Single and user-friendly platform requires only existing Communications staffing
Limited number of pages available in Spanish	Fully bilingual website to engage and inform Spanish-speaking population
Minimal use of images, photographs, majority of information appeared as links to PDF documents	Features interactive Calendar of events, ability to integrate and share images from events, developments and more.
Patchwork of documents, messaging, conflicting information, burdensome amount of text, unnecessary technical jargon	Defined tone and messaging throughout; less technical—more welcoming; crisp text and no unnecessary/irrelevant content
Outdated website and cumbersome level of info reinforced image as bureaucratic and unhelpful	Promotes agency as innovative, responsive and leader in the field
Did not support agency needs: communications / outreach, customer service, business lines, etc	Flexible enough to support current and future needs
Updates and changes could take days; certain efforts not undertaken due to barriers of websites	Updates almost immediately, allows agency to be nimble and responsive!
Poor brand recognition: Nearly impossible to build and sustain a strong brand identity with multiple websites	Strong brand recognition: Rhode Islanders know what we do and how we do it. And where they can go for help.
Sad staff	Happy, fulfilled and excited staff—the possibilities are endless!